Significant changes were underway in adjusting the boundaries of British and American cities in the 1950s and early 1960s. While London’s suburbs had begun to be viewed as a rustic retreat from city life in the eighteenth century, the restructuring of the city after the Second World War saw the suburbs expand at a particularly marked rate. In the US, a number of factors coincided to make suburbia “the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture,” and a manifestation of “fundamental characteristics of American society” (Jackson 4). Within the communities themselves, despite the apparent flourishing of suburban development during these years, tensions were developing as white males in particular reacted to the gradual refiguring of gender and racial boundaries. Tensions manifested in the development of the suburban areas, influencing architectural forms and zoning, but hostility also spilled over into mass acts of violence such as the UK’s Notting Hill riots. The complex social environment of suburbia became the setting for two influential post-apocalyptic science fiction works which imagined their white male protagonists as the last of a dying species: John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), set in the south of England, and Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954), set in Los Angeles County, California. Building on the tradition of the “last man” theme, these works reveal postwar anxieties connected with suburbia in their unfavorable depictions of women and the descriptions of their antagonists in racially charged language.¹ Both novels soon saw film adaptations, as (respectively) *The Day of the Triffids* (1962) and *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and have since been adapted for the small and big screens many times.² Looking at the novels and their adaptations can provide a means of assessing both a British and an American perspective on the relationship between urban and suburban spaces during the postwar years, and in their use of the last man theme, the gender and racial anxieties of these spaces.
Suburbia in Britain and the US

London’s suburbs had been gradually developing since the eighteenth century, though this picked up significantly over the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, increasing from 400,000 inhabitants in 1861 to 2.7 million in 1911, “37 per cent of the metropolitan total” (Inwood 571). With the housing crisis caused by aerial bombardment in London and other major cities during the Second World War, as well as the development of Welfare State initiatives, the government increased production of “prefab” homes and municipal council estates on the edges of towns, and developed the new-towns program, initiated by the New Towns Act of 1946 and largely modeled on the Garden-City principles of Ebenezer Howard. Despite the expansion of residential areas on the periphery of British cities, the need for more housing was still a critical issue by the end of the 1950s. The desire for private homes grew alongside an emerging consumer culture and a “widely-expressed desire to re-establish marital and family life” seen in the baby-boom that followed the war (Langhamer 349). As rapidly growing suburban housing struggled to cope with demand, there remained something of the prewar notion of the private home as an aspirational space evocative of “stability and security” (362), and a return to a “normal’ existence” after the war (Thane 194). Home life in the postwar years generally retained a similar level of cultural conservatism to that of the 1930s, though “there are signs of a certain, relative loosening up in sexual relations in Britain in the 1950s” (Thane 199). Suburban family life consequently found itself in a similarly transitional era to that of the postwar US.

In the US, postwar suburbanization was fueled in part by the return of service personnel and a subsequent increase in birth rate, the reallocation of industrial land, and improved transport infrastructure, particularly with the rise of car ownership. Central to the economic boom of the late 1940s and early 1950s was the combination of mass industrial production, the emerging consumer culture, and vast residential construction projects. By the early 1960s the suburbs had taken on such a portentous position in American society as to represent “both a planning type and a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism” (Jackson 4-5). The rhetoric and ideology surrounding the suburbs thus came to spur on the rapid growth of these spaces in the postwar years, a growth so far reaching as to have been termed the “fourth migration” by Lewis Mumford (Urban xvi). The postwar American suburbs are often conceived in the popular imagination as a place of white middle-class stability and social conservatism. Elaine Tyler May writes of how media and official sources in the early 1950s insisted that white middle-class suburban women be “contented and fulfilled wives devoting themselves to expert childrearing and professionalized homemaking” in order to keep their husbands from
“degenerative seductions” and the “destruction of the nation’s moral fiber” (97). While the popular conception of the postwar US suburbs as a place of preoccupation with family life and traditional gender roles is not wholly incorrect, it is reductive in so far as it does not take into account the diversity of experiences of women in these years, and particularly those who were not white, middle-class, and married. The late 1950s also saw women increasingly in independent employment, “promoting undercurrents that would emerge as dominant trends in the 1960s and 1970s” (Hartmann 98). The growing suburbs of the late 1940s and 1950s in both Britain and American were thus more dynamic than conventional wisdom would conceive them. These were transitional spaces, in which the physical and societal conceptions of the home and family were neither fixed nor immutable.

As city dwellers in the UK and US increasingly moved out to the suburbs, the city came to be perceived as a place of threat. In the UK, this was partly due to the pollution and congestion of the industrialized centers, along with the memory of area bombing experienced during the war. Although aerial bombardment was not a new phenomenon, the scale of bombing campaigns against cities during the Second World War was unprecedented, and it was often carried out with the explicit intention of suspending services and striking terror into the civilian populace. In the US, much of the perceived danger of the city originated from the threat of nuclear war: if such a war were to break out, the cities would be the primary targets. Cities became “nuclear environments. No longer places of refuge protected by encircling walls—the new perspective was from above, not outside—they were places to flee from not to” (Cordle 65). Moving to suburbia was not quite enough to protect against nuclear war, and so Civil Defense literature focused to a great extent on fortifying suburban homes. This greater emphasis was justified partly by “a strong ideological investment in making the middle-class environments of contemporary America seem secure,” but also by the idea that “defense against nuclear attack, always liable to seem absurd, was marginally more credible in areas at a slight remove from the main target areas” (31). Gender played a role in alleviating the fear of these dangers. As May shows, the stability of the family was connected by authorities to the effort to maintain national security. White, middle-class married women in particular were expected to uphold the integrity of the family unit in suburban enclaves, ensuring their basement bomb shelters were as well-stocked as “grandma’s pantry,” establishing the home as a refuge against the uncertain threat of the wider world (May 105). It is in this context of an emerging and developing suburban way of life that Wyndham’s and Matheson’s post-apocalyptic tales of suburban retreat first appear.
The “Last Man” Tales of Wyndham and Matheson

The Day of the Triffids (hereafter Triffids) tells the story of William “Bill” Masen, a man who awakens in a London hospital to find that society has broken down completely as a result of sudden worldwide blindness. His eyes having been covered at the moment of catastrophe, his sight is both blessing and curse, as the few remaining sighted are coveted assets for the hordes of desperate blind citizens. Though seeming at first to be the only sighted person left in London, Masen soon meets novelist Josella Playton, who has also retained her sight, and the two remain allied over the course of the novel, resisting the efforts of other disreputable groups of the sighted and blind to pull them apart for their own purposes. Alongside their travels and the conflicts experienced in an effort to re-establish society, the two are also threatened by the constant presence of triffids: venomous, carnivorous, and apparently intelligent plants that come to dominate a humanity disadvantaged by blindness. Masen and Playton, accompanied by adopted daughter Susan and soon their young son David, escape the mainland to join a community which has settled on the Isle of Wight, and there is some hope for their future. Steve Sekely’s 1962 adaptation makes several considerable changes. Masen (Howard Keel) is now a US naval officer, who awakens in a London hospital and, on discovering what has happened during the night, heads across Europe in search of any naval base still manned by US troops. He finally finds such a place in Alicante, where he is rescued along with two of the characters he had met along the way: a young English orphan named Susan (Janina Faye), and a French woman named Christine Durrant (Nicole Maurey).

The adaptation has been heavily criticized, for changing the source material in such a way that it “falls too gratefully upon the horror film that is implied within Wyndham’s story,” and with the trek across Europe “loses the novel’s sense of cultural claustrophobia” (Sawyer 81).

More overt horror elements are found in Matheson’s I Am Legend (hereafter Legend). The novel’s protagonist is Robert “Bob” Neville, the last man and indeed the last human on Earth. Neville lives on Cimarron Street, near Compton in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles County, a macabre parody of a typical suburban neighborhood. The quiet houses are now occupied by vampires, who descend on his home at night calling for Neville to come outside, to be bitten and join them. Much of his life by day is spent in routine chores, one of which is discovering and exterminating vampires. His desperate loneliness leads to his capture by the living vampires when he meets Ruth, a vampire disguised as a human. With this encounter Neville discovers that his indiscriminate slaughter of vampires has included both live innocents infected with the plague, who are banding together to form a new society, and the reanimated dead, who are merely monstrous. He realizes too late that he has become the
monster, exterminating the infected living as they sleep. The novel in this way “suggests that in a world that does not contain Good or Evil, violence, even when it is […] undertaken in the name of survival, necessarily dehumanizes and creates monsters” (Waller 262). Having surrendered to capture, Neville dies the final example of his fearsome species, to become merely a “legend.”

The protagonist of Sidney Salkow’s 1964 adaptation The Last Man on Earth (hereafter Earth) is Robert “Bob” Morgan (Vincent Price). Much of the action of the film remains the same as in Matheson’s novel, except that Morgan is a scientist who has long been working on a cure for the vampire plague. At the end of the film he manages to cure Ruth (Franca Bettoia) before being killed beside his wife’s grave. What will happen to the cured Ruth is left unresolved, but his act seems to leave the film with some hope that the vampires might one day become human again, which would mean Morgan had not become not a monstrous legend, but rather a legendary martyr.

The two novels and their film adaptations contain many parallels. In both novels, it is the hubristic and militaristic advancement of mankind that sees its downfall. In Triffids, the blindness is thought to be caused by the accidental use of nuclear and biological weapons aboard satellites, and the triffid invasion is caused by the cultivation of the plants for use as a renewable fuel source. The novel’s depiction of military technology leading to widespread blindness recalls the blinding flash of light that accompanies nuclear weapon detonation. It also precedes the first example of artificial satellite technology, the Soviet Union’s Sputnik, which was launched in 1957 and heightened the anxieties of the US and its allies over the future of the Space Race. In an essay titled “Science Fiction and Armageddon,” Wyndham writes that he finds “scare-‘em-to-death approaches” to apocalyptic fiction that directly involve nuclear war and the Space Race unconvincing (1). This may explain why he chose the unusual and indirect route of a story about mass blindness and walking plants. Military and scientific progress is also at fault in Legend, as bombs used during the war lead to a virus mutation which turns people into vampires. The film adaptations of both novels take less critical views of humanity by making meteorites solely responsible for blindness and triffids in Sekely’s adaptation of Triffids, and a mysterious plague responsible for zombie infection in Earth. This simplification may be a result of the increased anxiety around nuclear issues in the early 1960s, the years in which heightened Cold War tensions led to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limited Test Ban Treaty. As scholars such as Paul Boyer and Robert A. Jacobs demonstrate, from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s heightened nuclear anxieties saw a direct effect in fictional portrayals of World War III, which became “far more brutal than those of the earlier period [of the Cold War]” (R. Jacobs 402). As the two films draw on texts published in the early 1950s, these changes seem to indicate a longing for a perceived time of lessened nuclear threat.
The four works are also similar in that a coincidence saves the male protagonist and allows him to become the last man, a singular witness of a world gone awry: Masen in the novel is stung in the eyes by a triffid, but this experience of near-blindness ironically leaves him among the few to keep their sight; Neville and Morgan are bitten by a vampire bat with an early mutation of the virus and so become immune to the disease. Their early awareness of the emerging threats to humanity prepares these characters to resist that threat later on. Lastly, each of the four texts features a lone male protagonist with a common monosyllabic nickname: “Bill” and “Bob.” The reader’s surrogates in their exploration of the post-apocalyptic worlds, these are presented as every-man characters, though they carry with them the prejudices of their time.

Masculinity in Crisis

Despite presenting in his first-person narration many independent female characters with believable motivations, Masen’s actions through the novel seem a determined attempt to establish his dominance as a man. In a chapter appropriately titled “The Groping City,” Masen attempts to intervene as blind and sighted men sexually assault blind women in the overcrowded Piccadilly Circus. He views his attempted intervention as “a mixture of schoolboy heroics and noble sentiments,” but also as a foolish move. Knocked down by another sighted man, Masen regains his “sense” and allows them to continue, remarking, “I felt doubtful whether any of the women hereabouts would seriously mind, anyway” (Wyndham, *Triffids* 59). Within one or two sentences following the introduction of any female character, Masen is quick to define them in terms of their physical attractiveness to him: he notes that it “seemed likely that beneath the smudges and smears [Playton] was good-looking” (65); Sandra Telmont has a “pleasant though unexotic countenance” (105); Miss Cary has a face “interesting rather than good-looking” (111); Stephen Brennell’s unnamed female “companion” is “a good-looking, well-built girl” (193); even the young Susan has to be described as a “pretty little girl” (210). This demeaning attitude toward women is also reinforced by his supposedly superior and exaggerated calmness with regards to triffids, which stands in contrast to the reaction of the women around him, who act, as he reports, “hysterically” (78). Sekely’s film is also determined to present women as hysterical, with most of the screen time for Karen Goodwin (Janette Scott), Durrant, and Susan consisting of petrified screaming as the men push past them to fight back triffids. The women’s career independence is tempered by physical and mental weakness, as the scientist Karen relies on brawny, aggressive husband Tom (Kieron Moore), and Durrant and Miss Coker (Alison Leggatt), who started their own hospital, must lean on the military Masen and the intellectual Mr. Coker (Mervyn Johns). While Wyndham is not necessarily implicated in the masculine supremacist attitudes of his character, depend-
ing on the reader’s perception of the contrast between narrator and implied author, neither the novel nor the film challenges their protagonists to reevaluate their attitudes toward gender.

Much of this hysterical femininity and dominant masculinity seems to emerge from resentment toward the new economic role of women in the years following the Second World War. The number of women aged between 35 and 49 in employment in Britain had risen sharply by 1951 to 43 per cent, up from just 26 per cent in 1931 (Langhamer 359). In the US, rates of women’s employment in the mid-1950s “matched the artificially high levels attained during World War II” (Harmann 86). While many public officials on both sides of the Atlantic openly supported such changes, others publicly objected. A frustrated speech by Coker demonstrates this ambivalence, as he lambasts a young woman for what he sees as “a mess of myth and affectation” that hides the fact that “women can or do—or rather did—handle the most complicated and delicate machines when they took the trouble to understand them” (175). Coker entirely ignores any expectations of domestic responsibility placed on women by society, directing the blame entirely at women and refusing to acknowledge any fault on the part of men. In fact, both Coker and Masen paradoxically celebrate the resourcefulness of women while expecting their obedience and occupation as housewives. The once independent novelist Playton feels conflicted over this issue, both wishing to make Masen happy and feeling that she “wasn’t meant for this kind of life” as “a farmer’s wife” (228). Wyndham’s inclusion of Playton’s internal conflict over her assumption of a traditional domestic role means that the novel is far more sensitive to contemporary gender concerns than it would have been in its absence.

Neville, too, is a character who represents the insecurity of postwar masculinity. Neville seeks to dominate women at any opportunity, though he is restricted by necessity to female vampires. Neville’s test subjects in understanding the vampire plague are almost always women: “the question posed in his mind: Why do you always experiment on women? He didn’t care to admit the inference had any validity” (Matheson, Legend 49). He considers the fact that, faced with a sleeping female vampire, he could rape her without consequence: “Morality, after all, had fallen with society. He was his own ethic” (50). W. Warren Wagar notes that post-apocalyptic last men frequently take the position of “high court of the world” (69), and this is clearly the case with Neville. Feeling insecure about whether Ruth is outsmarting him, he reassures himself that being male gives him an innate advantage: “That’s ridiculous, he argued. She’s just a woman” (Matheson, Legend 126). Noting her choice of music, he comforts himself with the thought that “Her taste isn’t remarkably advanced” (131). Neville attempts to reassure himself of his masculine superiority in these scenes, viewing women as having inferior intellects and only deserving his attention as targets of lust. It is in part his underestimation
of Ruth, which culminates in the rejection of her advice that he abandon his stubborn occupation of the house on Cimarron Street, that leads to his demise.

Neville’s need to assert a primitive masculinity is due in part to his loss of identity with the deaths of both his wife and daughter, whose existence defined him as husband and father, and in part to the breakdown of society, in which he was defined by his maleness and more specifically by his military rank. It is also related to issues with his father, which appear early in our introduction to Neville, when we are told that “Neville had loathed his father and fought the acquisition of his father’s logic and mechanical facility every inch of the way” (15). Despite his resistance to scientific thinking Neville finds that he must activate this part of his brain to try to discover a cure for the vampire disease, and in the process unwittingly to become more like his father. Interestingly, in Triffids, Masen seems to have similar issues with his father: “my inability to make any column of figures reach the same total twice caused me to be something of a mystery as well as a disappointment to him. […] And until I was thirteen or fourteen I would shake my head, conscious of my sad inadequacy” (Wyndham, Triffids 25-6). Reliant on their supposedly superior male brains, both characters feel weakened by the fact that these qualities seem not to have passed from their fathers to them. Unequipped with these masculine qualities and so unable to pass them on, both characters are doomed to die as last men.

Initially content with objectifying female characters, developing a close homosocial relationship with Coker, and helping to rebuild society, Masen later becomes obsessed with beginning a relationship with Playton. In other words, after a “youth” of wandering eyes, male bonding, and career focus, he devotes himself to finding a wife and concentrating only on his family. Taking Susan with him, he finds Playton in the Suffolk Downs. Their house, named Shirning Farm, is a “modernized and reconstructed” farm with a “suburban rather than a rural tidiness” which “tired Londoners had found adaptable to their needs” (218). With their adopted daughter Susan and their own son David, Masen and Playton call themselves husband and wife and become a typical suburban family. They even drive a “station-waggon” (80), “the family car of the 1950s” (Jancovich 149, emphasis in original). Neville and Morgan, too, drive station wagons. In the film Morgan notes, as he drives the bodies of vampires from his street to be burned in a pit, “there was a time I shopped for a car—now I need a hearse.” Making a connection with the procedures and rituals of death shows suburban and consumerist aspirations such as the purchase of station wagons are defeating for these last men—they represent only dead ends. At the farm Playton devotes her time to learning to cook and keep house as Masen drives into London to gather supplies. The triffid-related violence Masen witnesses on these commutes connects to the fear of “urban violence and decay spreading outside the bounds of the city center” that Robert Beuka identifies as a common thread in fiction concerning sub-
urbia, particularly when allied to the “racial pluralism of the city” (41). With Playton’s domain the adapted rural home and Masen’s the dangerous city, the characters fit into prescribed roles as described by Abraham Akkerman in his principals of “Philosophical Urbanism.” According to Akkerman, the Western city, or citadel, is deeply rooted in the masculine myth, so much so that the two have long informed each other. Femininity, on the other hand, is commonly associated with the opposite space, the garden, with its connotations of fertility and motherhood (230). Masen and Playton fit into these paradigms with little thought, following the long tradition associated with these spaces.

Cities and Race

In addition to the division of the urban and suburban realms by gender, their developing definition was also complicated by racial prejudice. In the US, the years following the Second World War saw millions of African Americans relocating from the segregated South to large Northern cities. Alongside this exodus, and perhaps because of it, the rate of relocation to the suburbs by white residents of the city escalated. The term “white flight” designates a “wholesale departure of white folks from many formerly segregated communities” who feared “the encroachment of people of color” (Camarillo 143). In addition to this physical redistribution, suburban enclaves sought to institutionalize the separation of races between city and suburb. The Federal Housing Authority established covenants to maintain racial segregation as a matter of policy: “Urban ghettos were reserved for African Americans and other minorities; suburbs were to remain lily white” (Baxandall and Ewen 175). In Britain, the 1948 British Nationality Act standardized Commonwealth citizenship laws, and this, coupled with high unemployment in the West Indies, saw the first significant era of black immigration (Clapson 80). Besides the West Indies, these years also saw significant immigration from former British colonies and territories such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Until the early 1950s this immigration proceeded at a low rate: only 15,000 people of West Indian birth lived in the UK in 1951, for example, and of these only 4,200 lived in London (Inwood 856). The McCarren-Walter Act of 1952, greatly restricting West Indian immigration into the US, saw this rate increase sharply, leading to stricter British immigration laws in 1962. The preceding years saw a growing racial prejudice against the perceived Other. This manifested in groups such as Oswald Mosley’s “Union Movement,” “Keep Britain White,” and the “White Defense League,” although prejudice was generally “ubiquitous but well camouflaged” (858). The so-called “Notting Hill Riots” of 1958 were an unusually large-scale and vicious manifestation of such prejudice, which saw white gangs targeting minority ethnic residents and businesses in the Notting Hill area. Though there was no legal segregation comparable to that of the US, it was still the case that the black population typically resided in poorer areas of the
city that had been effectively abandoned to decay by white Britons, communities such as Peckham and Brixton.

In both Britain and America relocation to the suburbs cost money, making it a largely white middle-class phenomenon, and housing-market discrimination reinforced the racial demarcation between suburban and urban spaces. The abandonment of cities to their fate in the event of nuclear war, therefore, takes on racial implications when they are considered as spaces with the highest proportion of black residents, as opposed to the almost exclusively white suburbs. As Jacqueline Foertsch writes, for “policy makers in general, negroes were a ‘problem,’ like the bomb, to be solved as expeditiously as possible. For white America, the answer in both cases was flight to the protected suburb, even as it knew that the solution was provisional at best” (136). Indeed, as Paul Williams shows, civil defense planning on both sides of the Atlantic “privileged the suburban family (silently encoded as white)” (Race 111). Though it would be a stretch to suggest that either Triffids or Legend is a conscious parable about the phenomenon of white flight to the suburbs and the sacrificing of black cities, both works are products of prevailing contemporary anxieties over the threats toward cities and suburbs, and fit into a history of works of this kind. As Eric Avila notes, the “rise of Hollywood science fiction paralleled the acceleration of white flight in postwar America and not only recorded popular anxieties about political and sexual deviants, but also captured white preoccupations with the increasing visibility of the alien Other” (88). Sean Brayton, too, observes that there has long been a connection in fiction between dystopia or catastrophe, and multicultural landscapes (66). Both Triffids and Legend, along with their film adaptations, can be said to engage (whether consciously or not) with these kinds of concerns in their depictions of urban and suburban spaces.

**Triffids and Vampires as Racialized Others**

Making a life in suburbia, the “sterile” cities become merely an “oppressive memory” to Masen and Playton (Wyndham, Triffids 164). The ever-present threat to this suburban idyll is that of triffids, which necessitates a daily maintenance of the home’s defenses. Masen, Susan, and Playton have their time consumed with fixing fences and burning hordes of triffids with flamethrowers. The ritual exaggerates routine maintenance of the suburban garden, aggrandizing the achievement of keeping invasive species from spreading to their patch of land. Though they have left the city to decay and be reclaimed by nature, the danger does not remain there but instead threatens to encroach upon their lives in suburbia. The gradual migration of triffids from the city center is a manageable threat, nonetheless, while the ultimate danger occurs when a human gang from the city targets their attractive suburban sanctuary. Defense against such a horde of invaders is Neville’s daily ritual, too, and
much of *Legend* is spent telling of his trips to acquire garlic and mirrors, his efforts to maintain the house, and his production of wooden stakes. His suburban bachelor home is now a fortress against the constant tide of vampires emerging from their city homes and terrorizing him by night, a scheduled daily encounter with the horrors of his proximity to the metropolis. As with the 1950s civil defense efforts, these characters are continually reinforcing their suburban homes against the threat originating from the nearby existence of the city. Though this vigilance can be clearly connected with the nuclear threat, there is also a distinct racial undertone to the novels and films.

Race is not explicitly dealt with either by *Triffids* or *Legend*. Though Dr. E. H. Vorless advocates in *Triffids* “one primary prejudice, and that is that the race is worth preserving” (119, emphasis in original), and Ruth refers to Neville as “the last of the old race” (157), these mentions refer merely to the fight between the human race and a species which is “Other,” whether triffid or vampire. There does, however, seem to be some cause to view the threats to the main characters as stand-ins for racialized Others. As Avila writes, there has long been an “ominous affinity between the alien Other of science fiction film and the racialized Other of American history” (88). Vincent Price and Howard Keel are both white men, and there is evidence in the novels that Masen and Neville are both white. The race of characters in *Triffids* is only specifically mentioned with regards to the “dark” Umberto, of “assorted Latin descent,” which appears to suggest that he is the only character whose race deserves remark as being outside the supposed norm (Wyndham, *Triffids* 29-30). Neville’s race is more clearly alluded to, as he is described as having a “blond beard,” “blue eyes” (Matheson, *Legend* 109), and a father named “Fritz” (15). Conversely the antagonists of the stories, the triffids and the vampires, who invade the city and displace the white heroes into the suburbs, are described in terms of their darkness. Umberto, who is largely responsible for the proliferation of triffids, is “sleek, dark” (Wyndham, *Triffids* 30), mysterious, and manipulative; Masen sees the triffids themselves as “odd and somehow foreign” looking (37, emphasis in original) and they stand out from other foliage by making “a dark border round any inhabited place” (255). The “dark border” here is suggestive of the poorer suburban neighborhoods on the outskirts of towns. Racial minorities in the UK generally did not move out to suburban areas until policy decisions from 1969 encouraged this by making it economically viable, and even then only in small numbers due to the isolating effects of moving into predominantly white areas. Cheaper land tended to be on the outskirts of town, which made it a suitable site for low-income council estates. This created division within suburbia along class lines, as the council estates were distinct from the “many originally prosperous and class-specific suburbs [which] have remained as bywords of suburban kudos” (Clapson 72).
In *Legend*, Neville repeatedly refers to the vampires with such terms as “black bastards” (Matheson 24) and “dark men” (150). He even mockingly refers to his fight against them as “minority prejudice” (20), suggesting that, while theoretically he could live side-by-side with vampires, he would not “let [his] sister marry one” (21). Comments such as this imply that while Neville recognizes the arbitrariness of his prejudice against the Other, he nonetheless perceives associating and procreating with them as potentially dangerous to his own identity. This feared dilution of identity raises the supposed threat of “race suicide,” which is connected to contemporary fears that independent white women would not have children (May 100). Neville’s encounters with the vampires in the city invariably begin with a drive along Compton Boulevard, which runs through the middle of the city of Compton. Whether or not Neville’s house is within Compton itself or merely nearby, the repeated reminders of this particular city in Los Angeles County is evocative of racialized spaces. At the time of the novel’s publication Compton was becoming deeply divided because of the process of blockbusting by real estate agents, which “divided Compton in half, creating a racially bifurcated city” (Camarillo 142). Neville’s repeated characterization of the vampires as “black” and “dark” therefore suggests that whatever his attitudes toward the racial composition of Compton prior to the apocalypse, as Bernice M. Murphy writes, “now a really bad element had moved into the neighborhood, [Neville] can violently express feelings that otherwise have been repressed” (33). The use of Los Angeles in this way can thus be viewed as further evidence that the vampires are representative of African Americans, and that Neville is used by Matheson to demonstrate a racial antagonism at least partially repressed in the city at the time of the novel’s publication.

These invading forces, the triffids and vampires, are suggestive of a new colonialism, in which roles have been reversed and the white colonizers have become the colonized. As John Rieder demonstrates, stories of sf invasion have a close connection to the subject of colonialism: “all these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixed upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being ‘discovered’ by Europeans and integrated into Europe’s economic and political arrangements” (124). Peter Hutchings makes a similar point, noting the telling nature of British obsession with invasion narratives: “In reality Britain has rarely been invaded. In its fantasies the opposite is true. It is perhaps fitting that a nation with such an expansive imperial past should have developed a rich tradition of narratives about itself being invaded” (337). While many of these invasion narratives imagine a European, often German, aggressor (as demonstrated by I. F. Clarke in *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763-3749* [1992]), the logic carries forward to a postwar era which saw unprecedented degrees of immigration from countries previously under colo-
nial rule. The post-apocalyptic landscape, re-ordered by catastrophe, allows for a new colonial encounter to take place:

The world after nuclear war, then, mirrors the pre-colonial and “pre-civilized” world of soft places that defy European cartography. Both spaces are positioned outside human civilization, either awaiting its imprint or the result of its self-destruction. And as such, the post-apocalyptic world can be an arena for the replaying of the colonial encounter, frightening in its unintelligibility but alluring in its virgin promise. (Williams “Beyond” 304)

The history of British colonialism, therefore, makes the post-apocalyptic terrain of southern England the perfect environment for a new colonial encounter to take place, in the tradition of H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1897). The title “The Day of the Triffids” shows a colonial role reversal of this kind in which humanity is no longer the most powerful species, and Masen remarks that it is “an unnatural thought that one type of creature should dominate perpetually” (Wyndham, *Triffids* 112). *Triffids* and its film adaptation reflect a post-colonial Britain, and the rise of the American Empire in its place. In America, too, what Rieder describes as “the form of global hegemony being established by the United States in the wake of World II” ignites anxiety of the reversal of colonizer/colonized (148). As Patrick B. Sharp demonstrates, nuclear frontier stories, a genre of which *Legend* might be considered a part, incorporate the “frontier imagery of the nineteenth century,” with survivors needing to “battle the manifestations of savagery in order to establish a new America out of the wreckage of the old” (172). While the reader is initially led to interpret this as Neville battling the savagery of the vampires, Neville’s discovery of the distinction between the living and dead among the infected means that it is he who represents the savagery of the old world which must be vanquished. By the end of *Legend*, Neville finally comes to realize that majority and minority roles in his world have reversed: “I’m the abnormal one now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man” (Matheson 159). The vampire in particular is a figure through which conventional oppressor/victim relationships have often been explored and deconstructed in fiction, as Veronica Hollinger writes in her 1989 essay “The Vampire and the Alien: Variations on the Outsider” (155). Each of the four texts thus expresses anxieties over the inversion of colonial power, in which karmic reprisal is meted out for the crimes of empire.

Spaces that had previously been dominated by humans such as Masen and Neville have come to be reallocated as belonging to a new and invasive force. In *Triffids*, this takes the form of the reclamation by nature of built spaces. Commenting on rural developments, Playton notes that “people were wailing about the way those bungalows were destroying the countryside. Now
look at them.” Masen replies, “The countryside is having its revenge, all right” (Wyndham, Triffids 242). In depicting the conflict between the natural and built environments, the bungalow possesses very specific connotations. An architectural form originating in India with a hybrid Bengali name, bungalows were used by members of the East India Company and the British Raj, and were later appropriated for use in Britain itself (Kennedy 103). At the apex of the British Empire in the late nineteenth century, London occupied a central global position in banking, finance, and services. Bungalows were constructed on the outskirts of the city to accommodate the “new bourgeoisie” who worked in these industries (King 65), representing “the symbolic display of private property ownership” in their purposely uneconomical horizontal use of space (56). Even after the Empire began to decline, the bungalow continued to be a stalwart of suburban housing. After the Second World War, local authorities took over army land and erected 15,000 temporary bungalows or “hutments,” and the “popularity of these aluminum-framed ‘prefabs,’ produced in their tens of thousands by redundant aircraft factories at the end of the war, was one of the surprises of the postwar years. All but 500 of them were still in use in 1955” (Inwood 824). A quintessentially suburban development, bungalows are thus structures associated with the privilege of a colonial power that spread broadly across rural land. Their reclamation by nature in Triffids, therefore, displays an inversion of the established power structure. Human colonizers are now the colonized, as nature moves in to destroy them and their homes.

In Legend, the new society is one not wholly different from humanity, albeit in an earlier, more primitive form. Neville wonders, “Did they have to do it like this, with such a black and brutal slaughtering? [...] They were more like gangsters than men forced into a situation” (Matheson, Legend 149). Indeed, the labeling of this new society as “gangsters” links them to a specifically urban American space, putting them further at odds with Neville’s suburban identity. In The Immediate Experience (1962), Robert Warshow writes that “the experience of the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans,” and describes the figure of the gangster as “the man of the city, with the city’s language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring” (86, emphasis in original). When Charlton Heston was pitching the novel for a second film adaptation (which would become The Omega Man [1971]), he characterized the “Others” as a gang-like group, its members like teenagers who stay in all day and wake at night, and whose affliction is like drug abuse, “capable of chemically inducing a progressive and irreversible psychosis” (2). Given the formation of youth gangs such as Compton’s Pirus in the 1960s and 1970s, Heston’s description pairs the vampires with a particularly urban incarnation of drug-related and violent crime comprising gangs of “minority youths, dressed out in certain colors or clothing, and striking menacing poses as ‘outsiders’” (Cummings and Monti viii). While
it is not always the case, some violent gangs emerge in response to “disparities between aspirations of young persons and the lack of opportunities they have in poor communities” (Moore 33), enabling a modicum of empowerment and resistance to the dominant, oppressive forces of society.

Accordingly, Ruth shows Neville the hypocrisy of his criticisms: “New societies are always primitive. […] In a way we’re like a revolutionary group—repressing society by violence. It’s inevitable. Violence is no stranger to you. You’ve killed. Many times” (Matheson, Legend 156). Those infected with the vampire plague and hunted by Neville have organized and formed a rebellion to overthrow his dominion and reclaim the land. Neville’s stubborn confidence in his claim of superiority is evidenced by his attempt to hold out against the rebellion, and he refuses to heed Ruth’s instruction that he abandon his suburban domain. In a scene redolent of a race riot, and in an urban county that was to see the Watts Riots of 1965, the vampires come by night “in their dark cars with their spotlights and their guns and their axes and their pikes. Came from the blackness […] around the [Compton] boulevard corner and clutching out at Cimarron Street” (Matheson, Legend 147). The city is a place “custom made for spreading disease,” such as Legend’s vampire infection, where if “forces of social order and discipline weaken […] country folk will presumably go on behaving like solid citizens, but urbanites will turn into a mob” (Abbott 185-6). Imagining the vampires in terms of the inhuman, racialized Other in rebellion against white masculine rule brings to mind the origins of the “zombie,” not least because of Legend’s crucial importance in the evolution of the zombie myth itself.

**Blurred Boundaries**

The Haitian zombie, which would later be appropriated by Hollywood, began as an adapted form of West African religious ideas repurposed to speak to the experiences of slaves in the Caribbean. A person robbed of their volition and humanity and set to work tirelessly in the fields, the zombie represented both a fate to be feared and a clear parody of the dependence of Euro-American capitalism upon slave labor. The idea of the zombie originated first in the colony of Saint Domingue, later the site of the Haitian Revolution and a localized overthrow of the system of slavery, and came to be used by outside observers to illustrate the primitiveness of Haitian self-rule. The revolution of a majority Other which is viewed as primitive by the white oppressor has clear links with the story of Legend. Indeed, the vampires of Legend and Earth provide something of a bridge between the Haitian origins and Hollywood appropriation of the zombie. Though referred to throughout as vampires, the Others of Earth are scruffy, shambling, groaning creatures, the reanimated dead, and visually share far more in common with the zombies of future George A. Romero films (1968-2009) than vampires depicted in films such as Dracula (1931). Their
infection in the novel is through Bacillus vampiris, mutated by the use of bombs during the war and transmitted via mosquitoes and dust storms. The infection in the film is merely an airborne virus. In both cases the means of transmission has moved from the body horror of gothic vampire stories to the scientific reasoning of the sf zombie. The chemical nature of the vampire epidemic, a form of germ invasion, speaks to contemporary fears of an insidious enemy with the ability to infect normal, upstanding American citizens.

In this way Legend and Earth, along with Triffids in its novel and film incarnations, fit into the broader history of invasion-scare narratives of the postwar years, Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) being a classic example, in which aliens and monsters are often seen as stand-ins for communists. The vast majority of scholarship on postwar sf focuses on this theme as the primary concern. As Mark Jancovich writes, however, this is an oversimplification which excludes “a great many films which simply do not fit with this subgenre,” and “even the 1950s invasion narratives are often markedly different from one another” (2). Reflecting the racial anxiety of the time, the boundaries between races, once so clearly demarcated for Neville, have become blurred, and he realizes that it is he who has become the feared monster. As Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry write in “The Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism” (2008), the zombie is a figure highly suited to these issues: “the zombie’s irreconcilable body (both living and dead) raises the insufficiency of the dialectical model (subject/object)” (87). Established divisions in society, therefore, have become problematized. As with the blurred boundaries between racialized bodies, the racialized city is not clearly demarcated.

While attempts were being made to racially segregate populations between the suburbs and the urban centers, in practice these boundaries were not so clearly defined. Despite the persistence of “separate but equal” laws even after Brown v. Board of Education, “the lines between black space and white space increasingly blurred [in the 1950s], particularly in the cities, where racialized minorities, blacks in particular, concentrated in unprecedented numbers” (Avila 89). The decentralization of cities no doubt influenced this amorphousness in racial boundaries. Jane Jacobs, in The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), lamented the role of the automobile in decentralizing American cities, resulting in the formation of “Noplace” (352). Mumford, too, wrote of the mechanical functionality of “formless urbanization” brought about by automobile transportation, which “disrupted urban space […] recklessly” (Reader 110). Despite the prevalence of white flight to the suburbs, urban and suburban spaces were nebulous and formless enough that they were not wholly separate but rather bled into one another, as, consequently, did supposedly black and white spaces. Nor were the suburbs exclusively white. In London, for instance, while West Indian immigrants seldom lived in the outer
suburbs, most lived in “poorer inner suburbs” (Inwood 858). In America, studies such as Kevin M. Kruse’s *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (2007) demonstrate that the conventional wisdom of a division between black urban centers and white suburbs is only part of the story, as many cities had both white suburbs and black suburbs. The interdependence of city and suburbs also challenges this idea of a clear demarcation. Beuka writes that fictional depictions of the daily commute between suburb and city “both highlights and ultimately works to dissolve the distinction between the urban and nonurban realms” (250), and this can be seen in both of the novels and their adaptations. The routine drives between suburb and city by Masen in *Triffids*, and by Neville and Morgan, make clear the lack of an absolute division between the supposedly violent and dangerous city and the sanctuary of the suburbs.

**Conclusion**

There are clear parallels between the two novels and their film adaptations in terms of the use of the last man theme to portray anxieties regarding the status of white males in cities and suburbs. There are noteworthy differences between them, however, caused by their differing settings of Britain and America. In *Triffids*, Masen notes frequent mentions of America tied to the hope that America will eventually intervene to save the afflicted Britons. Brennell’s “good-looking” companion, for instance, “had an utterly unshakeable conviction that nothing serious could have happened to America, and that it was only a matter of holding out for a while until the Americans arrived to put everything in order” (Wyndham, *Triffids* 194). Other refugees refuse to join up with Masen and Coker, holding a “widespread and fixed idea” that the Americans “would never have allowed such a thing to happen in their country.” Masen and Coker, although not being able to disprove these ideas, react to them with scorn, mockingly referring to belief in “American fairy godmothers” and remarking that “any surviving Americans would be likely to have their hands more than full at home” (202). Masen instead prefers to rely only on a British “make-do” attitude such as that championed during wartime. In the film adaptation, Masen is now a member of the American military, and though he cannot save Britain, he does at least manage to save Susan and Durrant. The remaining American naval personnel (all white, all male) in Alicante are the only organized force left in Europe, and they alone are evacuating survivors from the ruined Europe to the (presumably) better-off America. It is only through the power and stability of the American military and its white masculinity, therefore, that anyone on the continent survives the apocalypse. This highly positive spin on US military power separates film from novel and makes the film far more typical of American monster movies of the time. In America itself, in *Legend* and *Earth*, there is no real mention of Europe or any
other continent. With the knowledge that Los Angeles and therefore the rest
of the US has ceased to function, Neville and Morgan hold out no hope for
being saved by another nation: if America has fallen, the world has fallen. The
difference is telling: in all four works the existence of America stands for the
continued existence of the world, so much so that it possesses the aura of a
fairy-tale in Triffids. In contrast to earlier post-apocalyptic sf texts that focus
on London as the nexus of Western civilization, a transition is underway in
the immediate postwar years to passing that title to the great American cities
such as Los Angeles.

The two novels and their film adaptations, in their use of the last man
theme and their exploration of post-apocalyptic urban centers and suburbia,
depict Britain and America in an identity crisis. White masculinity has ceased
to be the dominant mode, as cities, which Akkerman shows to be inher-
ently male spaces, are given up to the threat of nuclear annihilation and an
increasing proportion of black residents. Moving to the suburbs, the white
male protagonists struggle to adjust to a space of female empowerment, and
additionally feel themselves threatened by a black populace that is no longer
subject to “separate but equal” laws. Though living surrounded by many other
beings, whether the blind, the vampiric, or the independent and successful
Josella and Ruth, the last men are characters nonetheless profoundly alone
and desperate to assert the superiority of their gender. Their only refuge is
in the futile defense of their suburban homes against an emergent new soci-
ety with which they are not compatible, in the obstinate conservatism of a
doomed order.

With their last white men standing in as generic everymen, it is mainly in
their incompatibility with the developing society that these texts interrogate
such a conservatism. Neville’s realization of his own monstrosity in Legend,
although coming too late to save himself, is the only moment in these four
works in which this interrogation is consciously addressed. As Jancovich
notes, “Matheson’s fiction seems to be preoccupied with the male anxieties
of the 1950s, although he does not necessarily endorse these anxieties. More
commonly, he explores and criticizes the conceptions of normality upon
which these anxieties are often founded” (130). The novel’s depiction of “the
privileged trying to maintain their privilege” (148) places readers “in an uneasy
relationship to Neville in which they are not only deeply involved in his
thought processes and responses, but are also able to identify their limitations
and omissions” (149). This ability is certainly not forced upon the reader, and
while Neville is clearly a character with many limitations, it is not until the
conclusion of the novel that he gains the self-awareness to recognize his role
in their formation.

While it might be argued that we are placed in a similarly uneasy relation-
ship to Masen, particularly given his attitudes toward women, the refusal of
"Triffids" to pass judgment on him as a character could be read either as a lack of self-awareness, or as an indication that Wyndham is leaving this judgment entirely to the reader. In an early manuscript, "Triffids" had possessed a Foreword written in the style of the disclaimer before an eyewitness report:

The Editors wish to make it clear that the following account is the personal story of one man involved in disaster, and the opinions expressed are his personal views. William Masen was not a person of any importance in the pre-catastrophe world. He was an ordinary man of his time, reacting as an ordinary man. (Wyndham, Manuscript 1)

A conceit similar to that used in the quasi-journalistic sf stories of writers such as Wells, the Foreword introduces moral distance from Masen, indicating that perhaps the conservatism typical of men of his time was no more endorsed by Wyndham than by Matheson. Its removal, however, makes this uncertain. Neither film adaptation bears quite this level of ambiguity. Rather, both draw on novels from a decade prior and reinforce the conservative tendencies in each to separate white heroes from dark villains and powerful male protagonists from defenseless female supporting characters. Both novels and their film adaptations can thus be seen as products and critiques of white male anxieties in postwar Britain and America, anxieties closely connected to the demographic makeup of both the urban and suburban realms.

Notes

1. Once extremely popular, post-apocalyptic tales in which a lone male protagonist wanders an unpopulated world, such as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), had fallen out of fashion by the late nineteenth century, but were coming to take on a new significance. Alfred Noyes’s novel *The Last Man* (1940) tells the story of a world almost destroyed (but for one Englishman) by a death-ray. George Orwell had for his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) the working title “The Last Man in Europe,” referring to protagonist Winston Smith’s suspicion that he is the only man who desires to resist the totalitarian panopticon of Big Brother (Ingle 118). Within the context of the postwar era and with the Cold War well under way, the last man theme came to assume a new and pertinent position.

2. *The Day of the Triffids* most notably as two television mini-series, of the same title, in 1981 and 2009. For more on the various adaptations, see Terry Harpold’s “The End Begins: John Wyndham’s Zombie Cozy” (2011). *I Am Legend* most notably as *The Omega Man* (1971) and *I Am Legend* (2007). The influences of both works go further than direct adaptations, with, for example, *Triffids* clearly influencing such popular films as *28 Days Later…* (2002) and *Legend* inspiring George A. Romero’s creation of
the ghoulish zombies introduced in his Night of the Living Dead series of films (1968-2009).

3. The first migration refers to the clearance of the land west of the Alleghenies by pioneers; the second migration to the reworking of this recently opened land with a “pattern of factories, railroads, and dingy industrial towns, the bequest of the industrial pioneer”; the third to the flow of people and materials into financial centers, where “buildings and profits leap upward in riotous pyramids” (Mumford, Urban x). The essay, first published in Survey Graphic in May 1925, was considered still accurate enough to be reprinted in 1968 as the preface to his The Urban Prospect.

4. In the novel Ms. Durrant is a puritanical tyrant who represents the perilousness of conservative inaction in governance; in the film, Durrant is the hero’s love interest, and comes swiftly around to his way of thinking.

5. The mercenary methods suggested by Dr. Vorless to preserve the race involve using blind women for procreation and refusing to help blind men. In a reading of the novel based on race, the views he espouses make him somewhat evocative of the academic proponents of eugenics such as Dr. Ernst Rüdin. It also raises the history of the social construction of race, which often made allowances for the sexualization of women of ethnic minorities, as Ian F. Haney-López notes (32). While Vorless finds the blind male Other useless to his cause, the blind female Other can be acceptably brought into his new race.

6. Mathias Clasen argues against reading any kind of subtext into phrases such as these, writing dismissively, “To be sure, the vampire is an apt metaphor for the other, the mother, the subaltern, the liminal, for the allure of death, for fear of death, desire for immortality, fear of immortality, for immigration, the phallus, the vagina, capitalism, for colonization, female sexuality, male sexuality, amorphous sexuality, and probably much else” (318). The argument that any of these suggestions could be made and that therefore none of them should be, of course, gets us nowhere.

7. The term “soft places” derives from Neil Gaiman’s description of the “phenomenon of ‘nothing’ spaces resistant to cartographic inscription,” (Williams, “Beyond” 86), which equates to the “space preceding colonization.” Soft places both acknowledge and value “the space that exists before its ‘discovery’ by colonists” and “offers a sentimentalized space where past and present meet in a site outside colonial history” (87).


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Abstract

This essay looks at the iconic science fiction texts *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) by John Wyndham and *I Am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, as well as their first film adaptations (respectively 1962 and 1964). In these works, the changes surrounding urban and suburban areas in postwar Britain and America manifest in the portrayal of their “last man” protagonists, who struggle to assert their dominance while fearing independent women and a “dark” and threatening Other. Despite the established scholarly narrative suggesting a flourishing of British and American suburban development immediately after the Second World War, these texts demonstrate how tensions developed within these communities as white males reacted to the gradual refiguring of gender and racial dynamics.
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