

“We’re All Going to Die:”
Discourses of Planetary Crisis and the Formation of Collective Imaginaries

by

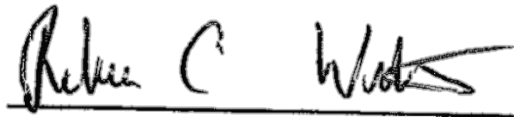
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Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University
Submitted to The Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

May, 2020



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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores discourses of planetary-scale crisis with a focus on climate change, the threat of mass extinction, and the COVID-19 pandemic. What stories are being told about planetary-scale crisis? How are these stories produced and reproduced? What are their implications? I answer these questions with an exploratory analysis of crisis storytelling in the US. The stories people tell about planetary crisis matter, because they are the groundwork, the means, and the justification for how people come to understand and interpret, experience, and respond (or not) to crisis. Drawing from diverse sources (digital media and social networks, Hollywood film, collaborative organizing tools, social media posts, memes, and academic texts), analysis is organized of these stories into three emergent themes: Emergency, Apocalypse, and Extinction. First, mobilization around the declaration “Climate Emergency” underscores the clear need for the state to take responsibility for leading the transition to a fossil fuel free economy. At the same time, there is also reason for concern over the state’s abuse of power. Second, apocalyptic entertainment shapes future imaginaries that center the “normalcy” of the white cisheteronormative man, while some modes of preparation individualize the need to do all they can to prepare. Third, diverse responses to mass extinction (from conservation to “doomerism”) ultimately protect the status quo. A significant common thread of US planetary crisis discourse is a sense of “existential exceptionalism,” a term Mary Heglar (2019) uses to describe the false novelty of collective existential threat that the environmental movement assigns to climate change. The logic of existential exceptionalism enables, first, the obfuscation of the fact that planetary crisis has been ensured and protected by systems like neoliberal globalization. Second, it accepts an orientation towards preparing for crisis that protects the status quo version of a post-crisis return to “normalcy”. Existential exceptionalism can also be characterized as a part of Joseph Masco’s “ crisis in crisis,” (2017) in which media cultures are over-saturated with crisis-talk, the political sphere is limited, and languages for collective self-improvement are abandoned. These discourses have serious implications for limiting collective imaginaries, or the ability to understand and to respond in community to planetary crisis. This is an relevant conversation to the recently emergent COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to speculations about the co-creation of a post-pandemic planet.

Keywords: *Planetary Crisis, Climate Change, Mass Extinction, COVID-19, Collective Imaginaries, Existential Exceptionalism, Normalcy, Storytelling, Neoliberal Globalization*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of completing this thesis was quite taxing. It was so not only because of the expected rigor, but also owing to the shifting circumstances under which I was writing (a global pandemic and political unrest). I am infinitely thankful to my thesis director, Dr. Rebecca Witter, for helping me make it through. Dr. Witter was with me every step of the way, helping me operationalize my very abstract thoughts, design an exploratory research approach, and author/edit draft after draft of each chapter. Not only did she push me to make this project the best that it could be, she was also endlessly patient and encouraging at a time that I really needed both patience and encouragement. Dr. Witter was the best thesis advisor that I could have asked for. Thank you for thinking along with me.

I am also extremely grateful to the second member of my committee, Dr. Dana Powell. This thesis is ultimately a product of conversations that we had over several years and no less than five classes. Dr. Powell sparked my curiosity and passion not only for critical and engaged scholarship, but also for acting for the betterment of communities. Even though I did cry during at least two of her tests. Thank you for the excellent education.

I'd like to thank the faculty and staff from both the Sustainable Development and Anthropology departments who offered me critical guidance throughout my time at Appalachian and showed interest in my work, especially Dr. Susan Reed, Laura England, Dr. Anatoli Ignatov, Dr. Jacqui Ignatova, Dr. Diane Mines, and Dr. Brian Burke. I'd also like to express my deepest appreciation for the Sustainable Development Department as a whole, which I believe is doing critical work to teach thinking that can approach complicated and systemic problems with long-lasting alternatives.

In addition, I am indebted to my collaborators with Appalachian Climate Action Collaborative, which makes periodic appearances in this work. I was going to try and start listing people, but I soon realized that there were too many to keep this concise. Many of the conversations that I have in this project were conversations that we had collectively. May we continue to push our collective imagination to envision a new world.

I am also thankful to my family, for teaching me to care about others. I am grateful for the opportunities and support that the Honors College has allowed. And finally, a thank you and acknowledgment to my friend and roommate, Gab, with whom I have been socially distancing for the past months. We've both been working on Honors theses at a very uncertain time in our lives, and I appreciate their support and willingness to listen to rants. Gab, I hope that I didn't wake you up too many times making coffee at 3 in the morning. :)

CHAPTER ONE | INTRODUCTION: SYSTEM CHANGE, NOT CLIMATE CHANGE

On September 20th, 2019, an estimated 4 million people across the world took to the streets to demand climate action as a part of the Global Climate Strikes. I was one of those people. Along with other members of Appalachian Climate Action Collaborative or “ClimAct” (a local grassroots climate justice coalition), I co-organized the strike in Boone, NC. Boone is the small US college town where I worked (until Covid-19) and where I still (remotely) attend Appalachian State University.

I remember being pleasantly surprised by the numbers that we drew – estimated at [several hundred](#)– college students, “locals,” professors with their kids, and people who traveled in from surrounding rural towns and counties gathered on the green lawn outside the public library. A few of my collaborators had made a large banner that said read, “Give Change a Chance, Give Earth a Chance.” Several carried homemade signs: “Denial is not Sustainable,” “Planet Over Profit,” and “There Are No Jobs on a Dead Planet.” A few folks toted paper mache puppets of endemic species threatened by climate change and mass extinction - a Spruce Fir Moss Spider, a Hellbender, and even a large stony face with moss for hair that represented nearby Grandfather Mountain.

I remember that the megaphone (of which we only had one) produced a loud, ringing sound when I spoke into it. I fumbled my way through a set of five demands co-produced by US Youth Climate Strike Coalition¹, the group that organized many of the US climate strikes: 1) the US adoption of the “Green New Deal,” 2) respect for indigenous land and sovereignty, 3) environmental justice, 4) protection of biodiversity, and 5) a shift to sustainable agriculture.² I

¹ US Youth Climate Strike Coalition is a collaboration between 8 major youth-led climate groups facilitated by the mobilization group, The Future Coalition (Janfaza 2019).

² Strikewithus.org, accessed September 1, 2019.

then goaded the crowd to begin marching down our single main street, King Street, to the Watauga County Administrative building and Watauga Co. Courthouse. I intended for us to rally there before moving on again. I also requested that the crowd attempt to leave space on the sidewalk for other pedestrians, as I wanted to avoid any confrontation with the town police at that event. But as they turned and headed away in a mass, there was a moment of panic. Had I unleashed a sizable crowd onto our small town with too little direction?

And so I ran, fighting my way to the front of the friendly mob of directionless strikers. I hoisted the shoddy megaphone over my head. “When I say ‘system change,’ you say ‘*not* climate change!” Then we proceeded, spread out over blocks, still pouring off the sidewalks into the street. My call: “System Change”. Their response: “*Not* Climate Change!” My call: System Change. Their response, *Not* Climate Change. System Change. *Not* Climate Change. And in that moment it felt unreal, walking down a street I walked every day, but this time with a crowd of climate strikers along with me. After a block or two, I found my footing. And when we came out on the other end of King Street, I had lost my voice.

I was initially unsure about this event because I wasn’t sure what purpose it would really serve. I felt uneasy about the (reasonably so) with the prospect of accidentally replicating empty, photo-op activism for our own sakes. But what I quickly found was that the crowd that had gathered was alive with energy. They were ready to rally and to “fight back.” We were striking in solidarity with the rest of the global 4 million and we were striking for us. Many were looking for a place to have collective conversations about climate change, and, consistently, people were storytelling. I heard stories about climatic disruption to Christmas tree farming the next county over. I heard stories about local politics, and the potential of a new asphalt plant being built by the elementary school. I heard stories about how to stay connected. Moreover, collectively, as we

took King St., the hundreds gathered in my town that day told several stories about climate change that day. That it's a multigenerational and multispecies concern worth leaving work early for. That lives are at stake - Spider, Salamander, and Human. That leadership is lacking at some levels, emergent at others. And that addressing the crisis requires a change in the political and economic systems hinged to carbon, to exploitation, and to profit over persons.

When I read the local paper's article about the event, I also read the comments section. The stories being told in the comments were very different stories. Many were stories that aligned with climate denialism. In the US in particular,³ campaigns of strategic obfuscation have spun doubt and distrust in the validity of climate science, resulting in the emergence of climate denialism (or as denialists sometimes prefer to position, "skepticism") (Conway and Oreskes 2010). In denialist discourse, climate change might be storied as a political tool, or a conspiracy theory.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the political implications of discourses of "planetary crisis." These planetary-scale phenomena cannot be held in a human palm, in fact, they cannot really be seen. Rather, they are primarily perceived and known through layers of experiences (with super-storms, disappearances, and droughts) and through information imparted discursively (through a graph, an oral story, or a news report). Timothy Morton (2013) referred to climate change and other planetary crises as "hyperobjects" - things whose spatial and temporal boundaries are so large, undefined, and uncertain that they trouble ordinary conceptions of what a "thing" even is. Knowing a "hyperobject" is extra-ordinarily complicated. And how "planetary-scale crisis" is known influences how both individuals and social collectives react.

³ Also significantly present in other countries considered to be in the "Anglosphere" (Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada). (Ghosh 2016:141.)

This thesis project enters into the field of storytelling through an analysis of discourses concerning “planetary crisis.” I ask, What stories are being told about “planetary crisis”? How are the stories produced and reproduced? And what are the implications of these stories about planetary crisis? I approach these questions through exploration of artifacts and sites of discourse and storytelling, including social media interactions, films, organizing tools, memes, and academic texts. I also draw from fields of scholarship that ask similar questions - including anthropology, political ecology, literary studies, and Science and Technology Studies (STS). What I have found is that stories about planetary crisis are constantly co-created, and that they have influence over the way that people imagine and their capacity to respond to crisis. Because of this power over collective capacities to imagine, stories about crisis and social change have political implications.

I find in the process of this project that discourse and stories on planetary crisis are sites of negotiation and tension between different perspectives on normalcy, the role of the state in society, and on the nature of crisis itself. One common trend in crisis discourse is what Mary Heglar calls “existential exceptionalism” (2019) - the (false) sense of novelty attributed to the existential threat posed by planetary crisis. I argue that existential exceptionalism erases the systemic drivers of planetary crisis and furthers what Joseph Masco refers to as the “crisis in crisis” (2017), a state in which languages for collective improvement and positive futurities are left behind. Existential exceptionalism and the crisis in crisis limit the capacity of collective imaginaries to imagine alternatives to contemporary “normalcy” and positive futurities in the face of planetary crisis.

Theoretical Background

Discourse, Storytelling, and Planetary-Scale Crisis

I understand discourse as a framework for understanding the intimate relationship between knowledge and power, as a “set of social and cultural practices and norms that limit and shape what can be said (i.e., what seems normal, legitimate, and truthful, and what does not), in ways we are quite unaware of unless we challenge ourselves,” (Sheppard et al 2009: 52). This is a conception of discourse canonically attributed to postmodern scholar Michel Foucault, whose discursive analysis is particularly attuned to relationships of power and “truthmaking” (1980: 132). Essentially, some discourses have shaped understandings and meanings systems (or “epistemes”) which are legitimized as “truth,” while other discourses are marginalized (Foucault 1980: 132). Therefore, discourse analysis in this sense examines how “truth” is determined, how that “truth” shapes human behavior, and how “alternative” discourses are devalued, but also have the potential to contest and challenge dominant truths. In terms of planetary crisis, power and discourse direct conceptions of not only the conditions of the crisis itself, but also what is possible in reaction.

Storytelling is a discursive practice which makes particular use of narrative for creating and conveying meaning. Stories are affective forms of communication. In a recent article about storying climate change, a group of ASU professors explained: “Stories allow us to see and be with climate change. Stories connect people across difference and resonate through time. They call us to care for, respond to, and become responsible to one another” (England et al. 2019: 21). Master storyteller Ursula LeGuin argued, moreover, that words in the form of discursive expressions are not just framings, they are events that “... do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer” (2004: 199) by relaying ideas and information as well as

energy, understanding, and emotion back and forth and by amplifying it (Le Guin 2004). Thus, stories are lively and shared.⁴ They represent, project, and inform collective yearnings, collective fears, and collective imaginations. By collective imaginations I mean the capacity to co-create or envision something collaboratively, in this case specifically positive futurities.

Neoliberal Globalization and the Coloniality of Power

Throughout this thesis I refer to “the systems” which drive planetary crisis. When I write this, I am pointing to the context of planetary crises - that most if not all facets of contemporary planetary crisis are the result of social forces and human activity. However (as the many critiques of the designation “Anthropocene” point out), some humans and some types of human activity are far more responsible for planetary conditions than others. Simply put, fossil fuel companies are far more responsible for climate change than a subsistence farmer in, say, Nepal. The structures I am most concerned about in this thesis are neoliberal globalization and settler colonialism. The values and operation of both (e.g., the consolidation and commodification of

⁴ A litany of other scholars writing about planetary crisis also work (and play) with modes of storytelling and their relation to human (and multi-species) collectives in their theoretical projects. Activist Joanna Macy makes an intervention on collective imaginaries by telling “three stories” - that of “Business as Usual,” “The Great Unraveling” (crisis), and “The Great Turning,” emphasizing that “The Great Turning” is the story for unworking the other two and actively hoping for positive futurities (Macy and Johnstone 2012). Donna Haraway turns to science fiction as a particular type of fiction which fits into “SF” - a theoretical lens or mode intended to counter neoliberal autopoiesis (self-production and maintenance) with “sympoiesis” (M. Beth Dempster’s collectively produced system with no boundaries), in part by writing at the edges of literature and academia (2016). Haraway also prompts the reconsideration of collectivity with her call to “make kin” outside of blood ties, outside of species, and to therefore build a more powerful collective (2016). Other STS writers, including Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, take up the story of “Gaia” to story planetary crisis. The Gaia Hypothesis, as James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis presented it, was the Earth as an autopoietic, self-regulating organism (Gaia). However, Stengers renders Gaia as an “intruder”, while Latour uses Gaia as a figure to illustrate the obsolescence of “Nature” as a concept (Stengers 2015, Latour 2017). Stengers also relies on science fiction to question objective science and its regime of knowledge production and understanding (2015). Thom Van Dooren’s *Flight Ways* engages in “lively storytelling” about the flight ways of birds with the intention of “storying” the world and intervening “into existing patterns of living and dying in an effort to work toward better worlds” (2014). And Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is an ethnography of crisis told through, with, and from the perspective of matsutake mushrooms (2015). Each of these influence how this project incorporates storytelling and word-play into the methodology and writing, as well as influencing how the practice of storytelling and the power of narrative operate politically in discourse.

land and labor, the expectation of constant growth, the aggrandizement of consumer culture, and the devaluation of nonhuman being and of human labor as resources for exploitation in the name of profit) push on planetary limits and influence the cultural values and institutions which make planetary crisis so hard to fight against. They are also both immediately relevant to the political situation of the United States, which is the geopolitical location this analysis is focused on.

Neoliberalism [further theorized in Chapter 3] is an ideology rooted in the idea that an individual's ultimate freedom is realized through an unfettered (*laissez faire*) market economy. Essentially, the market economy is held up as a system of valuation and social organization which orders what neoliberal patriarch, Milton Friedman (1962), described as the typical state of humankind: "tyranny, servitude, and misery". State governance is considered a threat to freedom, and therefore must be cut back to the barebones of enforcing national order and the functioning of the economy (Friedman 1962). Classic neoliberal policy counsel includes privatization of all state operations, deregulation of markets, and cuts to social spending. It can be understood as an interpretation of "pure" liberal capitalism. Neoliberalism appears frequently in this project not only as a force structuring global power relationships, but also as a major influence (constant, albeit relatively invisibly) in American crisis culture.

When neoliberalism began to be spread across the world (mostly in the 1980's - on, but starting in the late 70's), it did not build international power relations from the ground up. Rather, it further entrenched global power relationships that already existed (and were already benefiting the ruling class of America) as a consequence of imperial and colonization. Actors like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) facilitated this (Harvey 2007). In addition, the logics of difference used to justify and organize colonial (and imperial) projects (like the organizing grammar of race) continue to

operate and are entangled with the conditions of crisis. Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo's conceptualization of the coloniality or colonial matrix of power model the relationship between economy, authority, gender and sexuality, subjectivity, and knowledge determined by positionality to a white supremacist, cisheteronormative standard body (Mignolo 2011, Lugones 2010). It is along the lines of the coloniality of power that "othering" and dehumanization occur, meaning that the able white cisheteronormative body is the standard (or Self) and everyone that deviates from that standard is a lesser Other. Often the processing of Othering entails dispossession or dehumanization of the other, which has historically been used as justification for projects of brutality and exploitation (like slavery, mass incarceration for profit, and eugenics). These logics of difference continue to thrive and they work throughout both neoliberal globalization and discourses of planetary crisis.

For example, one of the most eminent (and problematic) stories concerning planetary crisis is the "the Population Bomb" or simply "overpopulation." Sometimes the Population Bomb or overpopulation are presented either as direct drivers or major forces in forming planetary scale crisis. However, not only does the idea of the "population bomb" ignore the actual drivers of poverty or scarcity (particularly inequitable distribution of resources), it taps into a neo-Malthusian narrative of an imaginary crowded planet full of desperate, impoverished, and violent people (Hartmann 1995). The coloniality of power explains why the blame and fear of the population bomb is shunted onto poor black and brown people (particularly black and brown women) rather than wealthy over-consumers. And as a result, eugenics, sterilization projects, and the mass incarceration of migrants occur, justified by the myth of scarcity and the vilification of "others" through the coloniality of power.

The Crisis in Crisis and Existential Exceptionalism

Joseph Masco is one scholar who addresses crisis-based discourse specifically. In “The Crisis in Crisis,” Masco (2017) conjures images of media cultures soaked in “crisis,” reporting crises from mega-storms to oil spills to police brutality. Masco suggested that in the US, there is a “crisis in crisis,” in which the term (or “affect generating idiom”) is diminished in its affective and discursive power to mobilize reaction because of “narrative saturation, overuse, and a lack of well-articulated positive futurities to balance stories of end-times,” (2017: 65). For Masco, the overwhelming nature of crisis in crisis is a part of a changing political sphere and language, as the neoliberal governance and imperial activity of the United States re-writes or breaks the “social contract” and leaves behind languages for collective social improvement (or even just survival) in favor of individualism. This is a limitation of “political horizons,” which limits the ability for collective imaginations of other politics (Masco 2017: 66). Masco goes so far as to say that “crisis talk today seeks to stabilize an institution, practice, or reality rather than interrogate the historical conditions of possibility for that endangerment to occur,” (2017: 73). Theorizing planetary crisis with the crisis in crisis in mind entails attention, not only to the political limitation of collective imaginaries, but also to the systems and norms protected by such limitations.

Masco’s conclusion, that “the crisis in crisis” demands an increased commitment to the generation of positive futurities and the rehabilitation of collective “world-making” powers (like imagination) (2017: 74), resonates with other scholars. Among these, literary critic Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* (2016) that planetary crisis is also a “crisis” of culture and collective imagination (15). Collective imaginaries can be understood as collaborative, co-produced capacities to envision new ways of thinking, being, and acting. Ghosh suggests that it

is the role of storytelling to help push collective imagination to reconceptualize human positionality in the planetary ecosystem as a response to planetary crisis. “The Great Derangement” is the state in which collective imaginaries fail to do this reconceptualization, and are therefore limited in their scope of reaction to crisis (Ghosh 2016). While Ghosh is primarily concerned with fiction novels, in this project I identify numerous modes of storytelling, from films to memes to trainings provided by advocacy groups like The Climate Mobilization.⁵

Another term which is important to thinking with planetary crisis discourse is existential exceptionalism, an idea very similar to the crisis in crisis. Existential exceptionalism is a term used by climate writer Mary Annaise Heglar to describe the (false) sense of novelty that the environmental movement ascribes to the existential threat of contemporary planetary-scale crisis (particularly climate change) (2019). This sense of exceptionalism is false in the sense that there have already been many existential threats levied against the marginalized and exploited of the global system. Heglar’s example is being Black in America, particularly in the Jim Crow South (2019). Many of us concerned with planetary-scale crisis wonder if it’s responsible or worth having children in the face of utter uncertainty and ecological instability. What would their future be like, if ours is already so tumultuous? Heglar, however, points out that “Black people of the not-too-distant past trembled for every baby born into that world. Sound familiar?” (2019). This doesn’t mean that the fear of having children in an age of planetary crisis is invalid, but it does point to the ongoing nature of crisis, existential threat, and uncertainty. Existential

⁵ One example of the types of discursive differences that I attempt to be attuned to can be seen in The Guardian’s 2019 changes to its [journalistic style guide](#). “Climate emergency” or “climate crisis” are now the only terms used for “climate change,” and “climate science denier” takes the place of “climate sceptic.” (Zeldin-O’Neill, 2019). These decisions about terminology are not neutral; there is much at stake. The shift from climate change to emergency and crisis is meant to emphasize the temporal immediacy and the seriousness of the issue. The shift from climate sceptic to climate science denier is intended to invalidate the arguments of denialists who claim that their position is rationally justified by “scepticism” rather than blatant disregard for scientific consensus. Thus, each of these changes includes a shift in political affect, orientation, imagination, and, at least arguably, outcome.

exceptionalism (whether it intends to or not) buys into a kind of historical amnesia which forgets histories of planetary crisis which were had in the past (such as the threat of nuclear war) and the contextual roots of planetary crisis in systems of power which have already (and continually) propagated projects of mass elimination and existential threat.

A World Where Many Worlds Fit

In Julie Cruikshank's 2006 ethnography *Do Glaciers Listen?*, Cruikshank emphasizes that to her interlocutors, indigenous communities in the Yukon, glaciers have voices and agency in a way that a positivistic, scientific understanding would reject. And as Cruikshank lays out, colonial encounters and hegemonic power systems create a politics of knowledge which delegitimizes "local" knowledges of crisis. Marginalization and erasure of knowledges othered from Western epistemes is part and parcel of the hegemonic power relationships which were entrenched globally through European colonization and imperialism (Sousa Santos et al 2008, Spivak 1988). Not only does this marginalization of knowledges have an impact on the formation and operation of collective imaginaries in response to planetary crisis, these power systematics (like the colonality of power) are the same ones which have orchestrated planetary crisis and the conditions of vulnerability which position some humans to experience far worse and more immediate impacts of planetary crisis.

However, there are many who point out that there are important lessons to be learned from sites of colonial difference created by the colonial matrix of power. Frameworks such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos's "Epistemologies of the South" which center marginalized epistemes also take on an ontological power, in that epistemological diversity allows for the existence of many worlds (Escobar 2015). Anthropologist Arturo Escobar suggests that planetary

crisis is largely a crisis of the world figured by “Euro-modernity” and that actually thinking new thoughts (as many scholars of crisis are calling for) requires moving away from “the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with the multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle,” (2015). These politics are said to be a part of the pursuit of a “pluriverse” (as opposed to a uni-verse) in which many worlds fit, as the Zapatistas suggest (Escobar 2015). Although this project is primarily concerned with discourses which operate in a white Euro-American episteme, I bring border thinking and pluriversal politics to the conversation here briefly in order to highlight that the formation of collective imaginaries and alternative politics to globalized capitalism is actively occurring at points and perspectives devalued and marginalized by the coloniality of power and knowledge. My contribution is to begin to unravel discourses of crisis which hold onto that coloniality.

Methods and Approach

This project is not about finding the “best way” to discuss planetary crisis, nor does it provide an all-encompassing survey of the stories told about planetary crisis. Instead my approach is exploratory, emergent, and experimental. By exploratory I mean that I thought with and wrote about that which I encountered. I cannot make claims, therefore, that my sampling is representative or even sufficiently thorough. I do not quantify my results. But I do engage with stories that travel as, in many cases, the stories found me. I share stories (in the forms of protest marches and political campaigns, Hollywood films and science fiction, academic treatises and preparation guides, conservation ethics and viral memes) as well as in the form of my own experiences. Thus the thesis is also, in part, experiential auto-ethnography - my own contribution to the collective imaginary. So what I provide here is a preliminary analysis, an emblematic few

strands from a larger web of stories, described and analyzed in detail. The exploratory and emergent nature was only amplified by the development of a global pandemic half-way through the semester, which has both made the writing process far harder, but also made the project more immediately relevant than ever.⁶ COVID-19 and the impacts of physical distancing haunt, inform, and limit this project.

The Stories I Gathered and Encountered

I used a sort of snow-ball sampling to locate the stories I present in these chapters. By snowball sampling, I mean opportunistically “following the rabbit,” letting one source lead me to the next and to eventually (dis)orienting me in an endless sea of discursive objects and themes. For example, I came across The Climate Mobilization “organizer toolkit” (featured in Chapter Two), after ClimAct sent two of our members to a “Climate Emergency” training they organized. That toolkit then led me to their website, where I found a number of other sources (like “Emergency Mode”).

I also relied on my own experiences. My pursuit of an undergraduate degree in “sustainable development” and my grassroots organizing inform this thesis, but so too do my day to day conversations about planetary crisis. I treat each as field sites where artifacts and themes emerged. In that sense, I am indebted to the people around me - like my friend Willy, who provides the framework for the story that follows this introduction. Or my co-organizer (and instructor), Dr. Susan Reed, who introduced me to Bendell’s Deep Adaptation (featured in

⁶ I certainly wasn’t expecting it, but in a dark way it was almost sickly convenient, like a new example of planetary crisis had been served up to me on a platter, itching to be written about. But it’s still so fresh, still unfolding. And it has definitely made this already overly ambitious project harder. By the time that this project is at its end point, things will still be uncertain. And the losses are so great, and so fresh that I thought it best to keep COVID-19 out of the spotlight. But it’s still there, throughout this project, as I write and edit, I am living in this planetary crisis, “we” are all living in the crisis (because it is planetary), though the experiences of each person are different.

Chapter 3) over a working Tex-Mex dinner one night as we planned an energy justice summit. In some cases, these connections brought me to new ideas and examples. And in other cases, conversations, experiences, and stories recounted to me (whether online or in person) have become integral sights for auto-ethnographic reflection (discussed more below). I must also mention that while the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the flow of the project, it was always my intent that many of my materials of analysis come from digital spaces, where the lines of authorship are often blurred. This is intended to provide further space for insight into how discourses of planetary crisis are co-produced and contribute to collective imaginaries.

Due to the disparate origin and sources of my materials, I have tried to be very clear throughout about how I encountered my sources. Especially because in some sense, this project and my participation is part of the discourse, and the digital spaces which I draw much of my work from are also spaces where there are many authors. Sometimes the authors are unidentifiable.

My Approach to Analysis

I approached the research as a general inquiry into planetary crisis discourse, and I tried to let the analytical frameworks and themes that I came to use develop from the stories and materials I encountered and collected. The themes and frameworks were also influenced by some a priori interests, ideas I had spent the past four years working with and through, about coloniality and decoloniality, systems thinking, and neoliberal globalization.

To illustrate the process: I first identified themes, key frameworks, and even crisis-related phrases that I felt were relevant and wrote them on notecards. This allowed me to visually map and make connections between concepts that I had never thought to put together before. There

were a lot of notecards. They range from “Migration” to “The Rapture” to “Settler Moves to Innocence” to one that just said “Live Fast, Die Young, Bad Girls Do It Well.” I had “Preppers,” and “Doomers” and “Boomers.” Suffice to say that not everything on the cards made it into the project (explicitly, anyway). I grouped, sorted, and stacked these, and eventually I wrote new ones and posted them on my wall.⁷(See Images 1.3. and 1.4.)

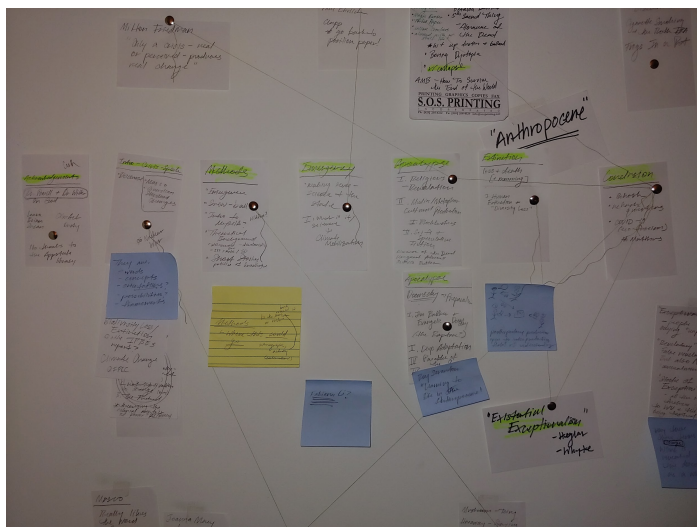
By working and reworking relations between the cards, I identified a collection of interrelated themes that became my organizing framework and key chapters for the thesis: emergency, apocalypse, and extinction. These terms were not only recurrent and interrelated, they were themselves lively discourses of social and ecological change, of threat and opportunities, and the relationship between individuals and collectives.

The more experimental part of the thesis is this: I took some of my own day to day encounters with planetary crisis storytelling and turned them into very short stories. Throughout the thesis these act as interruptions and interludes distinct from, but still related to the formal chapters. These help ground the analysis in the present and the daily presence of crisis and they reveal the more pedestrian workings of collective imaginaries. They also leave open space for speculation on the tensions between academic writing (which is a form of storytelling in its own

⁷ When this is over I'll probably burn them.

right) and my active storytelling in the shared struggle to conceive of planetary crisis amidst the collisions of the existential in with the mundane of the everyday.

Essentially, I have attempted to take disparate but thematically related things and juxtapose them to see what emerges. My findings and arguments were derived this way. It might not be the most orthodox of methods, but I believe that it has served its purpose in pursuing the goals and questions. And there is also an added bonus of troubling what is legitimized as “real knowledge production” in academic settings, which is often rooted in references to a disciplinary



Images 1.3 and 1.4.
Photos Provided by Author

canon and conducted through positivistic research methods. I have left some of those frameworks behind as a part of the normalcy that I am attempting to problematize throughout this project.

Chapter Overview

In the second chapter, I examine the role of “emergency” as a concept in planetary crisis discourse primarily through the lens of “Climate Emergency.” Climate Emergency is a politically active term that seeks to leverage the World War II mobilization as a precedent to appeal to the state to mobilize against climate change (as if it were equivalent to a war). I problematize this appeal primarily through investigation of the states of legal suspension / exception which states of emergency open up. I argue that to center the term emergency in discourses of crisis (especially in United States-based activism) is an appeal to “normal” systems which opens up a state of exception for “the greater good”. In some respects, therefore, declaring a climate change emergency can reorient states to take the calls of scientists and society seriously. Yet the means to achieve this ends rest, too often, on sacrifices that can easily be imposed on vulnerable populations rather than being taken on collectively or by the wealthy.

In the second chapter, I think with the concept of “apocalypse” as an orientation towards crisis which assumes the obliteration of the social “normal” that precedes it. I ask how apocalypse is produced and reproduced in apocalyptic blockbuster films, and how that formation of apocalypse contributes to neoliberal “normalcy,” disaster capitalism and narratives of “white affect.” I then think with the “prepper” as an attitude towards apocalypse that manifests the individualization of security. In other words, the lack of social support systems and the neoliberalization of the mind has prompted people to internalize the need to prepare for apocalypse not as a society but as individuals or households. These and other discourses of “apocalypse” are sites where people produce, reproduce, and negotiate shared conceptions of what apocalypse means, when exactly the apocalypse is going to happen (or if it’s already happening), what it will look like (and how we will dress for it) as well as how to prepare for it.

The question, I argue, that needs to follow: Is the apocalypse in question an emergent threat to American normalcy, or is it the escalation of that normalcy?

In the third chapter, I take up “extinction” in planetary crisis discourse as a term entangled with the threat of Mass Extinction. I consider the role of extinction in discourses of environmentalism, and in turn what effect environmentalism as a movement has on collective conceptions of planetary crisis. I use Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s theorization of “settler moves to innocence” to characterize the role of “wilderness” (and extinction) in American environmentalism. I then pay attention to the relationship between “charismatic species’ and mass extinction, after which I will argue that both the centering of charismatic species and settler environmentalist moves to innocence are protecting settler normalcy and futurity. And finally, I think with the Doomer as an orientation towards planetary crisis that assumes the inevitability of extinction. I show that Doomer-ism is both another embodiment of existential exceptionalism, but also a concept by which lively (and arguably necessary) conversations about collective threat, loss, and death are being catalyzed.

In conclusion, I argue that discourses of planetary crisis have the power to shape collective imaginaries, which in turn orient human action towards crisis. I argue that existential exceptionalism, which removes planetary crisis from its entangled context with legacies of neoliberal globalization and other systems of exploitation, limits the capacity of collective imaginaries to fight the actual causes of planetary crisis.

INTERLUDE I | “FROGS IN A POT”

Before COVID-19 appeared on the horizon, I had a part-time job working in a coffee house that has been in this town for several decades. Between the hours I spent writing for my professors and the hours I am paid to make coffee or bake pastries, I was in the shop a lot, and I have come to know many of the other people who also spend a lot of their time there. Our regulars.

One of these is a fellow named Willy.⁸ Willy is tall, in his 40’s, and loves to read history books. He works nights at the infamous on-campus gas station. Leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak, he spent a majority of his days in the coffee shop and at the community cafe around the corner, as he is homeless. Willy would often have rich conversations on the shop smoking stoop (which is actually just the back steps of an Antique Mall). One particularly dreary day I went out to the stoop after clocking out from a shift to drink my free beer with Willy, who was asking me about this project. I explained to him that I was writing about planetary crisis stories and their political implications.

He nodded and said that sometimes he felt like we were all “frogs in a pot.” I laughed and agreed. The tale goes, that if you put a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump out, but if you put a frog in a pot of still water and heat it slowly to a boil that the frog will never know until it’s too late. He said, some of the frogs are wise now to what’s happening, but they can’t convince the other frogs that it’s worth doing something about. They’re still stuck in the pot.

They are eased into death, accepting the increasing heat as normalcy.

⁸ This is a pseudonym.

CHAPTER TWO | EMERGENCY

When I heard my crewmate's deep, booming voice yell FIRE! the first time, I thought that he was joking. I was standing, shocked for a second, holding a 4 pound "single-jack" sledge hammer in my right hand. My trail crew and I were crushing rocks and building stone stairs in the baking summer Southern Californian sun.⁹ We were several miles from our car, surrounded by brittle, dehydrated scrub. I thought to myself that it wasn't a very damn funny place to be joking about fire.

Before my mind caught up to the reality of fire, my body was being shoved down the trail by my supervisor. I tripped over the rock stairs that we had already completed. I dropped the single-jack and tripped on that too. And then I saw it - the fire, burning in the middle of the dry creek bed, growing and spreading in the coarse grass and bushes. The husk of a dead agave plant caught, and then we ran. All there was to do was run. We ran until our legs couldn't take it anymore, until my friend chucked in the scrub, her face as red as the flame. She was asthmatic. We could see the smoke clouds mushrooming in the sky, and I was repeatedly trying to dial the National Forest Dispatch, my calls dropped over and over again. I vaguely remember yelling, and the faint sound of our bluetooth speaker still playing the workplace tunes - Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Simple Man." I remember being thirsty. I had dropped two of my water bottles; they were too heavy, they had to be sacrificed.

When wildland fires break out on public land, the standard procedure includes investigation into the cause. When the Angeles National Forest guys came to question us, they

⁹ I was with American Conservation Experience (ACE) based out of Dulzura, CA.



Images 1.1 and 1.2.

Image 1.1 is a photo taken by author of path into trail work site

Image 1.2 “Stone Fire” is from the [Santa Clarita Valley Signal](#)

did it in one on one interviews, asking us questions like “Was anyone angry that day?” “Are there smokers on your crew?” “Which way was the wind blowing?” These were relevant questions. After all, if the wind had been blowing a different way that day this might be a different story. Nonetheless, I fixated on the ugly wallpaper in the room and told them the truth – that we weren’t allowed to smoke on project and, that at the time, I had been too preoccupied with other thoughts (like what it might be like to die in a fire) to think about which way the wind was blowing.

They understood. And then they told me that for the forest service, this fire had actually served a somewhat productive purpose - it was burning a canyon that hadn’t burned in decades and clearing out brush before an even larger fire could threaten the nearby town. It was contained and controlled with little incident. But to us, the fire had felt life-threatening. To the nearby residents, who evacuated themselves, their precious belongings, and their large animals, it was an emergency. But from another angle, our single fire (the [Stone Fire](#)) did not stand alone in the minds of many. Rather, it was a small part of a longer, brutal “fire season”. The 2018 Californian

fire season was (to this date) one of the most deadly and destructive seasons on record. And that single season is also part of a broader trend of change, in which fires burn hotter, larger, and more unpredictably.¹⁰

“Emergency” refers to a dramatic shift in state or status, from normalcy into extraordinary conditions, necessitating immediate remedy to prevent tragic losses. Emergencies are exceptional. And yet, whether they are “natural” disasters (landslides, floods, fires), tragic accidents (car crashes, workplace injuries, falls), or acts of violence (terrorist attacks, wars), they happen every day. As in the story of the Stone Fire incident, perceiving “emergency” depends on the scale and magnitude of the event, circumstance, or relationship and on one’s position (and positionality) in relation to the event.

In this chapter, I focus my analysis of discourses of planetary crisis on recent mobilization around “Climate Emergency.” I take my first step into (Climate) Emergency discourse with an analysis of an “organizer’s toolkit” for the advancement of climate emergency campaigns put out by the grassroots advocacy organization, The Climate Mobilization. I then characterize the very active tension between the pursuit of “climate emergency” and the history and potential of injustice perpetrated by the state in times of emergency-related legal suspension.

Climate-concerned organizers, advocates, and activists use emergency terminology strategically, to make an appeal to their governments to classify anthropogenic climate change as an emergency. Such a move would theoretically reify the threat of climate change in the

¹⁰ I grew up in the East Tennessee valley, a very green area with lots of water, where the topography, climate, and ecology largely protected my life from dramatic natural disasters. I had never seen a wildfire in person before this (although my new Californian friends were accustomed to seeing them on the side of the road at times), and I was under the (false) impression for a long time that wildfires just didn’t happen like that in the Appalachian Mountains. However, in 2016, the Great Smoky Mountains Wildfire complex burned through places and landscapes that I cherished and claimed the lives of 14. It was the deadliest fire event in the eastern US since 1947. While the emblematic location for fire tragedies in the US is California, changes are occurring across the globe.

language of the state, and would set a precedent for taking serious steps to address it. In today's context, where the executive leader of the US has refused to act (and instead denied climate change and doubled down on measures to increase global warming, ramped up high emissions economy), organizers have also targeted city and state governments with their campaigns. However, there are real concerns around the use of the term - in particular, the (precedented) potential for the US government to exploit emergency powers to advance other agendas, including those involving racism and militarization.

In the United States, those advocating for a state of "Climate Emergency" grasp at the precedent set by the large-scale mobilization and redirection of US resources and labor force during World War II. In that case, the state took a powerful role in redirecting industrial activity towards military needs, distributing resources and otherwise influencing the daily lives of everyday Americans. This is because the nation was in a recognized state of emergency (and therefore in a state of political exception) post-Pearl Harbor. War time efforts hinged on enormous sacrifices, some of them generative, collective efforts, others aberrant human rights violations. If the WWII mobilization is the same level of commitment and pace of action that Climate Emergency campaigns seek (both within the United States and in other places), there is reason for hesitation. I argue that the normalization or necessity of "sacrifices" in emergency management contributes to that active tension, in which "Climate Emergency" is both extremely important and extremely dangerous.

Sacrifice, Suspension, and State Responsibility

Emergency brings up important questions about state responsibility and important implications about the relationship between states and citizens. This is certainly the case in a

context of US neoliberalism, characterized by the role back of public services, including emergency response (Gotham 2012). The declaration of a “state of emergency” in response to a crisis allows state authorities to expand the actions that they can take legitimately and, in some cases, to make exceptions to the law. Sundberg (2015) refers to this as “legal suspension,” or a “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) in which the state can act how it wants with relative impunity in the name of the greater good. In theory, that expansion of power is “necessary” to make the emergency response most effective. However, there have been a number of cases in the United States in which a declared “state of emergency” has been used to justify actions unlimited to the scope of the “emergency” (if there is one at all) - for instance, in the case of the “crisis at the border” being declared an emergency by Donald Trump (Holden 2019), a topic I return to at the end of the chapter.¹¹

Emergency management is geared towards the best possible outcome of the situation, with the least losses.¹² In emergency management (especially with an emergency with mass casualties, like a war), who or what is helped in what order is determined by criteria like triage - which assumes that there will be a certain amount of sacrifice necessary to achieve the best outcome possible. In a state of legal suspension, the state has an increased ability to determine what sacrifices are “necessary” for the greater good.

Princen (2010) characterizes sacrifices as positive or negative according to the positionality and power of the actors making sacrifices (positive) or being sacrificed (negative). Positive sacrifices, like parenthood, are taken on willingly with the assumption that sacrifice is implicit in the fulfillment of the role. Parenting involves enormous trade-offs in terms of

¹¹ It’s also worth pointing out here that some “emergency relief” delivered by the United States, such as the response following Hurricane Katrina, is also both dangerous and inadequate.

¹² Of course, in the US, individuals and groups with power can influence the emergency management process if their interests conflict with the interests of the collective greater good.

commitments of time, energy, finances and even health, yet parents endure these costs as investments in the future (including their future). Negative sacrifice, on the other hand, is a sacrifice imposed, wherein individuals are sacrificed themselves for the good of a future that is not accountable to, and indeed, may not include them. Negative sacrifices are not “part of the bargain” at least not for those being sacrificed; here Princen’s example is the coal miner who sells labor for a paycheck, but then also has their health sacrificed (2010).

In the United States, the negative sacrifices have been made or forced upon those living on the margins of society. One example is the placement of toxic industries in the backyards of those who are systematically dispossessed from the means to resist, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and persons of color) communities (Bullard 2010). These and other areas that are particularly contaminated for the “greater good” of industry are called “sacrifice zones” (Lerner 2010, Maldonado 2019). In Princen’s words, this is institutionalized negative sacrifice. This pattern of unjust and imposed “sacrifice” is one of the reasons that appealing to the state for emergency management means risking further repetition of unequal patterns. On another hand, planetary crises like climate change tend to impact vulnerable communities first (who are now more prone to health problems because of the toxic industries right down the road), leaving climate inaction as another mode of injustice and of sacrifice in the service of upholding systems which contribute to planetary problems.¹³

Given the gravity of these circumstances and the very real practices of sacrificing the vulnerable, “Climate Emergency” has emerged as a site of tension between the injustice of climate inaction and the risks of “legal suspension” in the United States. I will argue that to center the term emergency in discourses of crisis (especially in US-based activism) is an appeal

¹³ Geographic location and climate are also factors which influence vulnerability in this sense.

to “normal” systems which opens up a state of exception for “the greater good”. In some respects, therefore, declaring a climate change emergency can re-orient states to take the calls of scientists and society seriously. Yet the means to achieve this ends rest, too often, on sacrifices that can be easily imposed on vulnerable populations rather than being taken on collectively or by the wealthy. While the wealthy might be convinced to make minor lifestyle changes (like metal straws, or going vegan), the nature of sacrifices suffered by the most vulnerable are often sacrifices of well-being, health, and livelihood.

Mobilizing From Below

The Climate Mobilization is a non-profit think tank and advocacy group that provides groups of all kinds across the US with the tools to run Climate Emergency campaigns. On Thursday January 9th of 2020, I wrote to The Climate Mobilization to explore what running a Climate Emergency campaign entailed. The following day, I received the “Organizer Toolkit” from The Climate Mobilization in an email. The Toolkit was a Google Doc entitled “Guide to Starting a Climate Emergency Campaign.” It is littered with embedded links to further Google Docs, a bit like a maze. There are no named authors on the document, but in other ways, the document felt alive. In the top right corner of the Google Document window, colorful animal icons signify the simultaneous presence of anonymous readers in the same online space. I wondered how many different places and burgeoning campaigns for change those people represented. The embedded links inform the reader about the history of climate emergency, how to start laying out a campaign, and how to network with and train others. There are also templates and case studies and practices, even training curricula. The latter includes “Reaching

Out to Partner Organization,” “Guide to Putting On a Town Hall,” and a “Commitment Card” template (“a tool for asking people to join your campaign”) (“Guide to Starting...” 2019).

The Climate Mobilization suggests that the core of such a campaign should be a steering committee of 3-5 people, around which many working groups revolve. The working groups divide up the tasks of contacting local representatives; conducting outreach; organizing trainings, town halls, and assemblies; planning actions; and educating voters. Too many people to work effectively in a small group? Split up into even smaller working groups and encourage folks to start neighborhood climate emergency campaigns to educate and recruit *their* neighbors. The Mobilization logic seems to follow that every time the story of Climate Emergency is told, the window for new involvement opens wider. The more people are “missionized” and brought into the know now, the easier and more equitable a transition to national mobilization would be.

In the section of the Tool Kit marked “The Change We Can Create,” the unnamed authors describe their reasoning. The end goal of a Climate Emergency campaign is to move the federal government to decisive action. According to The Climate Mobilization, over 1,350 governments of varying scales (national, provincial, municipal, rural) in 26 countries have declared a state of Climate Emergency. The US is not one of the 26, but the concept has been gaining traction in cities, counties, and states, which are able to independently declare themselves in a state of Climate Emergency. Plenty of cities in the US have done so - Hoboken, NJ was the first, and is followed by more (including New York, Chicago, San Diego, San Francisco, Albuquerque, Austin, Flagstaff, Miami, Minneapolis, and Asheville) (The Climate Mobilization, 2020). Los Angeles skipped right over the emergency declaration and jumped straight to creating a city office and city commission to design and implement a climate mobilization plan (The Climate Mobilization, 2019).

The Climate Mobilization is also careful to remind organizers of other types of slippage between national, state, and city/county levels of governance. In other words, it's not only about organizing from below to influence the federal government. In some cases, like federally mandated minimum wage laws and the Affordable Care Act, states and cities have ignored what has been mandated to them from above ("Guide to Starting... 2019). To this end, Climate Mobilization perceives the local/state levels of governance as strategic places to organize, not only for the crucial community connections that emerge, but also because this type of organization from below lays the groundwork for easy local transitions into what they hope will be passed at the federal level.

States of Emergency and Positive Citizen Sacrifice

Climate Mobilization works towards the "use of World War II-type policy instruments to transform the economy on an emergency basis" (The Climate Mobilization 2020). The phrase "WWII-level mobilization" emerges as a constant refrain throughout the maze of documents as the ultimate precedent and example of what is being sought by "Climate Emergency." This aligns climate change (and planetary crisis generally) with other (perceived) threats to national security. World War II is the strategic and legal baseline for Climate Emergency campaigns, not only in convincing government officials, but also in spreading awareness to the public.

The WWII mobilization is even integrated into Climate Mobilization visuals. For example, one of the co-founders, Ezra Silk, published a Climate Mobilization "Victory Plan," which draws from WWII programs like "victory gardens" and "victory taxes." The cover of this report (see Image 2.1) is deliberately reminiscent of the iconic "Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima" photo, the American flag replaced by a wind turbine. The same image backgrounds the home

page of their website. The optics evoke a sense of collective patriotism in extraordinary times of need. It is a call, not only for the state to have a more pro-active role in climate action, but also for citizens to rally around national identity and make sacrifices for “the war effort.”

Salamon goes on to celebrate the personal sacrifices of Americans of the 40’s, who fought in the war and took factory jobs, invested in war bonds, and ate rations. She says that the country was united in a spirit of unity, sacrifice, and common purpose. In facilitating a

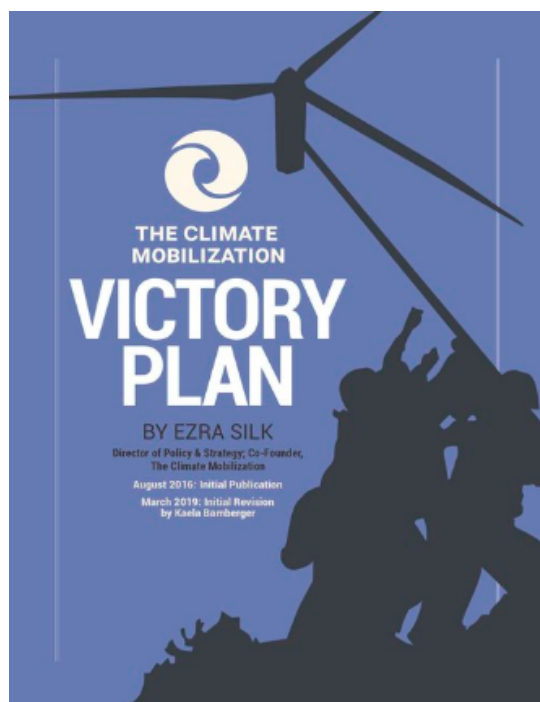


Image 2.1 “TCM Victory Plan.”
theclimatemobilization.org

nationwide “emergency mode,” the state is promoting a collective culture in which the participants see themselves and their actions as part of a whole, which feels rarely promoted by the state post-neoliberal reform. This collective culture is how the state is able to encourage citizens to make personal lifestyle sacrifices for the greater good, or the war effort. For example, the aforementioned Victory Gardens were household gardens encouraged by the government

during the war, which required families to sacrifice some of their time, but attempted to locate more food directly with households to increase national resilience. In the current American political climate, this and other measures would be unthinkable “progressive” from some perspectives, and alarmingly socialist from other perspectives. This is especially true of the “Victory Tax,” which taxed the highest earners 88% in 1942 and 94% in 1944 (Salamon, 2016).¹⁴ In the state of emergency, these are normalized as positive sacrifices (using Princen’s typology), in which the sacrifices being made are the just and patriotic duty of willing citizens. However, during the World War II mobilization there were also instances of large-scale negative sacrifice which was imposed on vulnerable groups in the United States as a means of national security. This legacy of institutional negative sacrifice comes along with the invocation of the WWII mobilization alongside emergency just as the positive collective sacrifices do.

States of Exception and Negative Sacrifice

WWII mobilization efforts aimed to bolster American military power abroad *and* to increase national security back home. Measures like rationing and the push for individual self-sufficiency and thriftiness (à la “Victory Gardens), for instance, were designed to increase political and social resilience of “the Home Front” during war time. Such sacrifices were justified as patriotic and ultimately empowering, for the nation and for the citizenry. Other efforts like the Manhattan Project and the internment of Japanese citizens and immigrants (both discussed below in more detail) also hinged on citizen sacrifice, but in these contexts roles and directionality of the sacrifices being made and the positionality of those being sacrificed in relation to the state were far different.

¹⁴ This seems important to note in an era of American history in which the wealth gap cannot be contained on a visible graph without a break in scale...

Both Japanese internment and the Manhattan project operated in the grey area of “suspended legality” opened up by the declaration of war. While both projects were tentatively legal (through eminent domain and executive acts), they were highly contested by the parties being sacrificed. The state nonetheless justified these in the interest of the “greater good.” As both of these projects had serious consequences for human rights and justice, they are significant points from which to begin identifying and analyzing the risks of declaring climate emergency and the gravity of the political power embedded in the process.

The Manhattan Project was a research and development project backed by the United States (and allies, Canada and the United Kingdom) that aimed to complete nuclear weapons before opponents like Germany could do so. Led by Army Corps of Engineers Major General Leslie R. Groves, the project involved research into atomic science, purchase of large amounts of materials (like uranium) which had to be mined and refined, the construction of sites to build the weapons, and weapons testing (Galiffa 2019). Such was the scale of the project that the government built entire secret cities (like Oak Ridge, TN) to house workers and their families, who were required to keep silent about the work that they were doing under threat of arrest. The government selected project sites (most notably Los Alamos, NM, Oak Ridge, and Hanford, WA) because of their relative isolation (Galiffa 2019). In both the Oak Ridge and Hanford sites, the government seized the land through eminent domain justified by war powers, displacing residents who had no way of refusing. At Oak Ridge (which is in Appalachian East Tennessee), the residents of the area at the time were largely poor white farmers. Among the displaced at Hanford (and affected in post-project contamination and clean-up) were the Confederated Tribes

and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the Wanapum people (Phillips, 2020).

The legacy of the Manhattan Project also reaches far beyond World War II. The nuclear age, which extended into the Cold War, demanded copious amounts of materials like uranium. The US government sourced uranium from the Navajo Nation, where Navajo miners were uninformed of the risks of radiation and given no protective equipment for themselves or their families. Intensive mining there resulted in serious health consequences for both miners and their families, as well as contamination of land and water (Masco, 2006). In addition, nuclear weapons were frequently tested in “remote” areas where nearby residents had to deal with the fall-out (literally). It occurred in the southwest US, and it occurred at Bikini Atoll, an island in the Marshall Islands, where residents were moved with the promise that they could return (Brown, 2013). Promises aside, following testing, land was far too contaminated to support human life, and the residents were permanently displaced. In addition to the people, livelihoods, and territories sacrificed to construct the sites and the weapons, and to test, there are the enormous social and environmental costs and legacies to those places, sacrifice zones, detonated by nuclear war, like Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The legacy of the Manhattan Project also reaches far beyond World War II. The nuclear age, which extended into the Cold War, demanded copious amounts of materials like uranium. The US government sourced uranium from the Navajo Nation (as well as Laguna Pueblo land), where Navajo miners were uninformed of the risks of radiation and given no protective equipment for themselves or their families. Intensive mining there resulted in serious health consequences for both miners and their families, as well as contamination of land and water (Masco, 2006). In addition, nuclear weapons were frequently tested in “remote” areas where

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While each situation is unique in important ways, both Japanese internment and the mass incarceration currently occurring at the Mexico-US border are examples of human rights violations that are authorized by states of legal suspension in response to a “crisis” that is highly racialized.¹⁵ For instance, according to Representative Blumenauer’s office, Blumenauer decided to draft the Climate Emergency resolution introduced in 2019 after President Donald Trump declared an emergency at the Mexico-US border, claiming that a border wall was critical infrastructure to protect the US from a “crisis” (Holden 2019). And state of emergency aside, the US-Mexico borderlands are routinely a site of legal suspension.

Juanita Sundberg writes about this pattern in “The state of exception and the imperial way of life in the United States-Mexico borderlands,” which examines legal suspension that facilitates the construction of border wall/fencing infrastructure. Sundberg demonstrates that models of “the political” that operate within a system whose limits are set by the Constitution or other nation-state constructs are nearly impossible to productively struggle through. The work also unpacks the normalization of inequitable legal suspension in borderlands as part of imperial

¹⁵ It is also important to note that mass incarceration of migrants, refugees, and immigrants by Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE), (along with the instrumentality of the Border Patrol [CBP]) is not only a phenomenon entangled with US interventionism in Latin America, but also with climate change and other conditions of planetary crisis.

life-ways that are entrenched in the operational history of the United States. Therefore, in calling for the use of extra-judicial power in the service of climate action, Climate Emergency campaigners risk activating further imperial patterns of governance.

This is especially critical in conversations about the borderlands and the mass incarceration occurring there, as planetary crises continue to amplify the conditions which motivate migration and border-crossings. As the language of crisis and emergency are repeatedly leveraged in general discourse as well as in policy, it is worth asking (instead of “What is the crisis?”) the question “Who is the crisis?” or “Who is being painted as the crisis?” In the case of migration and asylum-seeking from Latin America to the United States across the Mexico-US border, refugees and migrants are portrayed as the crisis itself, rather than parties who are victims of the crisis. In the “world of scarce resources” mobilized in images of apocalypse and crisis, refugees and migrants are the “other” threatening the limited supplies of Americans. This sort of sentiment allows for the legal continuation of the dehumanization of migrants, refugees, and immigrants and their treatment in detention centers and other apparatus of the immigration machine. It is the grounds on which premature deaths go on without oversight or accountability. As non-US citizens, migrants and refugees are already vulnerable “others” in the eyes of the US legal system, but states of emergency or the appearance of emergency only complicates and exacerbates the situation.

Legal suspension legitimized by a state of emergency also holds the potential to threaten other legally vulnerable parties. Among others, Indigenous Climate Change Studies scholar Kyle Whyte has voiced concerns about what handing more power over to the state might mean for Native self-determination and tribal and/or national sovereignty in North America (Whyte 2017). Crises like climate change (and other “environmental” degradations) already disproportionately

affect Indigenous populations and nations and therefore their rights to self-determination (Whyte 2017). Whyte points out that changes in habitats and potential displacement could threaten the functionality of treaties, which are extremely difficult to be re-negotiated equitably because of the allocation of political power and authority. Processes of emergency management that might arise during a state of Climate Emergency may only further threaten already delicate balances of sovereignty and self-determination.

The Climate Mobilization's Tool Kit suggests to those running Climate Emergency campaigns that tribal governments ought to be contacted at the beginning of the process to ensure proper communication and to allow those governments to have a say in how the campaign proceeds, but it cannot be overlooked that appealing to the US federal government at all is to appeal to a settler colony with a storied history of eliminatory violence. Similar to Sundberg's point that the imperial patterns are reinforced by regular legal suspension in the borderlands, legal suspension is a method by which the settler state has manipulated the rights and lives of indigenous people(s) for centuries, whether it be through blatant disregard of treaty or simply (but severely) inequitable law enforcement. In this sense, the state of exception created by a climate emergency declaration would have serious political implications for vulnerable parties, but it would also be a singular part of a larger picture of normalized legal suspension.

Through these examples, it can be seen that the use of "emergency" as a strategic rhetorical turn based on the precedent of the WWII mobilization in discourses of planetary crisis (particularly in activism for climate action) not only risks justifying extrajudicial action of the state on dubious, racialized grounds, but also that frameworks which rely on the US nation-state as the key platform for climate-related work are limited in their understandings of what counts as political action and where power really lies. Emergency shapes the collective imaginary of

planetary crisis to be a phenomenon that can and should be primarily managed by “experts” from the top down, leaving ample room for the US to justify all sorts of projects that control “threats” to national security through negative sacrifices and incarceration, violence, and racialized logics.

Legal Suspension as Normalcy

When discussing states of exception and legal suspension, Sundberg also notes that despite the qualities of “exceptionalism,” the implementation of these states in the borderlands is actually normalized and everyday. This normalized state of sacrifice is said to activate imperial life-ways which have animated the United States since its inception as a settler colony (Sundberg 2015). In addition, the normalization of imperial life-ways is built-up by the nationalized myth that “politics” and citizen engagement can only happen legitimately within the confines of the United States Constitution, which is by no means the actual terms and conditions of politicality. “Climate Emergency” risks reifying these boundaries, limiting the scope of collective imaginaries to understand and react to planetary crises appropriately.

In 2019’s “Climate Emergency Politics is Dangerous,” human geographer Mike Hulme suggests that “...meeting the challenge of climate change for future human well-being demands a proliferation of diverse policy goals, **the very opposite of what states of exception bring into being**” (Hulme 2019). This resonates with the aforementioned sense that politicality limited to the confines of the American Constitution in turn limits the scope of reaction to crisis that might be appropriate. The entire concept of a “state of emergency,” of course, entails a break from normalcy into crisis and threat, which a Climate Emergency campaign then counters with a WWII Mobilization-type state-led rally, which might tend to conceptually (or even physically) limit options for resilience-building, survival, and flourishing that occur outside of the conceptual boundaries of the US.

Hulme and others like him are reminding readers that global health, biodiversity loss, desertification, challenges to marine fisheries, and other planetary crises are ongoing, and Climate Emergency mobilization as temporary solution could potentially threaten to keep them out of the conversation by focusing too much energy on issues that would mitigate only certain aspects of planetary crisis. Thus, Climate Emergency amounts to a reductive logic because climate change has been oversimplified in public discourse by its summation as “seductive” metrics like global temperature and carbon dioxide concentration. Accepting this would mean that we are in a:

“quasi-permanent state of emergency; [which] also obscures much of what actually matters for human well-being and ecological integrity. Carbon metrics are only a proxy for global temperature, which is only a proxy for regional weather, which is only a proxy for human well-being, which depends on innumerable other factors for its achievement and maintenance” (Hulme 2019, np)

Focusing mobilization on measures to reach these metrics could easily become part of a transition away from fossil fuels that overlooks questions of justice and precedent. A state of exception directed at climate change metrics leaves itself open to techno-fix faith or legal measures that not only fail to cut at the root of the problem, but also provide a platform for the complex of normalized negative sacrifices to continue and accelerate.¹⁶ This point resonates with Ghosh’s conceptualization of “The Great Derangement.” However, Ghosh also invokes emergency as a framework for climate change, saying that

“...if whole societies and polities are to adapt then the necessary decisions will need to be made collectively, within political institutions, as happens in wartime or national emergencies. After all, isn’t that what politics, its most fundamental form, is about? Collective survival and the preservation of the body politic?” (2016: 60).

¹⁶ In addition, it seems relevant to mention that negative sacrifices forced onto “others” in the state of American normalcy often directly serve the agenda and market interests of ruling elites.

But in a neoliberal nation-state, is insurance of collective survival included in the role of political institutions? Or are we supposed to pull our own bootstraps through the storms?

INTERLUDE II | FREEZE DRIED BLUEBERRIES

For a decade, my mother's parents lived in a condominium a few blocks away from my childhood home. It smelled like multi-vitamins, the must of books, and essential oils, as my grandmother sought the health-food cure for her hyperthyroid. The television played Fox News constantly in the background. Rather the fore-front, as it was usually played loud enough that you could hear the indignant tone of the host from any room.

Their front room was a guest bedroom. It had several dressers of old photographs and documents. A rocking chair. A cedar-chest full of quilts and blankets. And a bed. I must have dropped a marker under that bed, or perhaps I was just curious. Either way, when I was about 10 I happened to lift up the bed skirt to find what must have been at least 40 large, uniform canisters of freeze-dried food. They were not self-prepared. Their containers were cheap, their lids plastic, the white labels simple. "Freeze-dried Blueberries," one said. There was an expiration date stamped on top: March 2035.

I realize now that my grandparents had been sold those freeze-dried blueberries by some charming telemarketer who was capitalizing off of strategically kindled apocalypse-fear.

When my child self asked my parents about it, they explained that my grandparents intended to have food for the whole family (us included) if something were to go wrong. My dad said that he appreciated the thought, but that now that was his job. My dad didn't buy 40 gallon containers of freeze dried fruit, though. He bought canned beans and gas masks. Rain barrels and jugs of gasoline. All stored Just in case.

I remember lying on the floor of my childhood bedroom trying to imagine what it would really be like to experience a situation that would demand that level of preparation. Would people be fighting in the streets? Would there be violence? Police? Would we really be holed up

in our house? Or would we need to escape somewhere, the stockpiles all for naught? I was a privileged child, sheltered from violence, war, shortages. I could only speculate, over and over again.

I asked my mother about it, and she said that she didn't know, but if the apocalypse happened, she wanted to "go early...."

CHAPTER THREE | APOCALYPSE

Apocalypse... Now?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, my methods and approach have been forming alongside the emergence(y) of a global pandemic. COVID-19, happening now, is arguably the “first” pandemic of this magnitude. There have been hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide amidst social, political, and economic uncertainties. To “flatten the curve,” people across the world are engaged in “social distancing.” Physical distancing might be the more apt term, given that social practices still remain, albeit reconfigured and often involving digital communications.

A typical tweet on my twitter feed reads “How I thought we’d dress for the apocalypse vs how we are actually dressing for the Apocalypse.” Two images are juxtaposed - the first is Charlize Theron in her role as Imperator Furiosa in the most recent *Mad Max* installation, *Fury Road*.



Evan DeSimone

@Smorgasboredom

How I thought we’d dress for the Apocalypse vs how we are actually dressing for the Apocalypse.



8:38 PM · 22 Mar 20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

222 Retweets 799 Likes

Image 3.1 “How I Thought We’d Be Dressing for the Apocalypse.”
@Smorgasboredom Accessed 22 March 2020.

Head shaven, she wears dusty leather, holds a large gun, and a minimal prosthetic arm made of what look like “spare parts.” The second image is also Charlize Theron, this time in *Young Adult*. (See Image 3.1) Blonde and pony-tailed, she sports large sunglasses, Hello Kitty pajamas, sweatpants, and a purse dog. The tweet appears to have been published on the 22 of March. I first encountered this text and image combination from the account @Smorgasbordeom, but then saw it replicated almost identically several times over. It blended in with the surrounding tweets, which include personal stories of people losing loved ones to COVID-19, DIY mask-making advice, Tiger King memes, and tweets about wildlife reclaiming abandoned cities. *Is this an apocalypse?*

To whatever extent COVID-19 has opened up the tap on the flow of “apocalypse imaginaries,” the trend is not new. Ideas of apocalypse come from religious texts, from lived experiences of violence and collective loss like genocide and slavery, and from the media (Amanat and Bernhardsson 2002). In recent decades, diverse actors, including but not limited to the makers of films, religious websites, academic treatises, and megacorporations, have all engaged in co-production of apocalyptic narratives. Each variously manifests a collective imagination of planetary crisis in the form of apocalypse.

In this chapter, I focus in on discourses of apocalypse in order to raise questions about perceptions of normalcy, about the responsibilities of states (versus individuals) in crisis preparation, and about efforts to protect or destroy the status quo. I approach apocalypse as a process rather than an singular “event” (i.e., “The Apocalypse”, capital A). Discourses of apocalypse present a previously existing picture of presumed “normalcy,” and then culminates in a changed world, in which the previous “normalcy” is lost.

Normalcy -> Apocalypse -> Post-Apocalypse

This logic of apocalypse carries not only designations of “pre,” and “post,” but also the sense that apocalypses have transformational power. Things are fundamentally different in the after.

In attempting to explore the assemblage of apocalypse in this light, I first examine the origins of apocalyptic narrative, from religious eschatology (speculation at end times and last things) to blockbuster North American film. I then identify the ways in which apocalypse itself is sold, as neoliberal shock, as white affective stories, and as all kinds of “survival gear” purchases. I argue that white affective narratives of apocalypse in Hollywood films are positioned to defend white disaster capitalist normalcy. I then turn to modes of apocalypse storytelling in which apocalypse is represented as an escalation of white disaster capitalist normalcy rather than a disruption of normalcy.

I then think with the figure of “the Prepper” in order to explore the impact of different apocalypse stories on modalities of preparation. I consider apocalypse-preparation as a space in which the neoliberal notion of “resilience” is brought into tension with imaginaries which use apocalypse (and adjoining post-apocalypse) as openings to speculate at how to make post-disaster (capitalism) societies. I end arguing that apocalypse narratives are sites where people produce, reproduce, and negotiate what constitutes cultural and collective threat. I also consider the implications of apocalypse discourse for not only collective imaginaries of crisis, but also determination of “normalcy.”

Origins of Apocalypse

Apocalypse is a Greek word meaning “revelation,” in reference to the unveiling of things which could not be known before. This includes the divine knowledge revealed by (a) God, new knowledge that could then be construed as the conditions of the “new world” (Sheposh 2019).

The first apocalypticism is thought to have roots in Zoroastrianism, commonly cited as the oldest continuously practiced human religion. Apocalypse then became more defined and sensationalized in Abrahamic traditions, such as in the book of Revelation in the Christian Bible (Sheposh 2019). Both Judaic and Christian traditions specifically tend to conceptualize apocalypse as the return (or arrival) of a God to Earth, where “He” punishes the forces of evil in a great battle. In Hinduism, which includes the belief that the universe is constantly in a cycle of death and rebirth, it is prophesied that the god Vishnu will return to earth during a time of great immorality and evil and destroy it with a sword shaped like a comet (Sheposh 2019). There is also an apocalypse in Norse beliefs (Ragnarök), in which the Norse gods and giants destroy the Earth in the crossfire of a great battle, which serves as a beginning for collective rebirth (Amanat and Bernhardsson 2002).

The colloquial use of the term apocalypse is not always intended to invoke the religious connotations of the term. Often it comes to be associated with large-scale disasters, societal collapse, and the formation of “dystopia” rather than universal extinction. Apocalypse is the term that pushes knowledge about crisis over the threshold of “emergency” normalcy into a dark and fantastic exceptionalism, one that says the circumstances of the crisis are so unique in their extremity that they obliterate the “normal” beyond recognition. Apocalypse conjures fantastic episodes of violence, death, and chaos. During an apocalypse, the chaos and conflict are so great that systems fail - society collapses. In the wasteland of the post-apocalypse, whatever remains of humankind (or whatever remains of something other-than-human) is left to rebuild, or merely just struggle to survive. In the construction of apocalypse, then, both the apocalyptic event/process and the future post-apocalypse become an opening for projection and futuring. To engage with apocalypse is to tap into a layered (or bundled, rather) set of meta-narratives that

encompasses not only violence and death, monsters and aliens, but also the nature of social change. It is mobilized in storytelling practices both as a powerful fictional narrative of change, and as a concept to describe lived histories of violence and social change.

Disaster Capitalism and the Cleaning of the Slate

Disaster capitalism refers to the exploitation of disasters, from economic crises to hurricanes to mass violence (Klein 2007). Private sector entities like private lenders, security firms, and developers create profits from disadvantage and further exacerbate inequities that prime societies for crisis and chaos in the first place. Part and parcel to neoliberalism, disaster capital feeds on market logics like reducing state regulations, strengthening protections for investors and traders, and privatizing public services (Klein 2007). Neoliberalism has been integrated into mainstream society such that wealth is a virtue of “free competition” triumphs, citizens are redefined as consumers, and the state is primarily responsible for protecting the functionality of the market, leaving the longevity and security of individuals in their own hands.

The same transformational power by which apocalypse turns normalcy into post-apocalypse is the logic that drives “The Shock Doctrine,” an idea that has played a crucial role in institutionalizing disaster capitalism and neoliberal globalization. (Klein 2007). When Milton Friedman and his students in the Chicago School of Economics sought to test out the ideology of neoliberalism, they lent a hand or two to military dictator Augusto Pinochet, who seized power in Chile in 1973 via a US-backed coup (Sheppard et al 2009). Pinochet overthrew and murdered the democratically elected president Salvador Allende, launching Chile headfirst into austere economic reform outlined ahead of time by Friedman’s students, Los Chicago Boys (Sheppard et al 2009). In addition to suffering through Pinochet’s high-profile mass-torture and murders,

Chileans found their market flooded by cheap American products and American contractors, price controls eliminated, social services cut, and constitution re-written to institutionalize neoliberal ethics. As is typically the case with waves of neoliberal reform, inequality surged, the poor grew drastically poorer, while elites grew their wealth and power (Klein 2007).

That coup serves as the first example of a crisis administered as a part of the “Shock Doctrine,” a tactic that involves shocking a subject (whether individual or society target) in order to “wipe clean the slate” for the implementation of something new (Klein 2007). Naomi Klein, who wrote the aptly titled book *The Shock Doctrine*, identifies C.I.A. torture tactics as the basis for the Shock Doctrine (2007). Based on C.I.A. torture tactics, the Shock Doctrine capitalizes on the complete disorientation and break from reality that a “shocked” subject experiences (Klein 2007). The shock can be a “natural” disaster (like Hurricane Katrina) or otherwise out-of-human-control incident (like a pandemic), or it can be strategically manufactured (like the US war in Iraq). This is where apocalypse comes into play - it takes an apocalyptic wiping away of the before to truly “wipe the slate” clean enough to implement neoliberalism. Friedman himself is quoted as saying:

“only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes political inevitable.” (Klein, 2007: 50)

The assertion of the Shock Doctrine proved to be pretty effective, and it has ushered in an age of disaster capitalism like no other. In disaster capitalist normalcy, there are established markets

and ideologues poised to stir up and profit from crisis. And they have already profited from the major planetary-scale crises (again, Hurricane Katrina comes to mind) (Klein 2007).¹⁷

I engage with these ideas to bring them into conversation with “apocalypse” and planetary crisis. Essentially, I argue that in light of planetary-scale crisis, disaster capitalism operates on shaky ground. When disaster capitalism needs a new influx of funds, new markets are created, new shocks are administered. However, alongside capitalism’s propensity for using finite “natural resources” at an alarming pace and emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere en masse, the proverbial “social fracking” of disaster capitalism risks causing an earthquake too big to handle. It risks creating an apocalypse. In addition, neoliberalism complicates the relationship of society, crisis, and state in crisis by loading responsibility for security and resilience onto individuals.

“Apocatainment”

Currently one of the most powerful fields in which “apocalypse” thrives is contemporary North American cinema, particularly blockbuster films which are building on an American apocalyptic tradition rooted in Puritan Calvinism (Moya and Lopez 2017).¹⁸ At first glance, the entertainment industry has had no shortage of apocalyptic imagination, as seemingly every kind of disaster from alien invasion to viral zombie outbreak to climate change gone wrong is implemented in a blockbuster movie, TV drama, comic, or book. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster uses

¹⁷ But at the same time, because the neoliberal ideology which formed contemporary disaster capitalism is a “pure” form of capitalism whose implementation entrenched values which already ruled in American society (like rugged individualism and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few), the “change” which occurs a result of the Shock Doctrine is symbolically empty and reinforces what already was.

¹⁸ Also worth noting (but skipped here) is the proliferation of Young Adult literature (and sometimes accompanying blockbuster franchises) which capitalizes on dystopia. This is the field that gives us the Hunger Games, the “Divergent” series and the trope

the term “apocatainment” to describe the vast array of media in which apocalypse plays a narrative or contextual role (2014). I would include in my conception of apocatainment the many stories concerning what happens post-apocalypse, where many a fictional dystopia has been formed.

And the drama of the apocalypse sells well. For instance, there is a decades long tradition of American disaster films, which arguably originated with the science-fiction cinema of the Cold War, carried through turn-of-the-millennium anxiety, and took on renewed vigor post 9/11 (Moya and Lopez 2017).¹⁹ Apocatainment profits by marketing apocalypse (and post-apocalypse) in all forms - as “feel good ending” blockbuster films with symbol-laden hero-figures (*Armageddon, I Am Legend, 2012*), as “gritty” sci-fi future projections (*The Matrix, Mad Max, World War Z*), as a platform for celebrity-based comedy (*This Is The End, Shaun of the Dead, Zombieland*), as a catalyst for romance (*Seeking A Friend for the End of the World*), as the premise for horror (*Bird Box, A Quiet Place*), and even as reality TV (*Doomsday Preppers*).

The type of disaster portrayed and the meanings assigned to apocalypse varies. Often apocalyptic cinema manifests social unease or worry, but the source and expression of that worry differs. For example, one apocatainment flic might feature an apocalypse driven by dramatic anthropogenic effects on the environment (like *2012*), while another might feature a zombie apocalypse, where encroaching racialized hordes are the threat to white normalcy (like *World War Z*) (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020). Many turn-of-the-century post-apocalypse movies (like *The Road, The Book of Eli, and I Am Legend*) use the post-apocalypse to envision

¹⁹ Essentially, coincident with the common conception of how planetary crisis discourse emerged in the United States.

potentials beyond the end of culture and the state as they are known now (Moya and Lopez 2017).

And yet, the same tropes keep cropping up over and over again. The white male protagonist protects his family from a zombie horde of “others.” The protagonist maintains humanity and morality despite the abject chaos and cannibalism that surrounds him. A technological fix is sought, and usually found. While the tropes might seem initially innocuous, they tap into a political orientation towards apocalypse that both values rugged individualism and white cisheteronormative American “normalcy.”

In “Earth Beyond Repair: Race and apocalypse in collective imagination,” Mabel Gergan, Sara Smith, and Pavitra Vasudevan analyze apocalyptic film tropes in relation to the concept of Anthropocene, as the collective imaginaries shaping and shaped by apocalyptic film influences the conception of Anthropocene like any other element of planetary crisis. They point out that “apocalyptic imaginings have often been framed through an exclusionary hierarchy of humanity, necessitating closer examination of how cliched genre conventions that saturate our media environment rely on anti-Black racism and indigenous erasure,” and that “without such attention, we risk reiterating these cliches in narrating environmental crisis” (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020). Essentially, tropes and cliches that are reliant on anti-Black racism and indigenous erasure have the potential to influence collective imaginaries of crisis from their role in apocalyptic media. The authors identify three trends of apocalyptic film which play into this: “The Great Deluge” (climatic conditions or unpredictable nature overtaking humanity), “Nuclear Cataclysm” (the role of toxic and nonhuman agents), and “The Population Bomb” (a neo-Malthusian suggestion of the threat of numerous “others”).

Films which feature a “Great Deluge” (like the “cli-fi” blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004]) are intended to convey a cataclysmic threat to humankind, but more often than not the “universal human subject” being threatened is the white male and Northern Hemisphere locations which he represents. Gergan, Smith and Vasudevan suggest this representation of crisis buys into “what Baldwin (2016:84) terms a **white affect**, a ‘pre-discursive intensity that forms when white positionality confronts the fantasy of its own death’” (2020). In doing so, these narratives erase actual extreme weather events which differentially affect vulnerable communities and livelihoods. This erasure contributes, in turn, to **collective imaginaries** of planetary crisis that center white maleness as the benchmark for what must be threatened to consider a phenomenon a crisis.

A similar idea can be seen when “white decline” and other threats to white supremacy become embedded in apocalyptic film narratives through white protagonists championing “normal” values and actions in the face of hordes of racialized “others” who [over]populate the apocalypse (whether it be as densities of zombies, or as nameless poor folk driven to cannibalism and violence). Think Brad Pitt’s protagonist in *World War Z* versus the zombies around him.

In the process of surveying popular apocalyptic films, Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan identify a series of “warning signs” that mark white affect. First, “the apocalypse is coming,” projects apocalyptic crisis into the future all the while erasing already existing conditions of “racial apocalypse” and other elements of violence and elimination interpreted through an apocalyptic logic (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020). Second, “Humans vs. the Horde” refers to the cinematic image of a white male protagonist threatened by a crisis of people which is people, reflected in real policy as concern over “scarcity” and Neo-Malthusian interpretations of overpopulation as a planetary crisis. 3) “Science is Magic” is the idea that

apocalypse can be averted by a technofix or otherwise patched, rather than acknowledging systemic problems. Attention to the types of disasters portrayed includes observation of the decline of trends over time (like the gradual disappearance of “Nuclear Cataclysm,” suggesting that other planetary-scale concerns have grown more immediate in the public eye). And “Epic Reversals” refers to a narrative where the oppressors become the oppressed and vice versa, like wealthy white America being threatened and displaced by those holding positionalities that are dispossessed by whiteness and American settler colonialism and capitalism in reality (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020). Each of these reinforce the idea that the boundaries of “apocalypse” is centered around threat to normalized (disaster) capitalist white supremacy, rather than collective human wellbeing. “Epic Reversals,” “Science is Magic” and “Humans vs. the Horde” specifically contribute to a sense of Heglar’s “existential exceptionalism.”

Parable of the Sower

All of this said, not all apocalypse stories center threat to capitalist white supremacist “normalcy.” This includes modes of science fiction and speculative fiction that take up the perspectives of marginalized identities. One work which does this is Octavia Butler’s 1993 apocalyptic speculative fiction classic *The Parable of the Sower*.

Set in a futuristic California (from 2024-2027), the premise of *Parable* is that climate change and other crises are plaguing the Earth and leading to mass violence, prolific migration, and apocalyptic loss of life. However, rather than a fantastic disaster (or “Great Deluge”), *Parable*’s apocalypse is evocative of the everyday, America past and present. *Parable*’s protagonist is a young Black woman named Lauren Olamina whose family and most of her neighborhood are killed by a mob of drug-fueled arsonists. This tragedy catalyzes her journey

North with an ever-growing group of allies. As they travel, the narrative reveals that company towns (where residents all work for the corporate owner of the land and receive “company credit” as payment) and human slavery (justified through debt) are making a comeback. All the while, Olamina teaches her comrades the emerging version of religion, Earthseed, which holds that “God” is simply the principle of change. Ultimately, Olamina and her allies survive in numbers due to their growing mutual trust.

The book (which does have a sequel) ends with Lauren and a group of roughly 15 investing in an autonomous Earthseed community, representing an investment in collective power and community rather than a masculine, rugged individual survival. While *Parable* is certainly an apocalyptic story, its approach to both what characterizes the apocalypse (escalation of American normalcy rather than disruption) and how the protagonist reacts to the circumstances (putting value in collaboration rather than rugged individual heroism) set up a different sort of future-projection than a typical apocalyptic blockbuster. *Parable* and other narratives like it use the apocalypse narrative to explore what counts as “apocalyptic” and how to envision futures beyond culture and society as they are known now. In that way, it is an exercise of collective imagination.

Preppers and Preparedness

The show *Doomsday Preppers*, which ran on the National Geographic Channel from 2011 to 2014, profiled a variety of “preppers,” their prepper gear, and the cause of the end-times that they were preparing for. At the time, these “preppers” were made out to be people on the fringe of society, as irrational “survivalists” and paranoid wearers of the “tin-hat.” And yet, in

March 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, *Doomsday Preppers* was suddenly trending on streaming services.

In this section, I turn to the figure of the prepper and the practice of apocalypse prepping as an active response to perceived threat. I work specifically with Kezia Barker's research of prepper communities and "subcultures" in the United Kingdom. I will argue that modes of preparation differ based on the apocalypse (or simple crisis) being prepared for.

While research often portrays preppers as a subculture, Barker underscores that the diversity of the phenomena. There is diversity at all levels: in terms of actors involved, their motivations and political orientations, the variety of skills and practices they undertake, and their modes of communication (Barker 2019). Barker argues that prepping is "best understood as a spectrum," saying that:

"In some iterations, prepping merges happily with bushcraft and wild camping; in others, a more overt militarised survivalism is exhibited and the bushcraft hipster is deplored; and more universally, the terms 'armchair prepper' and 'doomsday prepper' function as distancing devices..." (Barker 2019: 6).

However, I conceptualize it as an assemblage, because it is a nonlinear agglomeration of different orientations towards understanding and responding to crisis.

Barker (2019) does a literature review of scholarship on preppers, and identifies that many have conceptualized "prepping" as an "attitudinal state" among people who share common appeals and anxieties about insecurity and disaster. They have also analyzed prepping as an embodiment of masculinity in crisis, a rugged individualism complex, or a "bunker mentality towards preserving middle-class heterosexual privilege," (Barker 2019: 7). Rather than using any of these interpretations as a singular classification of prepping, Barker suggests that prepper subjectivity might be best grasped through its material practices, like stock-piling, assembling bug-out bags, acquiring wilderness survival skills, and using ham radio. Preparation practices are

expressions of future imaginations, “performed in relation to the crisis coordinates of the neoliberal capitalist and weak democratic present,” (Barker 2019: 7).

Whatever the reality of prepping-culture might be, the figure of the prepper has been conflated in many media representations, including in *Doomsday Preppers*, with paranoid apocalyptic theories of social collapse, electromagnetic pulses, and polar shifts. Barker points out that this positioning of the prepper becomes something of a measuring stick by which “ordinary people” are meant to gauge their own level of rationality (Barker 2019). Despite this, prepper-hood is not explicitly married to apocalypse or doomsday - some self-identified preppers distance themselves from the extremes in order to regain credibility as “rational thinkers” merely preparing for earthquakes or hurricanes. However, apocalypse and preparation have a particular resonance which cannot be overlooked, especially as it comes to involve planetary crisis discourse.

While “prepping” has roots in the survivalist movements of the twentieth century, prepping came to force in the United States post-9/11, as the government started encouraging citizens to be more personally disaster-prepared and kick-started neoliberal security culture (Barker 2019). One of the most common core values of American preppers is a strong focus on self-sufficiency, which is often influenced by a sense that it is an able-bodied individual’s responsibility to society to take care of themselves rather than relying on the state – a core tenant of neoliberalism. One clear demonstration of this is unfolding as the United States government is encouraging citizens to make COVID-19 masks out of old t-shirts rather than nationalizing industry to manufacture proper Personal Protective Equipment for essential workers.

While disaster capitalism profits off of chaos and disruption, it also makes a bet with itself that already neoliberal societies can remain resilient enough to bounce back from repeated

shocks with the status-quo intact. Again, neoliberal resilience places the onus of preparation on individuals and individual families. Apocalypse-prepping both supports this sentiment and complicates it. Doomsday preppers assume that society will collapse, and that therefore individuals must take care of themselves, feeding into rugged individualist complexes. At the same time, allowing for the potential of an apocalypse which wipes away the “normal” of before can open a window to practices of preparation and prediction that moves past neoliberal disaster capitalism.

I argue that like interpretations and stories of apocalypse differ on the relationship between the threat and normalcy, Prepper-hood is also a practice which varies specifically based on conceptualization of the threat. Some preppers are buying into white affective narratives like the ones furthered in movies (although, in some cases, this narrative of threat is based on The News rather than fictional media), and that is what motivates them to prep. And some “preppers” are simply planetary crisis-concerned. **Some preppers are engaging with fear over changes to disrupt normacy, while some fear escalated normalcy.** I argue that the differences between these two orientations towards prepping can be represented by two disparate figures - disgraced former evangelical TV host Jim Bakker, and “Deep Adaptation” author Jem Bendell.

Bakker was formerly the host of the “Praise the Lord” (PTL) Television Network (Hull 1987). After serving five years of a 45-year sentence for financial indiscretions, has been trying to cash in on his former fame to make money by conjuring apocalyptic projections online (jimbakkershow.com). Essentially, “the Jim Bakker Show” broadcasts commercials for freeze-dried food with decades-long shelf lives (perfect supplies for the apocalypse!) in between talk-show segments, sermons, and false-news reports that inform the viewer about incoming attacks

from North Korea and sales on “end times literature” like *The Islamic Antichrist* and *The Trump Prophecies*. Bakker, while he isn’t at the level of popularity that he used to be in the **PTL Club** days, profits by demonizing real groups of people already rendered as threatening “others” by right-wing news sources in the US and colonial logics of difference (Abelman 1989). In this way, those who are convinced by Bakker are buying into white affective apocalypse stories.

And he is not the only one to do so. Plenty of other telemarketers and salesmen have cashed in on simple apocalyptic fear-mongering and selling prepper goods. Now, even sites that avoid the connotations of “prepping,” and especially the kind of marketing that Jim Bakker is associated with (like the greenwashed, Thrive Life, which also sells bulk freeze-dried food) are experiencing booms in the customer service, from the fear surrounding the pandemic.²⁰ And in the meantime, Jim Bakker is being sued by the state of Mississippi for selling a fake cure for COVID-19.²¹

On the other hand, Jem Bendell’s approach to inspiring preparation is more based on collective decision making. The story goes that Dr. Jem Bendell invested time in doing a thorough survey of all climate science and what it meant for the future. What he found startled him so badly that when he was done, he tried to publish “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy,” and only succeeded in having it released as an occasional paper (Bendell 2018) because the editors of the journals that he submitted to did not appreciate his message or tone. What Bendell had done was write pages and pages about the short-term inevitability of complete social collapse, encouraging his audience of sustainability academics and professionals to reassess their careers and livelihoods. In this paper, he describes a number

²⁰ <https://www.thrivelife.com/>, accessed 2 May 2020

²¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/11/814550474/missouri-sues-televangelist-jim-bakker-for-selling-fake-coronavirus-cure>

of ways in which “you [the reader] will experience dramatic forms of violence, pain, and social distress,” effectively trying to shock his readers into realizing the gravity of the science.

What he wasn't expecting was the paper to “go viral” (relatively viral, as an academic paper) - over 110,00 people have downloaded the occasional paper. In addition, there are a number of support forums and a Facebook group called “Positive Deep Adaptation,” where readers of the paper tend to flock after being unsettled by the content. It has even inspired people to begin changing their lives (to begin “prepping”), including Dr. Alice Green, the former pro vice-chancellor of Arden University (Tsjeng 2019) and the author of [this](#) Medium article (Grimes 2019). Both of these people said that they were inspired to leave behind extended family and career to move into a rural area which is forecasted to be less seriously impacted by climate change. However, this isn't necessarily prescribed directly by Deep Adaptation.

Bendell's framework for response to social collapse and apocalypse is three R's: resilience, relinquishment, and restorations (2018). He says that:

Resilience asks us “how do we keep what we really want to keep?”
 Relinquishment asks us “what do we need to let go of in order to not make matters worse?”
 Restoration asks us “what can we bring back to help us with the coming difficulties and tragedies?” (2018)

According to the paper, these questions are meant to be pondered collectively, as societies. This is Bendell's attempt at a framework for how to respond and be oriented towards immediate crisis. It seems to be trying to get at addressing the underlying conditions of the unjust and exploitative systems which landed the planet in crisis in the first place - as “relinquishment” suggests that there are cultural values and privileges (like consumerism, for example) that might just need to be totally rejected. He also poses this set of questions to the reader: “Should you drop everything now and move somewhere more suitable for self-sufficiency? Should you be spending time reading the rest of this article? Should I even finish writing it?” (Bendell 2018).

Bendell is radically different from Bakker because he is trying to bring collective imaginaries to the table in trying to solve the crisis. Deep Adaptation and the three R's of Resilience, Relinquishment, and Restoration requires the practice of having collective conversations about dealing with collective loss and making collective (positive) sacrifices. Juxtaposing the two emphasizes the tension between individual and collective "prepper" practice. However, it must be noted that there is plenty of room for overlap - one could stockpile food and learn survival skills and simultaneously be prepared to help neighbors and to have collective conversations about sacrifice and community resilience. However, Bendell and Bakker as apocalyptic storytellers clearly differ in their conceptualization of crisis. Deep adaptation rejects "normalcy," and adapts by pushing social change (like "relinquishment"). Bakker's apocalyptic newscast profits directly off of the demonization of racialized and otherwise "othered" people in order to conjure threats to American normalcy. These two are irreconcilable because their relationships to "normalcy" are so different.

Troubling Pre-Apocalyptic Normalcy

Because the designation "apocalypse" is by definition preceded by a normalcy being disrupted, defining the boundaries of "apocalypse" are dependent on the subjective definition of "normalcy". But what is normal? Moreover, what parts of the normal might be contributing to the conditions of planetary crisis?

Indeed, the moniker apocalypse has been applied to the early formations of American "normalcy". For instance, in discussing the (falsely) novel connotations of the term "Anthropocene," Kyle Whyte referred to the settler colonial project and the genocide of Native peoples in the Americas as an apocalypse, saying that:

“Indigenous imaginations of our futures in relation to climate change - the stuff of didactic science fiction - begin already with our living today in post-apocalyptic situation. Had someone told our ancestors a story of what today’s times are like for Indigenous peoples, our ancestors would surely have thought they were hearing dystopian tales. For Indigenous people live in worlds so changed by colonialism, capitalism and industrialization that our collective self-determination and agency are compromised to a degree our ancestors would have been haunted by,” (Whyte 2017: 160).

In this configuration, American “normalcy” that would be disrupted by the apocalypse of, say, climate change, is already experienced by some as post-apocalypse. That said, a new apocalypse would continue to exacerbate the already existing vulnerabilities and injustices of the “normal.” If climate change is the apocalypse, then the apocalypse has already meant that once again indigenous folks are being forced to move from their homes and ancestral land (as is already the case with the Isle de Jean Charles band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe).

In essence, some of it comes down to the same questions that can be applied to other crisis terms - at what point is normalized violence or life-disruption no longer normal but a “crisis” or an “emergency?” If American “normalcy” is being destroyed by an apocalypse, hasn’t it already begun? If not then at what point does it actually begin? Will it only begin once those who are normally left secure are affected? Recent disasters (not only including COVID-19, but also phenomena like the West Coast wildfires and intensified storms) have indicated what normalcy looks like in crisis. During a global pandemic, the wealthy are the first to have access to tests, and BIPOC communities are disproportionately affected. When wealthy areas of Los Angeles have been evacuated for an oncoming fire, there have been multiple reports of housekeepers left behind who are either unaware of the danger or more scared of losing their job than a fire (Mejia 2019). And I personally believe that if a mountain-leveling comet were to appear in the sky and threaten rapidly approaching apocalypse, that the elites would rapture themselves into the bunkers that they’ve been preparing in New Zealand for years.

First, I argue that the logic of apocalypse (which changes normalcy into post-apocalypse) is a parallel logic to the neoliberal “Shock Doctrine,,” in the sense of that is doing the work of disruption and transformation. Disorient as much as possible. “New normal”. However, I also argue that because disaster capitalism and broader neoliberalism are now “normalcy,” the “apocalypse” of planetary scale crisis also threatens the long term viability of these systems. Therefore, while the use of “apocalypse” in planetary crisis discourse risks invoking white affective narratives (as seen in apocatainment films), it is also a meta-narrative that can provide theoretical space for speculation at futures beyond the state and social organization/culture as it is known now. In addition, I argue that apocalypse is also a theoretical space where concepts of preparation clash. Mainstream “prepper-hood” in reaction to a perceived apocalyptic threat tends to fall under the category of hyper-individualized, neoliberal preparation, in which social resilience is completely reliant on the “personal responsibility” of individuals and assumes the loss of the vulnerable. On another hand, there are emergent narratives of preparation for planetary-scale crisis (such as Deep Adaptation) which begin to trouble the neoliberal prepper rejection of broader community resilience systems. Therefore, I argue that neoliberal ideology limits the formation of collective “preparatory” practice and imaginaries.

In addition, I argue that apocatainment films overall reinforce (disaster) capitalist white supremacy as normalcy, at the same time as positioning that normalcy as the victim of apocalyptic forces. This erases lived experiences and histories of arguably apocalyptic loss and violence experienced at the hands of that normalcy. Therefore, using “apocalypse” to describe conditions of contemporary planetary crisis must be carefully examined in context at the risk of activating that erasure and the accompanying cultural imaginary that planetary crises like climate

change are novel (rather than rooted in systemic issues). I also argue that the proliferation of apocalyptic stories which glorify the rugged individual protagonist actively work against the formation of cultural imaginaries based on collective action and power.

It is relatively easy for the privileged to brush off white affective and neoliberal tropes as “just fiction,” but the reality is that the power of (apocalyptic) storytelling shapes collective orientations towards crisis so much so that real action (e.g., US policy) is often clearly delineated from white apocalyptic cultural imaginaries and fictional planetary crisis discourse. For instance, the U.S. Army recently sponsored a “Mad Scientist Science Fiction Writing Contest” where participants were encouraged to write about “the future of warfare and technology... with implications for how the Army operates in future conflicts” (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020). In other words, the stories gathered from civilian writers would inform military policy. Despite this link to militarization, I still argue that the power of apocalypse-narrative in fiction to hold open space for future-projection can be used for more critical speculation at social change in response to planetary crisis.

INTERLUDE III | CIGARETTE SMOKING AND THE ROTH IRA

The edition of the New Yorker magazine published on January 13 of 2020 featured a cartoon drawn by Emily Flake that pictures a couple standing outside a home with what is meant to be a real estate agent, and a child in their arms. The caption is simple - it reads “I know the schools are great, but is this really the house we want to ride out the apocalypse in?”

I sat with one of my close friends on my porch a while back, maybe six months ago at the writing of this. We were watching traffic roll down King Street. As I mentioned before, I nurse the rather unhealthy habit of smoking cigarettes. My friend was asking me if I wanted another one, and I can remember pausing and then it came out, accidentally, unconsciously - “Sure, we’re all going to die in 20 years anyway, what does it matter?”

It’s a ridiculous statement - Any number of things could happen to me sooner than 20 years, and I do tend to believe that the choices we make now matter. It’s also particularly tone-deaf to privilege. People are dying now as a result of planetary-scale crisis. People are dying now in accidents. Anyway, this wasn’t the type of sentiment that I was trying to spread about. But sometimes it just slips out. Sometimes, after days of reading climate science for class, I find it difficult to plan for the future.

Like when it comes that time of year, tax season, when I really am supposed to be putting money into the Roth IRA that I started with the money from my very first job. It feels ridiculous. What exactly am I buying into? I’m 21 years old. I was born in 1998. If somehow I retired at 65, the year would be 2063. I find myself doing the math, all the time. The time feels heavy. *Is this really the house that I want to ride out the Apocalypse in?* I’m not saying that we’re all definitely doing to die. But I am saying that I’m not invested in this Roth IRA normalcy anymore.

CHAPTER FOUR | EXTINCTION

The Sixth Mass Extinction

Extinction typically refers to the death of an entire species. It is a shared, collective death, drawn out over time. At a certain level, species extinctions are considered normal events, balanced with the natural emergence of new species, an idea that dates back to Darwin (Sodikoff 2012). Extinction studies scholar Thom van Dooren suggests that rather than extinction being the state of every individual of a species being gone, extinction ought to be thought of as an entangled process of collective loss, in which the death of each individual is slowly shaping the existence of the species (or categorization outside of “species,” like “flight way”) and contributing to its collective death (2014). This conceptualization exposes extinction as a slow pattern of loss and ecological reverberation. It is not a moment, but a “dull edge” drawn out over time and space (van Dooren 2014).

In contrast to the background rate, a “mass extinction” is an *abnormal* escalation.²² During mass extinction events, the rate of extinction rises rapidly and plays out over a larger geographic area. According to scientists, five mass extinctions have already occurred on this planet over the past 500 million years. The most recent of those was the “K-T” extinction, which annihilated the dinosaurs and 75% of all living species (Sodikoff 2012). And the next mass extinction? Increasingly, biologists and other scientists are saying that it’s happening now (Ceballos et al 2015).

Up until the sudden emergence of COVID-19, climate change was catching headlines and beginning to take the spotlight on public discourse on planetary-scale crisis. Since 1991

²² The average rate of extinction (outside of “mass” events) is referred to as the background rate. Projections about mass extinction are based on demonstrations that the current rate exceeds the “natural” background rate by a consistently significant amount (Ceballos et al 2015).

(measured up to 2016), media coverage of climate change was up to eight times higher than coverage of “biodiversity loss” or mass extinction (Legagneux *et al* 2018). Yet, there are certainly some who consider Mass Extinction just as serious (if not more serious) a threat than climate change. This is because the entangled consequences of mass extinction supersede the loss of individual species to also include the destruction of ecosystems and the associated “services” provided to humans by those ecosystems (like crop pollination or water purification/filtration). This means risks for food systems, energy economies, and human health (Heise 2010). Moreover, losses in greater biodiversity typically undermine capacity for adaptation and resilience in the face of other threats and disasters. Major drivers include habitat loss and fragmentation (the fragmenting of landscapes accessible to non-humans) due to shifts in land use (extractionism; deforestation; industrialized farming; toxic air, soil, and waters) and overharvesting linked to neoliberal globalization (Fagundez 2012). Thus, the Sixth Mass Extinction stands apart from the other mass extinction events in its causes. For this same reason, and the similarity of scale, Climate Change and Mass Extinction are sometimes called “twin” threats (Ceballos *et al* 2015).

With the conditions of the Sixth Mass Extinction in mind, this chapter explores how discourses of extinction shape collective imaginaries concerning planetary-scale crisis. The concept of extinction in American or Western understandings is typically associated with environmentalism, and species conservation, as American environmentalism is concerned with protecting a declining nature. Concerns about extinction (or other “environmental” concerns) are directed towards environmentalist sentiments and conservation practices. Environmentalism is the primary story of the American relationship with nature (and land, which is life), and therefore

it is a site of extinction storytelling as well. However, the story told is typically the one of the plight of the charismatic species, and of American (settler) identity. Worried about planetary crisis? Save the whales. And although American environmentalism has a fraught relationship with human death, complete human extinction is rarely on the radar.

Speculating at the potential of human extinction is to consider not only the stuff of life and death, but being and not being, and the entanglements that humankind is in with its surroundings (living and not-living). Despite the best efforts of environmentalists, the planet is still in crisis. Coming to terms with the potential of human extinction also means coming to terms with the collective losses that happen along the way.

In exploring discourses of extinction and planetary crisis, I found that there were two major sites of analysis at hand - first, American environmentalism and species conservation, and then a sense of impending human extinction expressed as “we’re all going to die,” or Doomerism. Doomerism is a shared sense of pessimism, nihilism, and hopelessness in the face of “inevitable” extinction. While at first glance these two concepts seem disparate, they merely represent two different but still prominent modes of reckoning with collective loss and death. And they both share a similar orientation towards white settler exceptionalism.

I begin by introducing American environmentalism, where extinction and biodiversity are invoked as extensions of “wilderness,” a concept entangled with settler colonialism and American identity. There I will argue that using “extinction” in environmentalist discourse limits collective imaginaries of crisis in dangerous ways, and I will link this phenomenon back to existential exceptionalism. Secondly, I examine the positioning of “charismatic species,” as emblems of extinction, which I argue potentially redirect too much energy from efforts to

address mass extinction overall. And last, I will think with “Doomers” as representations of pessimistic, privileged perspectives on planetary-crisis that have become a lively site of collective conversations on how crisis might be responded to appropriately. I argue that extinction is a threat which necessitates collective conversation and responses beyond the “normal” systems of handling crises (like emergency services).

In this chapter, I relate certain operations of extinction and environmentalism to what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have theorized as “settler moves to innocence” (2012). These moves are strategies or positionings (within settler colonialism²³) that attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity without actually following through on decolonial action. Settler moves to innocence are made possible by the “metaphorization” of decolonization, in which decolonization is limited to theoretical sites such as schools or methodologies, rather than literally decolonizing physically (a process which would include material changes in power relations/control over land, and the presence of settlers) (Tuck and Yang 2012).

I bring in settler moves to innocence here to trouble the history of American environmentalism, which has a historically complicated relationship with Native people(s) and land. I also believe that settler moves to innocence are kin with “moves to” existential exceptionalism. While settler moves to innocence are aligned specifically with the struggle for decolonization in a way that existential exceptionalism is not, both play a role in discursive obfuscation of systemic violence in discourses of planetary crisis. Existential exceptionalism does so by isolating the threat of planetary-scale crises from their contextual role as escalated

²³ Settler Colonialism can be thought of as a specific kind of coloniality, in which indigenous populations of a place are displaced by the colonizers, who put down “roots” and try to replace the indigenous populations (Wolfe 2006). Therefore, the violence of colonization is re-asserted each day and becomes a structure/system rather than a singular event.

forms of ongoing crisis within global, industrial capitalism and empire. Settler moves to innocence do so by attempting to remove literal decolonization from the conversation in order to protect settler futurity. Both are protecting a type of American (white, settler) normalcy which would be troubled by conversations about systemic drivers of planetary crisis (for instance, a critical look at settler capitalist relationships with land in the process of reconceptualizing human positionality as Ghosh calls for). But now I'm getting ahead of myself...

Extinction and the Environmental Movement

Wilderness, the "Frontier," and Settler Colonialism.

Concerns about extinction have long played a role in defining the concerns and activities of the environmental movement. The environmental movement emerged in the mid to late-nineteenth century United States as a reaction to modernization and industrialization. As the settler "frontier" began to close, upper-class urban Americans) began to feel nostalgic for what was being lost (or destroyed, rather). This included: nature (in the form of wilderness), identity in the form of rugged white male individualism (needed to close the frontier), and Native Americans (since closing the frontier hinged on their extermination, dispossession, and containment). I briefly discuss each of these in turn.

According to William Cronon, "wilderness" emerged during a rush for resources at that time, and reified "wilderness" as the quintessential "pure" environment that must be protected in order to in turn, save humankind from itself (Cronon 1995). This resulted in the creation of the national park system that still operates in the United States and laid the foundation for other traditional conservation practices, which by and large "conserve" their subjects by limiting human use. Thus environmentalism designates "nature" and human "culture" as distinct and

dichotomous entities wherein the former “nature” as the tragic victim of the latter, human activity (Heise 2010).²⁴

The environmentalist move to preserve certain place as “wilderness” areas not only sparked the narrative that nature was declining as a result of modernization, but also worked to protect the already hollow American “origin story” or “national identity” that relied (relies) on a sense of perpetual frontier-ism (Cronon 1995). This “national identity” was by and largely based on the central valuation of rugged individualism, and it was also particularly conflated with white masculinity. Men like Teddy Roosevelt (who is well known for furthering nascent conservation efforts) idolized pioneer men as symbols of a time-past that was corrupted by stifling modernity - the irony, of course, is that the men who typically bought into this idea were made wealthy through the system of industrial, urban capitalism (Cronon 1995). This class distinction also explains why the “untouched” and unworked “wilderness” became the prize of environmentalism, as the wealthy framed these spaces which were intended for recreation, or temporary, refreshing “return” to more “primitive” roots (Cronon 1995). Thus, claiming “wilderness” was a move to reconcile American identity with modernity. It’s also a move that is explicitly entangled in settler colonialism, as the spaces of “wilderness” they sought to protect were not untouched, rather, they were lands that Native Americans had been forced off of over centuries of genocide, violence, and treaty violation.

Because American environmentalism emerged in nostalgic resistance to industrialization around the same time era that most large-scale armed conflict between Native peoples and the

²⁴ This binary is linked with a larger system of Western thought that includes (Cartesian) dualism, in which dual entities (like nature and culture, or male and female, mind and body, etc.) are thought to be not only mutually exclusive, but also uneven. Categories that differ from the cisheteronormative white male standard (like female, nature, body) are considered “other,” lesser. The same logic can be traced through the colonial matrix of power (Lugones 2010, Mignolo 2007). Classically, “nature” would be marked as lesser than human “culture” and thus intended for exploitation by humans. The emergence of environmentalism troubles the exploitation part (kind of), but not the dichotomy.

United States ceased, a similar nostalgia for the pre-modern past (and a “return to primitive origins”) has historically been projected onto living indigenous communities and individuals. In addition, extinction-based narratives of the nineteenth century (which emerged alongside environmentalism) often focused on the deaths of indigenous people(s) and extinctions of cultures (Sodikoff 2012). Patrick Brantlinger argues that colonial discourses of extinction emerged specifically because settlers were experiencing guilt, regret, or intense nostalgia not only over the (perceived) loss of nature, but also the loss of Native North Americans.²⁵ The settlers began elegizing people who “they perceived to be living relics of their evolutionary past,” (Brantlinger 2003).²⁶ Unshockingly, this did not particularly change power dynamics between settlers and Native people(s), but was rather still a project of American settler identity.

Conservation and Biodiversity

The environmental movement positioned “wilderness” as a pure” victim of human activity. Thus, environmental conservation focused on limiting human access to and use of certain land (like national parks). Of course, what was permissible “use” was defined by those who were most interested in “un-used” wilderness - wealthy elites (Cronon 1995). This included the continued exclusion of Native Americans who want to use their territory, a pattern that continues to this day.²⁷

²⁵ This nostalgia was also part of the foundations of American Anthropology, whose “salvage ethnography” attempted to “save” what they could from people(s) who were assumed to be in the process of complete extinction.

²⁶ The United States government also hunted North American bison almost to extinction strategically to cripple Native North Americans. This is a brutal example of the continuation of the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism has resulted so often in genocide (Wolfe 2006).

²⁷ For example, there have been relatively recent examples of Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) members being penalized for foraging ramps in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Lewis 2012).

Species threatened by extinction are frequently fetishized as emblems of both biodiversity and “wilderness” (Cronon 1995). Biodiversity is also assumed to be “mystically greater” in the wilderness, which orients conversations about biodiversity loss to exclude consideration of areas overwhelmingly dominated by humans (like urban areas).²⁸ Conservation of endangered species, then, is also typically done with the same kinds of exclusionary practices.

For instance, the result of the Save the Whales movement of the 1970’s (which sought to address whale over-hunting and impending extinction) resulted in a global moratorium on all commercial whaling (Stelios 2010). This too has conflicted with indigenous rights to self-determination in the United States. The Makah of the Pacific Northwest had and have contingencies that want to resume whale-hunting, a practice that they have treaty rights and historical claim to (Sodikoff 2010). They are also hardly the culprits of over-whaling. Despite this, the pressure of environmental advocates and divided opinions has left the whaling ban enforced for years (Sodikoff 2010).

Tension is also found in conservation efforts designed to protect species like Rhino that are over-hunted or “poached.” The criminalization of poaching, for instance, has led to increasingly militarized and violent forms of policing and law enforcement in areas like South Africa and Mozambique (Witter and Satterfield 2019). Militarized approaches in this case have escalated violence against poachers (and others caught in the crossfire), but have not done anything to address what might be driving poaching (Witter and Satterfield 2019). This type of conservation fails to address root causes and rather causes further social distress. ‘

Settler Moves to Innocence and Extinction.

²⁸ Although, it is probably a useful exercise to trouble this notion about urban spaces and think through the multi-species entanglements that certainly still exist there.

I argue that the context outlined in the prior two sections provides ample evidence that American environmentalist conceptions of “wilderness” (and the associated modes of conservation) are settler moves to innocence as defined by Tuck and Yang. By reifying “wilderness” as something to be protected out of concern for “loss of nature,” early environmentalists were making several moves in tandem: to absolve themselves of guilt over environmental degradation as a result of intensifying industrialization and capitalism, to retain the “frontier” that was/is so central to American identity, and to claim space for the wealthy to “return to primitive roots.” Because Native American struggle at the time was inextricably linked to the narratives of loss / extinction that spurred environmentalism, settler environmentalists were also making a move to acquit themselves from any regret over the violent elimination of Native groups. In addition, the ideas that they were newly “stewards of the land” and deeply connected by “primitive roots” to the (newly emptied) land was a move to naturalize this. Each of these turns is part of an attempt to secure American identity as a form of **settler futurity**, as well as the sense that conserved areas like parks were long term investments for the American people for a long-term or permanent settling.

When American environmentalists conflate “wilderness” and biodiversity in the face of mass extinction, they move the threat of extinction into a similar discursive space. The threat of extinction to a certain species handled through American environmentalism and conservation reinforces the role of “wild” land as a pillar of American identity. In addition, American environmentalism

Charismatic Species and Mass Extinction

In practice, traditional conservation often advances around the protection of charismatic species. Centering conversations about extinction around individual species can limit the ability

to have conversations about large-scale, systemic drivers of mass extinction (like habitat loss and fragmentation driven by extractive and intensive capitalist industry). This occurs for a number of reasons. Among these, the extinction of so-called “keystone species” undermines ecosystem stability and its resilience. For example, bison maintain the health of the Great Plains and otters help control the populations of sea urchins and kelp. Without these species, habitat health would decrease and, even collapse.

The scale at which biodiversity loss is easiest to understand and care about is the scale at which average humans can perceive and interpret - thus the focus on elephant over ant (Heise 2010, Sodikoff 2011). It is arguably easiest to form multi-species relationships at that scale, and cultural meaning emerges more easily that way. Biologists and other scientists often refer to these species as “charismatic megafauna”. Third, and related, some species tend to evoke more empathy also tend to make for more successful funding targets; thus these (pandas, elephants, large primates) become the subject for conservation practice and publicity.

These factors provide institutional reason that mass extinction comes to be understood through individual species. Conservation organizations target the general public with campaigns that take advantage of the cultural charisma of specific species to spread awareness and garner support of all kinds. For example, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), one of the most iconic conservation organizations of the past decades, takes an (endangered) Panda Bear as its logo, and fills its website with photos of tigers, koalas, and whales. Image 4.1 depicts the “Wildlife Conservation” page on the WWF website, where the tagline reads “Ensure the world’s most iconic species, including tigers, rhinos, and elephants, are secured and recovering in the wild,” overlaid over a photo of a man and a rhinoceros.²⁹ In most cases, the large charismatic mammals

²⁹ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/initiatives/wildlife-conservation>, accessed April 12, 2020.

are money-makers. In the mainstream of a global system in which attempting to restore or preserve ecosystem health is rarely immediately profitable, the funds to advocate for and undertake conservation projects must be earned from donors of all sizes by convincing them that the monetary sacrifice is worth it. A cute face, impressive size, or familiar species helps the case. In most cases, campaigns around specific species are intended to raise support for the conservation of that species. That conservation is typically conducted through traditional methods common to the previously discussed environmentalism - which, again, means protecting precious biodiversity and “wilderness” by limiting human use by law.

As is seen in the previous section concerning both “Save the Whales” and the militarized



Image 4.1 “WWF Site.”
wwf.org, screenshot,
accessed 14 March 2020.

³⁰ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/initiatives/wildlife-conservation>, accessed April 12, 2020.

fight against rhino poaching, this type of conservation operates through the legitimacy of state-led protection, the willingness of environmentalists (like the anti-whaling protestors) to rally around cases and shame, and the exclusion of human “use” and “work” (defined through capitalist relationships between humans and land/ecosystems). I argue that overwhelmingly centering individual charismatic species in discourses of mass extinction contribute to the orientation of planetary crisis discourse towards environmentalism and traditional conservation. This does similar work as existential exceptionalism in that it doesn’t trouble “the normal.”

This sort of re-direction of large-scale and troubling planetary problems into the same old environmentalism is likely part of the reason(s) that Doomerism, addressed in the following section, emerges. The nihilism and hopelessness of Doomerism is typically portrayed as a response to the Doomer’s disillusionment with “how things work,” they have given up on any cause and they believe that there is no point in acting (or that they personally cannot act). Yet at the same time, Doomer discourse is providing a platform for collective conversations about values and the struggle against crisis and human extinction in an honest way that American environmentalism is frankly failing to undertake.

Human Extinction and Doomerism

The Sixth Mass Extinction has also prompted people to wrestle with their own collective demise, the potential *human* extinction. Societies constitute diverse epistemologies, ontologies, cosmologies, subjectivities, and lived experiences; thus, they have diverse ways of understanding, interacting with, and responding to death, which is one thing all living beings actually do have in common. Beyond the inevitable anticipation of one’s own inevitable death, the anticipation of a shared collective death appears to bring with it a different type of affect and

anxiety. Contemporary Global North online cultures especially appear to have found pessimism, fatalism, indifferent nihilism, and all sorts of “hopelessness” easily rooting into discourses of planetary crisis. These sentiments often come with an accompanying shroud of anxiety, masculinity, and dark humor.

One of the most common and salient manifestations of this which I have observed in recent years is the ostensibly offhand invocation “We’re All Going to Die.” As in the story that precedes this chapter, I have many times encountered the phrase thrown into conversation in order to justify a point or action that would be considered “irresponsible” - until, that is, impending human extinction makes it irrelevant. Why should I care about a career, we’re all going to die anyway? Why should I quit smoking, if we’re all going to die anyway? What’s the point of fighting against these things, if we’re just going to all die anyway? And for the close, “I hope that I go early.”

As I described in “Apocalypse,” religions have been speculating at the end of times since the proverbial beginning of times. “Normalcy” in relation to human extinction is the assumption that human extinction is a distant possibility, perhaps related to religious doomsday or the heat death of the universe. But when people flippantly predict existential threat as if it were a weather forecast, they are actively changing the rules of the game; they are predicting human extinction far early, and far more immediately. Like we (referring to all humans alive) might all die. That’s the prediction being made when “we’re all going to die” gets invoked. Another effect is sense of universalism. We are all going to die. Of course, this is an expression of fear, of speculation, and it is a possibility. But for now, it is worth taking positionality into account to ask “who is this ‘we’ that is perishing so imminently?” For while humankind has arguably not been so close to

extinction since the Biblical Noah's Ark story, all sorts of existential threats have been leveled at the dispossessed and exploited of the global system. Some extinctions have already occurred.

Perhaps the phrase itself really isn't even all that common (my sampling for observation is, quite potentially, biased). Yet the same affect(s) are present in other articulations of "hopeless" orientation towards crisis. In what follows, I examine the claim "we're all going to die" and its shadow (human extinction) through a particular kind of discursive representation - that of Doomer-ism.

The Doomer mentality (which I playfully term Doomer-ism) is certain that humankind will not be able to mobilize to avert complete disaster. Doomer-ism participates in and shapes conceptions of planetary crisis through a variety of mediums.³¹ But the most iconic and layered articulations of these is the Doomer meme.³² Internet lore holds that the Doomer emerged from the website 4-chan, which serves as place to share images. It then quickly proliferated throughout all kinds of social media circles.³³ These Doomer memes are where the "we're all going to die" mentality manifests as a singular white man. In the process, the Doomer character has become a constantly and collectively re-produced imagination of a generalized "the type of person who thinks these things."

The face of The Doomer is most often a derivative of a Wojack character from the aforementioned site, 4-chan, a meme image with a brooding face.³⁴ The Doomer is a white male wearing a black beanie and smoking a cigarette. It's meant to reflect "real-life doomers", who

³¹ One of these is so-called "doomer-lit," which is kin to sci-fi and "cli-fi" (fiction particularly focused on fantastic speculation about climate change).

³² On April 15, 2020, the online Oxford dictionary defined meme as "a humorous image, video, piece of text, etc., that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users."

³³ 4-Chan is infamous, and that context is important

³⁴ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomer>

do so often seem to be young white men who wear the black beanie and smoke American Spirits. Doomer-hood in memes is not always explicitly connected to the conditions of planetary crisis, although it is frequently implied and assumed by frequent consumers of Doomer discourse. More often, the Doomer is shown as dissatisfied, alienated, hopeless, and unmotivated to even try and change his circumstances because he knows that he will fail. The Doomer has different

The 23 Year Old DOOMER



Image 4.2 “Classical Doomer.”
Knowyourmeme.com

reasonings as to why ‘we’ are doomed. Among these: human nature, which is inevitably selfish, corrupt, and thus doomed (heh) to cause the means of their own extinction; fate (related to human nature or the will of God); and scientific consensus around climate change.

In response, some of the descriptive captions on the classic “The 23 Year Old DOOMER” image include “High Risk for Opioid Addiction” and “Cares... but knows there’s nothing he can do.” It’s suggested that the Doomer, who has a good heart (because he cares), is consumed by the inevitability of failure and the immediacy of “Doomsday.”

The face of the doomer then gets remixed across the internet for a myriad of meanings, often alongside a “Doomette,” a female counterpart to the male Doomer. A classic Doomer/Doomette meme interaction either emphasizes the alienation of the Doomer, or involves a sexual dynamic between the two with a variety of outcomes. One image might involve a



God i hate society...



Honestly dude, I get you are sad and are struggling, but guess what? So are most people and you taking on this brooding nihilistic identity is incredibly self indulgent and actively harmful to people around you. Being a “doomer” isnt a personality trait. The world fucking sucks and is coming to an end and the least you could do is get involved in your community and try to ease the suffering of others, and try to prevent that bleak future from taking root, instead of shitposting about how bad videogames are now because they put women in them.

Image 4.3. “Doomer and Doomette.” Knowyourmeme.com

Doomer bringing up “obscure” music to the Doomette, who does not know the selection or does not enjoy it, which would be alienating to him. Or the Doomer might ask out the Doomette, who either brutally rejects him or falls for him immediately. This interaction between Doomer and Doomette is also remixed, layered, deep-fried, and delivered with a strong sense of irony at various intervals.

The Doomer character and original meme format is not by definition directly related to the existential despair inspired by conditions of planetary crisis, many classic symptoms of doomer-hood are entangled pieces of the affective extremes that crisis sometimes inspires. The Doomer says things like “I’ve lost all faith in humanity.” “We’re all going to die.” “There’s no point.” The optics of a young white man saying such things are loaded and sometimes even comical. In some ways it seems like the Doomer is typically coping with a hopelessness inspired by his own revelation that he is not, despite how he might have been raised as a white male, entitled to live forever and succeed in everything that he does.³⁵

Some of the core tenets of “Doomer-logic” which are relevant to planetary crisis are:

- A sense that he is the victim of unprecedented crisis, and that the more cheerful cannot relate to his existential angst.
- A constant state of this existential angst, which he fixates on and pessimistically associates with his own insecurities (such as a “lack of ability to attract women”).
- Specific insecurity with his own ability to procure “success” or happiness, which is fed into by the neoliberal sense that masculine value is dependent on hyper-individualist independence and self-sufficiency.

These elements come to play in the decisions that the Doomer is said to make, especially in his relationship both to the Doomette and to society. And often, he is illustrated to act in similar patterns to real people in response to events like crises.

For example, in the below image, the Doomer has taken on Prepper or Hoarder characteristics and stockpiled toilet paper, N-95 masks, and guns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Doomette rejects his invitation to join him at his bunker, and instead is shown to

³⁵ And notably, he often projects this sense onto his own rejection by women, because the Doomer is both chronically straight and kin to the incel, whose personal demon is his own perceived inability to ever “get a girl.”

be partnered with a man (who is physically differentiated from the Doomer in a way that invokes the “Chad” template) who wants to “create a robust network of care for the vulnerable.”³⁶ This sort of antithesis to the Doomer varies, but often the anti-Doomers are referred to as “Bloomers”



Image 4.4. “Doomer COVID 19.” Accessed 20 March 2020.

- they are the people who have chosen to take a positive or hopeful outlook on life and, when the meme is engaging in the discourse of planetary crisis, usually they are indicated to have invested in some sort of theory of social change. Images such as the meme above are conveying a layered meaning that is complicated by the understandings of the viewer, but they are quickly digestible by individuals familiar with the format, templates, and references involved. Memes like Doomer

³⁶ The “Chad” template is a strong-jawed male character who originated in Incel culture as the counterpart to the Incel (a portmanteau of “involuntary celibate”; a male who believes that they will never be attractive to women because they were born with a weak skeleton/bone structure, while the Chad is a “normal” attractive male with no brains). Incel culture is infamously toxic and has resulted in real-world violence against women and against incels themselves, and therefore the invocation of the Chad-figure in Doomer memes (which positions the Doomer as the Incel) is worth attention.

memes have unwritten theses which spread quickly in digital social circles and shape discourse at a pace that is only limited by a participant's ability to repost or remix. Everyone with a device to access the meme is a potential author, and there are rarely editors or publishing standards to be adhered to. Doomer humor has the power to rapidly shape the form of not only planetary-scale crisis discourse, but the attitudes that people have towards a Doomer perspective, and therefore real people that exhibit characteristics of Doomer orientation.

In a way, Doomers fit into a similar sort of category as Preppers. Doomers certainly leave room for an apocalypse, but the extension of their logic results in human extinction, even if human extinction is not referred to in the Doomer image. Doomerism did not emerge from a vacuum, either. In essence, Doomerism is pessimism wrapped in white male privilege. It is a lack of "faith in society" and an excess of alienation that could likely be traced to the conditions of neoliberal capitalist society. What is significant about the Doomer is the position that he plays in representing very real, disillusioned young white men. In fact, I would argue that the figure of the fictional Doomer and its real-life referent are one manifestation of an orientation towards planetary crisis that registers its conditions as absolutely exceptional.

Our own extinction as a species lurks in every conversation in which crisis, emergency, or apocalypse is mobilized, whether spoken or unspoken. Existential threat is not equally experienced, nor is it novel to the extent that Doomer pessimism is warranted. And while Doomers clearly feel alienated by society, they are still holding on to the values of that neoliberal, cisheteronormative, white settler society. The Doomer works in a white affective register, speculating at the glimmer of potential of destructive being leveled at the white meme man.

That said, Doomer-ism still resonates with me (much as Deep Adaptation and certain Prepper practices do). The threat of planetary chaos and extinction-level events *is* overwhelming. I think that there's probably a little Doomer in most of us. But I still argue that to succumb to the hopelessness of the Doomer is to buy into existential exceptionalism and betray the pursuit of a world without globalized industrial capitalism. I argue that the co-production of Doomer memes is an active and lively catalyst for collective conversations about how to approach planetary crisis and human extinction. Hopefully it's just a first step.

INTERLUDE IV | MULTI-CASUALTY TRIAGE SYSTEMS

After running out of the Stone Fire, I felt like fire was following me around Southern California. I thought I might be safe at my next project, which was in the San Jacinto Mountains outside of Palm Springs. But on the first day of our third hitch there, I looked into the sky while rolling rocks and noticed a strange color in the sky. I swore it was fire, but this new crew I had been placed with laughed me off. By that evening, there was ash raining from the sky and the sun burned a deep and unsettling pink color, and the next morning we were evacuated. Our replacement project was clearing a fire break around the boundaries of a nature preserve, and the next was a seed collection project in a canyon which had burned two years ago. The topography still showed the scars from the fireline dug by dozers.

At the next project, at Lake Silverwood, we were hauling brush through an area that had burned just a year ago. Everything was still charred and black, and there were splashes of red-pink fire retardant on the leaves of the surrounding unburnt areas. On the second day, we saw (and smelled) the tell-tale signs of a fire nearby, but it was not quite so urgent that they made us leave. By the final day, we were throwing branches into a dumpster and watching the smoke grow thicker and thicker until the asthmatics among us refused to work any more. And then we heard that a fire was burning one road over from our hostel housing in Dulzura.

When the fire was burning near Lake Silverwood, it wouldn't leave my mind. I was convinced that it was going to top the ridge and that we would have to book it to escape. My friends would take me on walks and try to distract me, trusting that the crew leader knew what he was doing. But at the same time, I had caught a bug. When I left California and returned to school, I took a Wildland Fire class and learned the fire ecology and management techniques that

I wish I had known back in the Stone Fire. We conducted a prescribed burn. I learned that I loved walking through the flames in no-mex coveralls (although this fire in Appalachia after a rainy month didn't burn hot or fast at all). And as part of the class, we were given a small purple booklet titled "The Incident Response Pocket Guide," (IRPG), which contained as much information about wildland firefighting as the National Wildfire Coordinating Group could possibly see fit. We were encouraged to read it in our down time.

Page 113 (of the 2019 IRPG, as it is continually updated) is "Multi-Casualty Triage System." In the multi-casualty triage system, there are four colors used for classification. The first is red (immediate priority), and there are accompanying criteria (like "serious, life-threatening injury" and "radial pulse absent, capillary refill more than 2 seconds"). The second is yellow (delayed priority, "can follow simple commands"), and the third is green (minor, "all walking wounded"). The fourth is black, which simply indicates already dead or dying. It made sense to me that they would have a criteria for triage, since wildland fire is an emergency service. I didn't really think about it after I read it the first time. That is, until reports started trickling in from Italy's COVID-19 lockdown that hospitals were overwhelmed, and that doctors were being forced to conduct a multi-casualty triage system. I felt a little overwhelmed by the stories that were coming out. How do you decide who gets sacrificed for the greater good?

CHAPTER FIVE | CONCLUSION: PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

“Humans Are the Virus:” COVID-19 Discourse and EcoFascism

The COVID-19 pandemic differs from other planetary crises like extinction and climate change in that it appears to primarily affect humans. However, some other animals *are* also affected and responding to the change in human behavior patterns. Domesticated dogs, for example, seem to be pleased that their companions are staying home (cats less so). There have also been widespread reports from heavily locked down areas that groups of larger mammals are entering human-dominated landscapes. The sika deer of Nara, Japan, accustomed to eating Shika Senbei crackers provided by tourists, are [now wandering the city centre](#), blocking traffic and venturing into train stations (O’Connell 2020). A flock of sheep was also sighted [visiting a McDonald’s](#) in Wales (Woodyatt 2020). Limited travel and other behavior changes have also meant lower global CO2 emissions. While these examples of change are notable, they’ve also provided fuel and fodder to a renewed and newly problematic discourse of crisis: ecofascism.

“Ecofascism” is an authoritarian response to environmental crises wherein humans (particularly brown and black folks, migrants, and others “othered” by the coloniality of power) are blamed as the problem and citizens are forced to make sacrifices for the greater good³⁷. In response to reports of changed nonhuman animal behavior and lessened rates of pollution, some

³⁷ Ecofascism has ideological roots in white supremacy, as well as Malthusian (and neo-Malthusian) logics (Dyett and Thomas 2019). Specifically, self-identified eco-fascists, including early American environmentalist and racist Madison Grant, used the ideology to justify such practices as eugenics and the suppression of migration as necessary for the protection of the environment as well as for the maintenance of white supremacy (Purdy 2015). Numerous perpetrators of mass violence and terrorism have cited eco-fascism as a motivational factor for their actions, including the 2019 El Paso Wal-Mart shooting, the 2019 Christchurch, NZ mosque shooting, and the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway (Darby 2019). Beyond episodes of “lone-wolf” terrorism, some consider ecofascism as foundational to the ideology of the German Third Reich, as well as state-led projects of forced sterilization of black and brown people (Dyett and Thomas 2019).

have taken to social media to make this statement (or some variant): “Humans are the Virus, Coronavirus is the cure” (See Image 5.1). The logic of this statement follows that the anthropogenic roots (i.e., people) of planetary-scale crisis are being “cured” by a virus killing off large numbers of people. Terming COVID-19 as a “cure” suggests that the ailment is people. And while contemporary planetary crisis has anthropogenic drivers, there is no distinction between polluting industries and “too many” poor, desperate people in the term Human. Tropes like this (i.e., the existence of “too many” people) reinforce Neo-Malthusian and ecofascist logics, long prevalent in the other discourses of planetary crisis I have discussed in this thesis. With the onset of COVID-19, ideas rooted in logics of ecofascism are apparently becoming ever more active participants in planetary crisis discourse.³⁸

For instance, a tweet published by an account called Extinction Rebellion (XR) East Midlands states “Earth is healing. The air and water is clearing. Corona is the cure. Humans are the disease! #ClimateCrisis #CoronaCrisis #coronavirus.” The images that they included show stickers posted on a public lamp post reading “Corona is cure, humans are the disease.” (See Image 5.1). Extinction Rebellion is a global environmental network started in the UK which is

³⁸ It is also notable that “Humans are the Virus” rhetoric is playing a similar role to Doomer memes in some ways - while the initial posting reinforces ecofascist ideas, these statements have also opened up a space for public and collective discourse on ecofascism. Some of that has occurred in theoretical, conversational push-back denouncing these statements and their ideological roots. This is the version that I would advocate for as actually combatting ecofascism. However, a lot of it, like with Doomers, is happening through meme-ification, as “Humans are the Virus” memes proliferate, depicting parodies of the “return of animals to their natural habitat.” For instance, I was texted an image the other day of a pair of tan Timberland boots sitting alone on the platform of a New York subway station. The caption read “Timbs are roaming free in NY. Nature is healing (praying hands emoji),” which positions the iconic cultural association between Timbs and New York as the “wildlife in its natural habitat.” Other images show toilet paper on store shelves, dinosaurs emerging, and human objects like porcelain toilets and razor scooters in lakes (each of which is absurd in a different way, and therefore makes a different statement). In some ways, these memes only aid the spread of the un-parodied trope and its memorability, as they don’t always clearly articulate a message that disarms ecofascism. But they are certainly a form of discourse. And they’re so damn funny sometimes.

Image 5.1 “XR Midlands Tweet”
@xr_east. Accessed 24 Mar. 2020



well-known for staging disruptive and performative protests and other direct actions in the interest of addressing “global climate emergency” (rebellion.earth). One of XR’s “principles and values” (listed on their website) is autonomy and decentralization, which in practice means that there is no directly enforced hierarchy, and “anyone who follows these core principles and values can take action in the name of Extinction Rebellion” (rebellion.earth). This does mean that the people of XR East Midlands could make these “Humans are the disease” stickers and post them in public with the XR logo with no immediate oversight. However, in this case, the plot further thickens, as Extinction Rebellion Midlands [has stated to BBC](#) that this was a “fake Twitter account” not representative of them. However, regardless of the official position of XR (which is officially distancing itself from this statement and its accompanying ideology), or the legitimacy/illegitimacy of the account in representing the actions of all of XR East Midlands, the tweet has traveled. It was spread across the internet with the visuals and name of XR. Ecofascist

rhetoric is permeating discourses of planetary crisis, and whether it is “self-aware” or intentional in its positioning or not, it is becoming associated with “mainstream” crisis-oriented organizations.

This story emphasizes the importance of carefully examining not only the stories told about crisis, but also the storytellers themselves, and the ideological roots of their discourse. The continuing emergence of ecofascist and neo-Malthusian arguments in planetary crisis discourse reinforces part of the argument that I have been building in this thesis - **that removing planetary crisis from its systemic context not only limits the capacity of collective imaginaries to conceptualize effective reactions, but also protects globalized neoliberal normalcy and opens the door further for the promotion of dangerous ideas.**

“Sacrifice the Weak”

The “Humans are the virus” logic holds that COVID-19 deaths are in some way deserved and justified, sacrifices needed to maintain the long-term health of the planet. Some have followed the logic further onto the newly re-fertilized grounds of sacrificing the others. Take the image below, which was taken at a “Re-Open Tennessee” protest. The person featured in the image stands on the side of the road, ironically masked (although it may be for anonymity rather than personal safety), with a homemade red sign that reads “Sacrifice The Weak. Re-Open TN.”

“Re-Open” protestors across the United States are taking to the streets to demand that the states lift “stay at home” orders and business closures in favor of “business as usual” (against the counsel of epidemiologists). The reasonings are not uniform, but they tend to fall into similar and

overlapping categories. First, that the economy shouldn't be sacrificed for public health, but rather that public health should be sacrificed for the sake of the economy.³⁹ And secondly, that it



Image 5.2. "Sacrifice the Weak."
Facebook. Verified by News Media.

is the (God-given) right of American citizens to patronize whatever businesses they so choose, unlimited by the state. This is a neoliberal assertion of rights - that "rights" entail the freedom for citizens to do what they want (especially, consume), unfettered by the state, rather than "rights" as a suggestion that citizens have a right to safety and healthcare. This may be oversimplified, but if the signs are to be believed, people are willing to risk their lives and the lives of others to eat at Baskin Robbins, go to Disneyland, and get haircuts. Flouting public safety measures has become a sign of right-wing identity. Using the language of "Sacrifice the Weak," in this

³⁹ The path to this conclusion likely differs depending on the individual. In some cases, it is a (MIS)calculation that prolonged economy "closure" is more of a risk to the "greater good" than the public health risk. In other cases, I think that people just don't want to see their profits disappear and the neoliberal state doesn't want to keep paying unemployment or giving out loans/protections to small businesses at the rate that is has been.

context, the sign-carrier is making the argument that rights to neoliberal freedoms (no state control) are the greater good for which the weak must be sacrificed.

Calls to sacrifice the weak for the economy or “freedom” are especially insidious given that there are ever-escalating reports in the US that Black communities and Native nations like the Navajo Nation are experiencing highly disproportionate case and death rates (Kendi 2020, Morales 2020). The disparity persists because systems operating through the coloniality of power (including neoliberal globalization and settler colonialism) exclude black and indigenous communities from wealth, critical infrastructure, and healthcare, as well as subjected to environmental injustice (Breslow 2020). The same can be said about the incarcerated (another group with disproportionate numbers of Black people). As of April 27th, prison and detention centers make up 8 out of 10 of the largest clusters of COVID-19 cases (Hale 2020). As for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainees, fear of COVID-19 outbreaks in already dehumanizing and unsanitary conditions has inspired hunger strikes (Katz 2020). As of April 16, 2020, ICE self-reportedly released 700 immigrant detainees with ankle monitors to decrease risk, but around 32,300 people remain (Katz 2020). In addition, there is a bigotry against all disabled folks, the immunocompromised, the elderly, and other people who might be determined as “weaker” than an able body in the face of COVID-19 implicit in the call for sacrifice that Ms. Tennessee is making.

The public negotiation of crisis-threat and sacrifice described here exists in the same field as the stories told in Chapter 2 (Emergency), on Climate Emergency. “Climate Emergency” is a grassroots mobilization, an appeal to the federal government to declare a state of emergency. In that context, climate organizers refer to the logics of state-led sacrifice that accompanied the WWII mobilization. “Climate Emergency,” and the declaration of “state of emergency” by the

state opens up a space of “legal suspension” or exception in which the disruption of normalcy is positioned to justify the legitimacy of the state to bypass its own laws and make determinations about sacrifice “for the greater good.” Storying planetary crisis as “emergency” contextualizes the threat within the politicality of the state and the precedent of the past.

The emergency chapter also shows that a certain amount of sacrifice (including negative sacrifice) is already normalized in American society. While states of “emergency” do open up new spaces for legitimate power to be wielded by the state, legal suspension and exceptionalism are also part of normal practice, especially in border areas (metaphorical and literal) where imperial relationships are active (Sundberg 2015). In a similar sense, the US is already sacrificing the weak. And frankly, that doesn’t bode well, as COVID-19 is being likened to the “harbinger” of climate change. The austere response of the government in the face of an actually unprecedented global pandemic plays into what Masco called “the crisis in crisis.” The state is creating crisis both in its action and in its inaction.

Apocalyptic Normalcy and Existential Threat

Relative to emergency (around which there are political measures being taken up) and extinction (which is measured via science), there’s much less of a scale or a measuring stick for assessing whether an event meets the “apocalypse” threshold. It’s a narrative, not a classification, a discursive site of tension and negotiation between what is imagined to be “Normal” and what is imagined to unsettle and ultimately transform that normalcy.

Chapter Three, Apocalypse, brought the transformative powers of apocalypse into conversation with disaster capitalism and, in particular, the Shock Doctrine. Disaster capitalism organizes and energizes crises as profitable markets, while the shock of apocalypse cleans the

slate for neoliberal policy reform and those markets that thrive off disaster. Neoliberal values also place the load of personal security onto individuals (rather than the state).

These phenomena can all be seen in COVID-19 response by the United States. First, some companies (like Zoom and Amazon) and already wealthy individuals (like Bezos and Zuckerberg) are rapidly accumulating more wealth. Second, responsibility for personal security is so “bootstrapped” that people are being encouraged to make cloth masks (less effective than N-95 masks) from old t-shirts and socks. Third, some are using COVID-19 as an excuse for or a distraction from neoliberal activity (like President Trump’s recent attacks on the US Postal Service), as well as the limitation of all legal immigration. The shock of global pandemic scrambles, disorients, and then reorients social norms, including individuals’ expectations about effective, fair and appropriate governance, in ways that make neoliberal change easier to implement. Joseph Masco’s “the crisis in crisis” (2017) is also applicable in this context - a political sphere limited by neoliberal governance and a normalized state of crisis in turn normalize an austere crisis-response.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, the “apocatainment” industry is another way that apocalypse works into disaster capitalism. In brief, the narratives of apocalypse sells, some more than others. Blockbuster North American apocatainment movies often have a “white affective” narrative at their core, which means that white American normalcy is speculating at the possibility of its own destruction and, as often, its own ability to conquer and overcome. Usually white affective apocalypse stories involve an ending or intervention in the film that centers white masculinity and American neoliberal values as the “normal” to be returned to post-apocalypse, or the moral grounds which helps a protagonist thwart some life-threatening plot. **White affective**

stories code “apocalyptic” narrative in mainstream discourse as a potential end to American normalcy, which is centered as worth saving. On the flip side, apocalyptic narratives used in speculative and science fiction like *Parable of the Sower* position American normalcy as the crisis, which exemplifies the existential exceptionalist logic of white affective narrative.

In the context of crisis, similar tensions build between two different interpretations of crisis. In contrast to the aforementioned “re-open” protestors, strikes of “essential workers” are gaining traction. “#generalstrike” was trending on twitter a few weeks ago. Healthcare workers are striking in demand of basic Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). On May 1, International Workers Day, workers from some of the USA’s largest corporations, including Amazon/Whole Foods, Walmart, FedEx, Target, and Instacart, all planned strikes. They demand compensation for unpaid time off, hazard pay, sick leave, proper PPE, and real cleaning supplies (Neuman 2020).⁴⁰ The “normalcy” of before hasn’t necessarily been obliterated, rather, it has been escalated. But some see the lock-down measures as a threat to returning to normalcy, and yet, the “normalcy” of before hasn’t necessarily been obliterated, but rather, it has been escalated.

Chapter Three also examined tensions in the different ways people conceive of and enact “preparation” for apocalypse. Conceptualizations of crisis that derived from old survivalist discourse, like Jim Bakker’s scare-tactic evangelical apocalypse infomercials, and other white affective narratives, literally buy into individualism. Their modes of prepping involve securing oneself and ones immediate family first against a perceived threat (whether it be hordes of desperate and violent people or a bombing from a foreign nation). Deep Adaptation, on the other hand, centers collective conversations about collective resiliency and reconciliation as a starting place for preparation for overcoming ongoing and impending climate-related disasters.

⁴⁰ My friend that works at Target told me that they’ve been told to clean their self-checkout machines and keypads with glass cleaner.... Which will not kill COVID-19.

Similarly, in the time of COVID-19, some are choosing to stock-pile and some are participating in mutual aid. Because apocalypse is a powerful cultural narrative, it opens windows to imagine potentials beyond the state and culture as it is known now - but it is also a field overrun by profit-mongers and white affective narrative. As the Preppers and discussions of Apocalypse show, how crisis is figured by discourse has real power to orient both individuals and collectives towards what modes of action are most proper and most effective for weathering the coming weather...

Settler Normalcy and Nihilist Exceptionalism

In Chapter Four, *Extinction*, I demonstrated that since its inception, American environmentalism has used extinction as reason to reify wilderness and enact its conservation (by exclusion). I characterize these tactics, using the terminology of Tuck and Yang (2012), as a “Settler Move to Innocence.” This means that American environmentalism obscures the root causes of extinction and avoids culpability for harms enacted on indigenous peoples, all the while keeping settler identity out of crisis, and in doing so, protects settler futurity. This investment in settler “normalcy” and its relationship with land, combined with the conservatory focus on charismatic species as emblematic for their concerns about extinction, removes the threat of mass extinction (and human extinction) from the true nature and history of planetary crisis. In turn, discourses of mainstream environmentalism limit the capacity of collective imaginaries to conceptualize the threat of short-term human extinction.

“Doomer” mentality, on the other hand, takes short-term human extinction as an inevitability and responds with nihilism. This approach buys into existential exceptionalism, as the Doomer is portrayed as being so overwhelmed by the perceived inevitability of human

extinction and social collapse that he has given up the fight before he even began it. However, the representation of Doomer-ism in Doomer memes is a dynamic and lively site of collective conversations about existential threat, privilege, and social change. Doomer memes that push back on Doomer ideology and suggest counter-arguments to the nihilism they champion are part of an ongoing, largely online conversation about how best to respond to planetary crisis (both individually and collectively). These are the kinds of conversations that need to happen in order to combat existential exceptionalism, as they try to imagine and enact alternatives to the options for action that we are given by “normal” conventions and discourses.

Escalation vs. Exceptionalism: Pushing the Limits of Collective Imagination

Recall from the introduction Masco’s contention that in the US, there is a “crisis in crisis” in which the term and concept of crisis have become so overwhelming and overused that the term “crisis” has lost its affective power to mobilize response (2017). In the conditions of the “crisis in crisis,” the political sphere is limited and languages for collective social improvement are lost because neoliberal governance systems repeatedly break the social contract (Masco 2017). Masco also suggests that “crisis talk today seeks to stabilize an institution, practice, or reality rather than interrogate the historical conditions of possibility for that endangerment to occur.” (2017: 73) In this thesis, I have come to understand existential exceptionalism as a part of this crisis in crisis. Again, existential exceptionalism is the (false) sense of novelty that environmentalism and/or the climate movement attribute to planetary crisis (Heglar 2019). I suggest that existential exceptionalism is a part of “the crisis in crisis” because by framing the existential threat of planetary crisis as novel, existential exceptionalism removes planetary crisis from its political context and systemic roots. This removal hides histories of crisis and existential

threat which led up to contemporary planetary crisis and therefore normalizes them into the web of crisis which dulls and dilutes the power of the concept. Framing the existential threat of planetary crisis as entirely exceptional also limits the formation and capacity of collective imaginaries to respond to planetary crisis by removing the context and root causes of crisis, a power which in turn contributes to the limitation of the political sphere and loss of language critical for collective improvement.

Existential exceptionalism's power to hide the political context of crisis also serves to protect and justify the status quo (including the actions or inactions of the neoliberal state) by absolving systems of power (like neoliberal globalization) from complicity. To buy into existential exceptionalism in the first place is an indicator of privilege, suggesting that the normalcy before was just fine and that climate change, or COVID-19, or whichever crisis needs to be defeated in order to return right back to that normalcy. Sites of discourse like American environmentalism, white affective apocalypse stories and Doomer-ism contribute to this. Each of these discursive phenomena are not only influenced by (and reproduce) the coloniality of power, but also promote stories that disrupt the capacity of collective imaginations to break through the illusion of "normalcy."

An existential exceptionalist orientation towards crisis will likely only lead to techno-fix solutions or institutionally mandated sacrifices (of the "weak"), just as Ghosh suggests happens in a state of Great Derangement. As both Masco and Ghosh (and many others) suggest, actually understanding and responding to planetary crisis means re-conceptualizing not only human positionality in the planetary ecosystem, but also the hegemonic power systems and "normalcy" which got us here. Exceptionalist understandings of crisis simply do not have the language or scope of understanding to address the cultural shifts that need to be a part of that process. To

clarify, there *are* certain elements of planetary crisis which can be considered “new” or abnormal, like the combination of a global scale with threats that “don’t discriminate,” so to speak (like the COVID-19 coronavirus itself, which is a virus which will attempt to infect whoever it comes in contact with). But the path to this contemporary moment of planetary crisis (and how crises play out in relation to each other) is undeniably a systemic problem with complex drivers like neoliberal globalization and the coloniality of power. In this light, the more accurate and fair explanation of planetary crisis might be an “escalation of normalcy,” one that places increased pressure on planetary systems and undermines the capacity for life.

Storying planetary crisis as an escalation of normalcy rather than an exceptional phenomenon acknowledges the type of normalized sacrifices and unjust systems which orchestrate(d) planetary crisis. The failure to link planetary crisis with systems of power like neoliberal globalization and the coloniality of power incapacitates collective imaginaries from sufficiently addressing the conditions of crisis. This is a function of protecting hegemonic power systems (like American empire, the fossil-fuel based market, and white supremacy) which would be threatened by a collective power which can imagine an alternative way of living without trillionaires, without police, and without oil. However, there is also the added element that those of a privileged position in American normalcy also don’t have the same degree of incentive or pressure to push the limits of collective imaginations or reconceptualize human positionality in the world, simply because normalcy is a comfortable place. It’s easier just to buy into existential exceptionalism, donate money to a Save the Whales campaign, swear off the numbing drama of partisan politics, and kick back to watch an apocatainment flick.⁴¹ The thing is, pushing limits of the collective imaginary in response to planetary-scale crisis and taking action outside of

⁴¹ I know that it’s easier because I grew up white and middle class, and it’s worth noting that it’s where a lot of Doomers seem to come from too.

capitalist or governmental frameworks likely involves a re-distribution of sacrifice and power, and it involves questioning American epistemes (undermining the security some find in being sure of Truths).

But planetary crisis is already here, and it has been, it has been escalating and it will likely continue to. I believe that there has to be a better way. Or rather, better ways *plural*, and many ways within many different worlds (as Sousa Santos and Escobar's Epistemologies of the South might posit). We might all die (well, we certainly all will at some point), but why give up trying when we haven't yet exhausted the possibilities for meaningful, generative, and much more lively response.

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