"They Will Be Like a Swarm of Locusts": Race, Rurality, and Settler Colonialism in American Prepping Culture*

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ABSTRACT Preppers represent a sub-culture of Americans who prepare for the collapse of society, or "the end of the world as we know it," via emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency. Securing access to land and the rights to access natural resources are the tenets of self-sufficiency. Preppers associate access to land, water, resources, and distance from the presumed danger of the urban core with the national myth of a white, settler-colonial rural idyll. Rural living is thus an ideal of self-sufficiency. Based on thematic narrative analysis of data derived from multi-method ethnographic research (participant observation, digital ethnography, and interviews [n = 22]), I examine the relationship between settler-colonialism, white hegemony, and environmental privilege in preppers' discourse about the rural. Preppers rely on racially based frameworks that align with hegemonic whiteness, color-blind racism, and settler-colonialism. Even as they deny the salience of structural racism, preppers make claims to superiority based on cultural capacities like individualism, meritocracy, rationality, and objectivity. They invoke these claims to justify individualized, defensive response to socio-environmental risk that reproduces white possession of rural lands. Racialized prepper discourse informs the environmental practices that preppers adopt, based on claims to superiority and cultural entitlement to land rooted in settler-colonial ethics.

Introduction

Hank and I are sitting on the outskirts of a small city in Idaho. Hank is a prepper. He anticipates and prepares for disasters, including weather-related events like storms and floods, and the collapse of modern society, or, as preppers call it, "The End of The World as We Know It" (TEOTWAWKI). Preppers take it as their personal responsibility to be prepared by storing emergency supplies and learning how to live a self-sufficient lifestyle so they will be ready when the "Shit Hits the Fan" (SHTF). Those who are self-sufficient are less likely to go "feral," as Hank puts it, during disaster, because they will be prepared to meet their own needs. The ability to do so is predicated on access to land, water, and resources, and is therefore associated with rural living.

"Feral," Hank explains, refers to "the onslaught of the population that lives and escapes from …any metropolitan area. They're gonna be hungry and thirsty and very greedy…They will be like a swarm of locusts,

moving eastward." In rural Idaho, far from urban danger, Hank believes he is safe from the threat of "feral people." Hank describes "feral" people as a homogenous, reactive mob. Left destitute by disaster, having failed to take responsibility for meeting their own needs, they will act on instinct and emotion. Their bodily needs unmet, theoretically anyone— regardless of race, class, gender, or other social identity— has the capacity to participate in the horde of feral people.

Preppers are a thought-community of Americans anticipating emergencies that overwhelm available services and supplies, and/or societal collapse. Prepping is organized into two main practices: emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency. Preppers turn to self-sufficiency—a way of life organized around minimizing dependence on institutions such as municipal water infrastructure, industrialized agriculture and food distribution, and national electric grids—in anticipation of total societal collapse. Self-sufficiency practices include gardening, farming, hunting, fishing, or gathering wild food, relocating to property with direct access to a water source (such as a well, or creek), and point-source energy production, such as solar panels, generators, or wood-burning stoves.

Prepping is an offshoot of survivalism (Mitchell 2002), popularized by bloggers and self-published authors who developed a once scattered audience through the Internet. Prepping is connected to a history of American idealization of self-sufficient living, reflected in back-to-the-land movements (Brown 2011). Although self-sufficiency has appealed to Americans across the political spectrum (Brown 2011), contemporary prepping, a movement led by white, conservative, middle-class men, is rooted in political conservatism. Although not all preppers I met through this research identified as conservative, conservatism was the default political perspective centered in most prepper spaces, an observation that preppers confirmed in interviews. While the relationship between race and political identity is complicated, the conservative movement in the United States is dominated by whites, with whites making up 83 percent of the Republican party (Pew Research Center 2020). Whites are significantly more likely than non-whites to identify as conservative (Pew Research Center 2018). Conservatism is also gendered, more popular among men than women (Pew Research Center 2018), and conservatives tend to hold traditional gender beliefs that position men as leaders and providers, and women as caretakers in need of protection (Schreiber 2016). These race and gender dynamics were reflected in prepper spaces.

Hank's account of prepping and the threat of "feral people" is almost artfully racially neutral, at least if we look only at the literal meaning; the denotative level, in the tradition of semiotician Roland Barthes (1972,

1982). But stories never just operate at the denotative level (Hall 2001). The story of the marauding hordes is a racial story (Bonilla-Silva 2014), setting up an *us vs. them* relationship between preppers and racialized others. This *us vs. them* dynamic, reliant on colorblind framing (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Mueller 2017), builds on the colonial discourse of otherization. Preppers take on the role of Euro-American whites who represent qualities such as rationality, self-control, autonomy, and individuality, while the feral mob is portrayed as hysterical, violent, irrational, out of control, and unduly swayed by collective emotions—qualities whites have long used to denigrate racialized, colonized populations (Said 1978; Young 2000). The unprepared are not of any particular race—but they are racialized.

This paper examines the racialized stories preppers tell about hysterical mobs of "feral people" in the central prepper story of TEOTWAWKI. Specifically, I ask how colorblind but still racialized narratives shape the environmental practices that preppers adopt, based on their belief in the likelihood of immanent societal collapse. How do preppers describe the dystopian future they imagine, and how does their characterization of the present shape their response to the future? How is their sense-making raced, classed, and gendered, and how do their stories rely on and activate already racialized and gendered rural idylls (Campbell and Bell 2000; Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006; Cloke and Little 1997; Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Wood, Jakubek, and Kelly 2015)?

To answer this, I examine the centrality of rurality in prepper discourse, and show that cultural constructions of rural lands as uncontested and politically homogenous rely on qualities of hegemonic whiteness (Lewis 2004), including a white spatial imaginary (Lipsitz 2007), in which escape to rural lands are envisioned as a return to orderly, civilized lifestyles, free from "natures limits, society's burdens, and history's ambiguities" (Grandin 2019:2). Imagining US rural lands as uncontestably white draws on the discourse and practice of settler-colonialism, a central but undertheorized structure that intersects with white supremacy and patriarchy (Barker 2017; Deer 2015; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Grandin 2019; Norgaard 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012).

Using data from ethnographic observation and 22 interviews with preppers, I undertake a critical, intersectional reading of the prepper narrative "TEOTWAWKI" to consider how preppers make sense of the current political moment, in which the racial politics of public narratives (Somers 1994) or civic myths of the United States (Smith 1997) are under heightened scrutiny, particularly by radical right-wing nationalist and populist movements. Shortly after the radical right-wing attack on the capitol, the Trump administration released a Presidential Advisory

report from its own 1776 Commission, a last-ditch attempt to reproduce a whitewashed history of the United States, one widely condemned by historians (Flaherty 2021)[1]. This "history," which lacks citation and excludes Native Americans entirely (Flaherty 2021), institutionalizes the settler-colonial myths that preppers both idealize, and feel betrayed by.

Preppers must reconcile conflicting metanarratives: that of the greatness of Euro-American civilization, and their belief in its immanent collapse. Unpacking the story of TEOTWAWKI and the feral people, I document the following discursive themes linking prepping to whiteness rooted in settler-colonial aspirations: idealization of the individual, tension between claims of victimhood and heroism, claims to superiority and cultural entitlement to access and control resources.

What are the implications of a racialized, gendered, colonial story of societal collapse, stripped of explicit reference to colonialism and race? By leaving racist cultural structures intact, and simply changing the casting of who is denigrated, preppers not only import structural inequality into their vision of the future, but they also use the structure to legitimate a particular politics of land. Although I attend primarily here to prepper discourse, individualized self-sufficiency is a politics of land, linking it to a broader settler-colonial structure. I wish to show the complex imbrication between discourse and environmental practices, which are simultaneously cultural and material. Cultural movements that envision alternative socio-environmental relationships may seem marginal; however, they have the potential to reproduce or undermine dominant structures and the environmental practices they produce.

Literature Review

Race, Rurality, & Settler Colonialism

Rurality serves as "significant imaginative space" (Cloke 2006:18) widely associated with whiteness (Cloke and Little 1997; Inwood and Bonds 2017; King et al. 2018; Leap 2020) and masculinity (Campbell and Bell 2000; Campbell et al. 2006; Kimmel and Ferber 2000). Far from fixed, rurality is an inherently relational concept (Cloke 2006; Heley and Jones 2012) that is materially and discursively co-constituted (Heley and Jones 2012). Rurality is informed by interlocking structures of power (Cloke and Little 1997). Since the late twentieth century cultural turn, researchers have documented what Campbell, Bell and Finney (2006) call a "symbolic consumption of the rural" (15) in which people and institutions

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[1]The report was removed from the White House website on the first day of President Biden's administration

represent, perform, and practice differential enactments of rurality that may reflect conflicting social locations or worldviews (Bell 1994). This paper responds to the call to "rematerialize and repoliticize" the rural (Cloke 2006:24) by demonstrating that cultural narratives about rurality engender material environmental practices that reproduce (material and cultural) inequalities. To do so, I build on an increasingly intersectional (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1987) scholarship on race, gender, settler-colonialism, and the environmental politics of American land.

Despite recent investigation on the effects of gender, race, and other axes of power, the framework of settler colonialism is largely absent from studies of rural sociology, a gap this paper intends to fill. The literature on rurality, race, and gender often alludes to European colonialism indirectly, as it is virtually impossible to consider the trajectory of rural American lands without it. However, it would benefit from explicit integration with a growing body of literature on settler-colonialism, which documents the ways in which all contemporary land politics in the United States are structured by interactive relations of "coloniality, racism, gender, class, sexuality, desire, capitalism and ableism" (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014:2).

While often framed as a long past historic event, in both popular culture and scholarly work, settler-colonialism is an enduring structure that provides the context for contemporary hierarchies, institutions, and culture (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013; Bacon 2019; Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010; Glenn 2015; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Norgaard 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012; Wolfe 2006). Both possession of and cultural entitlement to land are central to the functioning of settler-colonialism. The social construction of rurality as a white, masculine space plays a central role in legitimating white settler constructions of rural lands, including entitlement to resources, land, waters, and the bodies of that places' occupants (Deer 2015).

Despite growing racial diversity in rural communities throughout the contemporary United States, the rural spatial imaginary remains associated with whiteness (Cairns 2013; Lipsitz 2007; Philo 1992; Razack 2002). Yet, if we account for colonial attacks on Indigenous societies, racial tensions have been a part of rural America since the early days of European arrival. The white rural idyll is contingent upon the settler-colonial perspective of white, European descended settlers as the only legitimate citizens of the state, while rendering indigenous communities and their relationships to land invisible (Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010; Cairns 2013; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Norgaard 2019). Thus, land ownership and access to natural resources play an important role

in the construction of whiteness (Arvin et al. 2013; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

The root of colonial discourse is that of otherization (Said 1978), a process of producing social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002) between the colonizer and the colonized. In settler-colonialism in particular, the colonizer comes to stay, yielding a particular need to legitimate settler-land claims (Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Norgaard 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012). White racial identity has been validated with the "legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as neutral baseline" (Harris 1993:1715). White occupation of settled land serves as the basis of racialized property rights that environmental practices like self-sufficiency depend upon. Private property is a politics of land rooted in individualism. The cultural logic of bootstrap individualism, which rests on the erasure of the collective, is one of the central defining myths of American colonialism, positioning the settler-frontiersman not as interloper, but as hero (Ford 2019; Inwood and Bonds 2017).

Hegemonic Whiteness, Colorblindness, and Individualism

Just as settler-colonialism as a structure is rendered invisible, most Americans today rely on colorblind racial frames to talk about race (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Carr 1997; Eliasoph 1999; Mueller 2017; Omi and Winant 2015). Lewis (2004) identifies colorblindness as a facet of hegemonic whiteness, defined as a "shifting configuration of practices and meanings that occupy the dominant position in a particular racial formation and that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of "normality" in our culture" (634). Hegemonic whiteness naturalizes the status quo, erasing histories of structural inequality. This creates the need for racial stories that make sense of the facets of racial inequality that cannot be rendered invisible. Mueller (2017) frames colorblindness as "a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing surrounding white privilege, culpability, and structural white supremacy" (220). The significance of race is eradicated from the perception of whites, as well non-whites who seek to uphold the racial order.

One way whites avoid knowing about structural inequality is an exaggerated focus on individual choice and responsibility, what Frankenberg (1993) calls power evasive discourse, and Bonilla-Silva, abstract liberalism (2014). Under the frame of abstract liberalism tenets of liberalism such as egalitarianism, individual choice, and meritocracy are rearticulated for racially illiberal goals, producing the illusion of individual opportunity and choice for all, through the erasure of structure (Bonilla-Silva 2014:7, 75). Deep individualism is a central discursive code

that undergirds not only power evasive racial discourse, but also settler-colonialism (Inwood and Bonds 2017), neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Reich 2016), and traditional American masculinities (Kimmel 2017). All are products of Euro-American political philosophy, imported to the Americas via colonialism.

Alexander and Smith (1993) identify belief in individualism as a central feature of American civic discourse, part of a "democratic persona" that serves as an enduring feature of American political culture; however, they overlook the racialized and gendered nature of these qualities and minimize the political significance of their colonial origins. The qualities Alexander and Smith identify as democratic codes align with qualities associated with "hegemonic whiteness" (Lewis 2004) and "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), meanings and practices that position whites and men, respectively, as different from and superior to non-whites and women. Alexander and Smith fail to connect the staying power of these enduring cultural structures to racialized and gendered power. The "democratic persona" they describe is an embodiment of Bonilla-Silva's abstract liberalism, "constructed as rational, reasonable, calm and realistic in their decision-making, and… thought to be motivated by conscience and a sense of honor" (Alexander and Smith 1993:162). The claim to superiority based on the individualism of some and the homogeneity of others, produces a sense of ownership and the belief in the right to exclude—qualities that Laura Pulido identifies as central tenets of white supremacy (Pulido 2015:812).

Data & Methods

Analysis is based on multi-method ethnographic research including participant observation, interviews (n = 22), and digital ethnographic observation of preppers on the web (blogs, forums, public email lists, and social media posts). Field work and interview recruitment began in the spring of 2014, and was ongoing, but especially concentrated in two waves, including interviews and participant observation throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2014 in Oregon, and in the spring and summer of 2017 in Oregon and Idaho. Most of the preppers I observed and interacted with were white and men. They were mostly middle-class, as indicated by educational attainment (most had college degrees), professional occupations, and high rates of home or property ownership.

Preppers are in many respects a "hidden population" (Watters and Biernacki 1989); many conceal their practices, or avoid public identification as preppers. They are concerned with surveillance, and many have chosen to live off-the-grid lifestyles to avoid attention. This posed access challenges, especially regarding interview recruitment, made up for by a

robust online community that allowed for rich engagement, with relative anonymity. I quickly expanded my research beyond physical sites into the digital realm when it became apparent from my field work how central the Internet is in producing the social world of prepping. Preppers I spoke with consistently referenced common online sites including blogs, message boards, podcasts, and Internet radio shows. In digital exploration, I began to recognize the physical and the digital as continuous elements of a single social world. My in-person field work consisted of attending events, such as expositions; visiting prepper businesses; and participating in online clubs.

Interviews contextualize and triangulate in-person and online observations. Recruitment involved a multi-tiered strategy that started out targeted, and eventually devolved into interviewing any prepper who would talk to me. Given the blended online/offline nature of the prepping field, and difficulty in gaining access to private spaces of a very private sub-culture, this strategy proved the most appropriate given the circumstances, recruited participants through convenience and snowball sampling, relying on online social networking sites designed to facilitate in-person events. I attended events as a participant observer and used the connections I made there to recruit interviewees. I also reached out directly to preppers with an online presence and requested both an interview and recommendations for additional preppers to contact. This strategy proved hit or miss. One prepper asked about my affiliations, told me I was "too liberal" for him to talk to, and hung up. Others kindly agreed to give me time, and one put out an interview recruitment call to his rather large network. All preppers named are given a pseudonym, and identifying details are obscured to protect privacy.

All but three interviews were conducted in person (one of these involved a couple), the exceptions were conducted over the phone. Interviews were recorded with participant consent. Of the 22 preppers I interviewed, all but three were white, and all but three were men. Eight lived in rural places. One moved between rural and urban spaces. The others lived in urban or suburban places. One identified as queer, and a queer family regularly attended one of the prepper groups I frequented in Oregon, but other than this, most preppers I observed indicated heterosexual orientations. Heteronormative gender interactions were the norm.

Analysis was informed by discourse analysis and thematic narrative analysis. Discourse analysis refers to a group of methods that attend to language use and its significance to social life (Potter 2008:219). Thematic narrative analysis specially attends to the use of narrative, or story, in maintaining discursive meaning. Both traditions focus on the

productive substance of narratives and themes (Floersch et al. 2010). I used Atlas.ti to organize data and to identify narratives and themes using a variety of coding styles, including grounded coding (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998), simultaneous coding, and in vivo coding to capture subject-generated language. Language-focused coding gave way to thematic coding, which shaped concurrent data collection. Coded materials included interview transcripts, field notes from participant observations, content from message boards, blogs, and news sources, as well as other digital materials referenced by preppers in these sources (such as podcasts and YouTube videos). Coding was iterative, and coding schemes developed as I moved in and out of the field, shaped by interactions with research participants, and with theory (Burawoy 1998).

One of the challenges of identifying and interpreting narratives that depend on invisibility in qualitative analysis is the process of identifying absences. Multiple levels of codes were necessary to make sense of both explicit claims and subtext. I relied on the Code Group tool in Atlas.ti, a function that allows for the sorting of codes into thematic clusters, allowing for multiple levels of story to emerge[2]. Storytelling is a central practice of prepping, and like all good storytellers, preppers rely on metaphors, colorful turns of phrase, and other rhetorical strategies that communicate beyond the literal level. Sometimes, the belief behind the story was made explicit (coded as Explicit Beliefs); sometimes, it was hinted at through language and the structuring of relationships between key characters. In this case, meta-narrative codes were applied to rhetorical strategy, and its implied relationality. The code "claim to superiority" was one such meta-narrative code that resurfaced repeatedly; its context varied widely, but the hierarchical relationship in which preppers were positioned as superior to someone else (including the unprepared, other preppers, or non-prepper practitioners of self-sufficiency) was remarkably consistent. A second meta-narrative code of "cultural entitlement" noted presumptions, usually implied, that the speaker, and/or groups to which they belonged, were entitled to determine appropriate behavior, speech, or use of resources. At times I probed this, forcing implicit statements to be made explicitly, as in my exchange with Hank about racial vs. political exclusion, below.

Analysis

Within the cultural logic of prepping, those who have access to land, water, and raw materials will survive TEOTWAWKI, and potentially set

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[2]A single code can be sorted into multiple code groups, a feature that is useful for seeing how a single trope may serve multiple themes or narratives.

the stage for rebuilding society. Preppers characterize their activities as signaling moral superiority, which justifies entitlement to land and resources. Making use of an individualist cultural repertoire (O'Brien 2015; Swidler 1986) rooted in interlocking racial, gendered, classed and colonial structures, preppers justify inequality by building on white, rural masculinities (Campbell and Bell 2000; Campbell et al. 2006; Kimmel and Ferber 2000) to reproduce environmental privilege (Park and Pellow 2011). They do so by making *claims to superiority*, expressing belief in *cultural entitlement*, and doing cultural work to *minimize structural inequalities*, adhering instead to a *deep individualist* frame. These themes run throughout the central prepper narratives of collapse, as I illustrate in the next sections: when the SHTF, and TEOTWAWKI. These narratives are supported with meso-level narratives, which explain prepper's expectation of societal collapse based on the belief that *we're not taking responsibility* for ourselves, at a time when *institutions are failing us*. Fear of dependence is reflected in narratives of *urban danger*, and alleviated through *claims to superiority, individualism,* and *culturally constructed entitlement*, which are invoked to justify a turn to rural lands.

When the SHTF

The phrase "When the SHTF" is regularly used by preppers to refer to a disaster that results in collapse. A SHTF event could be anything from an economic collapse to the arrival of aliens. More likely, most acknowledge, it will be a major earthquake or weather event that overwhelms infrastructure and institutions. The impacts of a SHTF disaster range in severity; at best, it disrupts daily life. At worst, it triggers TEOTWAWKI.

Preparing for the SHTF requires a plan to meet basic bodily needs once material flows have been disrupted. While the SHTF event itself may be a natural disaster, the real danger is human. When asked why he became a prepper, Kai traced his interest in prepping to a perception of urban danger following the 2008 economic crisis:

> I was living in L.A. and people were cutting into other people's gas lines and siphoning gas because the gas prices were so high. People were losing their jobs and the beginning of what seemed like the stuff[3] hitting the fan and cascading into TEOTWAWKI kind of stuff.

People in urban environments are highly dependent on complex systems to deliver goods and services. When those systems break down,

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[3]Preppers use "the shit hitting the fan" and "the stuff hitting the fan" interchangeably. The SHTF is the more common of the two, as a more evocative metaphor.

preppers believe *most people* will panic, and turn violent. Therefore, the SHTF almost always includes frames of *urban danger*. As illustrated by Kai, urban danger result from a population density, lack of personal responsibility, and a propensity toward criminality closely linked to this personal failure.

The End of the World as We Know It

The SHTF is the triggering event; its likely consequence is TEOTWAWKI. While the SHTF may be time limited, in TEOTWAWKI, society continues to unravel. The SHTF may be natural or social (a hurricane or a nuclear attack are both characterized as SHTF events). But the fallout is distinctly social. The threat is not the triggering event, but the response of other people, those who will respond differently from preppers, and who are thus a danger to society.

   Although this logic is racialized, it is not the exclusive domain of whites. I interviewed three preppers who were not white, including Benjamin[4]. Unlike white preppers, Benjamin spoke about race explicitly. He acknowledged that prepping is predominantly white and masculine; he knew virtually no other preppers of color and very few women preppers. He was the only prepper I spoke with who included white supremacists on his list of threats. Benjamin invoked his racial marginalization as one reason for prepping, explaining that in a disaster, "I'm not the perfect color for that situation." However, when I asked him about the racial dynamics of prepping, he reframed them in terms of politics, explaining that most preppers he knew were "mostly what they call rednecks[5], but there's a few like me that are Democrats." Despite his own racial marginalization, he adopted the central prepper narrative which situates preppers in an *us vs. them* relationship to the unprepared. He explains,

> In a disaster when there's no communication with Uncle Sam you're going to have panicking quite fast, and once they panic, it doesn't matter who you are… most people in this country, they have guns in their house. Americans, they all have guns, they all think they know how to handle guns, but they don't. But at the end of the story, if I don't have food, I don't have water, "cause I'm not prepared, at the end, they are going to be killing each other for whatever supplies everybody has. So, I see

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[4]Because I had so few people of color in my sample, I am intentionally vague about Benjamin's racial identity to minimize identifying information.

[5]Redneck is a characterization that combines race and class, referring to poor, generally uneducated, usually conservative rural whites

> prepping as a step from ok, I have to know what to do in case
> this happened, and civilizations start killing each other. Which
> is exactly what—if you check history—its exactly what happened
> when the Roman Empire fell.

Benjamin reveals deep seated ambivalence about the people he lives around and the institutions he relies on. If modern society is fragile, preppers ask, who ultimately can we trust? The answer, it appears, is nobody. Caught between the ideals of a civilization that they value, and society's failure to live up to them, preppers see themselves as both the victim of human nature gone unchecked, and as its antithesis: the calm, collected, rational hero who plans ahead, and is always prepared. The story of TEOTWAWKI allows preppers to narrate this paradoxical role and justifies why prepping is the most culturally logical practice they could adopt given the risks they face as modern citizens.

We're in Such a Precarious State Because We're Not Taking Responsibility

Preppers in many respects idealize American civilization. Yet they anticipate its collapse. Meso-level narratives, including "we're not taking responsibility," "institutions are failing us," and "urban danger" structure the story of TEOTWAWKI by explaining these tensions. If the system is about to collapse, it is not because its origins are flawed, but because individuals have failed to live up to the ideal of personal responsibility. This has left modern citizens vulnerable. Kai tells me:

> We're in such a precarious state where we're vulnerable to so
> many different potential political economic ecological factors
> mainly because we're not taking responsibility for our physical
> security and our own ecological security.

Preppers associate lack of direct access to land and resources with vulnerability, which generates discomfort, as illustrated by Kai's frame of "ecological security;" a militarized framing of environmental risk [Hinojosa (2010) and Sutton and Novkov (2008) both discuss the gendered dynamics of the discourse of security].

Feeling vulnerable is generally an uncomfortable emotional state. But it is especially at odds with the self-perceptions that accompany high-status identities. As Hollander (2001) shows, vulnerability, especially toward violence, is largely associated with femininity; feeling vulnerable might challenge claims to masculinity, which then need to be corrected by asserting traits culturally associated with masculine dominance, such as willingness to use violence, mastery, and self-control.

Institutions Are Failing Us

Preppers both eschew vulnerability and see it as a core condition of modernity. This is evident in the meso-narrative, "institutions are failing us." John, an Idaho prepper, mocks his neighbor for assuming that grocery stores will continue to function, framing this as an act of stupidity, and ultimately, a failure of personal responsibility:

> One of the things that just puts me to shock almost is when I ask a neighbor, "You got any food stored?" "No. Why? I've got Safeway here down the street." Give me a break. That's not ignorance. That's another realm of stupid.

Most Americans rely on supermarkets for their food, a practice that is structurally almost impossible to avoid. But John puts his neighbor's practice in the realm of personal choice by ruling out ignorance as an excuse, and sets himself apart, explaining, "I have a different mindset…I have the ability," signifying that others do not. For John, a mindset of always being aware sets him apart from his neighbors, providing the basis for a claim to superiority. This mindset reflects the presumption of a fixed quality of intelligence and ability that mirrors essentialist justifications for racial and gendered discrimination.

Having a mindset that sets one apart from one's neighbors is framed as both an asset and a risk. Those who are unprepared are not only irresponsible, but potentially dangerous. Max, a prepper in his 60s who lives in a semi-rural area, tells me that he conceals the fact that he is a prepper out of fear that his neighbors will take advantage of him:

> You don't advertise that you're a prepper. First thing people will think is, they got food, they got guns, they got cash stocked away some place. You going to come home one day, and all your stuff is gone. Your house has been ransacked or they'll show up after an event and you can't deal with that…I don't have enough for you. I don't. I'm sorry.

Even as he is fearful of his neighbors in the abstract, Max tells me he does regularly help a neighbor, a divorced woman in her mid-50s who he is fond of because:

> She's a perfect example of what I like because she will ask me sometimes, "How do I do this?" And I'll go over and help her do it, and I'll even let her do it. If she's up to it, I say, "You do it, because I want you to see how easy this is. If you do it, you'll remember," and that's just half of the equation. The other half of the equation is once she's done it, she's so proud of herself and

> I just smile on the inside because I think I don't have to worry
> about her becoming dependent on me or anybody else.

Like Max, many preppers give examples of helping others, and ac-
knowledged wanting to help others, but ultimately believed that each in-
dividual is responsible for themselves. For preppers, this is not a matter
a choice, but of nature.

Embracing the cultural logic of essentialism that frames humans as
inherently competitive and driven exclusively by self-interest, Max
believes that humans are "intrinsically self-centered." He invokes the
logic of biological determinism to explain why communal social organi-
zation is physically impossible.

> When you have a single man being expected to work and pro-
> vide for the children and families of other men, that's not fair.
> What's in it for me? What do I get out of it? … when you get
> down to it, human nature is not like that. We are not intrinsically
> altruistic. We are intrinsically self-centered. I don't mean selfish
> but we look out for ourselves first, and then we look out for our
> neighbor… That is what our intrinsic nature is. …it's a fact of
> life and you can't legislate that away.

Assumptions of biological determination, the belief that human be-
havior and social organization are determined by qualities of the body,
are deeply political, and have long been used as the foundation of hier-
archical institutional practices (Miller and Costello 2001). Here, they are
used to justify belief in self-sufficiency, framing any political organization
that requires cooperation, collaboration, shared resources, and interde-
pendence as not just undesirable, but as against nature. The organiza-
tion of society that facilitates dependence feels unnatural to Max and
preppers; if qualities like self-interest, competitiveness, and sex roles are
part of human nature, and are being suppressed, they will come out in
other ways, such as displays of violence and loss of control.

Urban Danger

The likelihood of the SHTF turning into TEOTWAWKI is a major motive
for preppers to leave dense population centers, and to obtain land in
rural places. Their ideas of rural places reflect cultural tropes of rural
communities as homogenous and tight knit, and cities as bastions of
depravity; moral vacuums, where, in the further destabilizing context of
disaster, anything goes.

Rurality is framed in opposition to the urban, in a classic binary con-
figuration, where the city represents excess, chaos, and artificiality. Russ,

a prepper who lives in rural Idaho, tells me that he thinks many people move to the area to escape city life:

> I think it's more about people just wanting to get away from the politics, the rat race, the big city life, the headaches and get into more of a little simpler way of life. Get back more into…natural surroundings and being able to hunt and fish and enjoy yourself outdoors and what have you.

Anti-urban narratives call upon images of urban centers as hotbeds of poverty, irresponsibility, and violence, invoking racialized and classed codes that link cities with racialized others, poverty, and criminality. These qualities are naturalized, and therefore presented as inevitable. Hank explains,

> When you have children… there will be a major change in the way you think because you will kill to provide for your child. That's just a fact of life. So you've got a couple of little ones who are starving…and you have got nothing. So what are you going to do to provide for that child that you will die for? You will kill of necessity…

> Magnify that by the population of any large metropolitan area, and what is their response going to be when they need to do those things, and yet they're trapped? … They're gonna resort to some nasty things… they are going to go FERAL.

Although Hank's attempt to justify the initial act of violence by arguing that parents will kill for their children could be read as a gesture toward empathy, his pivot to frame them as dangerous suggests otherwise. The composition of the mob soon scales up beyond desperate mothers to a criminal entity with nefarious intent:

> Now, add to that the fact that you have got gangs. And we *know* there's gangs around any metropolitan area. Gangs have a real advantage because they're already organized, they don't have a conscience, and they are prepared to do all kinds of things to get things taken care of. And they've got the organization to get that accomplished, so they're steps ahead of most people. And because they're ruthless they're going to do things that are going to be really nasty…Those people, once they have done whatever they can to rape, pillage, and everything else in the area, they're gonna start looking where else am I gonna go, and they will head east,[6] like a swarm of locusts, alright?

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[6]While Rawles warns readers of his blog to avoid the East Coast entirely, on the West coast, preppers advise moving east, away from the equally dangerous (liberal) coastal population centers.

In the above explanation, Hank uses a variety of dehumanizing tropes. He calls people "feral," a term generally only used in reference to animals, and "a swarm of locusts." The categorization of humans as animals and insects has served as recurring trope in some of the most explicit forms of prejudice (Joffe and Staerklé 2007), evoking fears of contamination, plague, and cultural evasion (Steuter and Wills 2008:52) to claim not just cultural, but biological superiority over others. The definition of self in reference to subordinate others is a key feature of racialization (Lewis 2004; Omi and Winant 2015; Said 1978). The narrative also parallels racial and gendered stories that frame women and people of color as animalistic, closer to nature, and less able to control their instinctive, bodily needs (Lensmire 2017; Omi and Winant 2015; Plumwood 1993; Young 2000).

Having defined members of the marauding hordes as animalistic and violent, Hank goes on to make assumptions about the morality of its leading gang members, who, he claims, "don't have a conscience." These essentializing statements reduce individuals to stereotypes, labeling an entire group of people as criminals, as opposed to referring to specific acts that are legally coded crimes. Gang imagery, crime and race are inextricably linked in the American public consciousness (Barlow 1998; Welch 2007). This trope draws on stereotypes that associate cities with crime, gangs, and unsavory types that take advantage of the anonymity that large populations and complex social organizations bring. The counterpart to urban danger is a pure, unsoiled rural lifestyle, in rural communities populated by "like-minded people."

Rural Longing

Land, water, and resources are central to prepping, as they are necessary to attain self-sufficiency, an idealized state of non-reliance (Ford 2019). In contrast to the dependency bred by urban lifestyles, rural lifestyles come with, as one prepper puts it, "everyday preparedness built in." Rurality is linked to purity and peace based on access to nature and its bounty.

The centrality of white, masculine-dominated rural lifestyles to prepping was made apparent at an exposition I attended during my field work. One of the keynote speakers, Anderson, encouraged his audience to go beyond emergency preparedness by seeking self-sufficiency. To be truly prepared, preppers must focus on surviving a long-term collapse of society. Self-sufficiency offers protection against the fallibility of modern systems, including industrialized agriculture, food distribution networks, and municipal water systems, which are prone to pollution, scarcity, and

disruption. It was clear from his tone that he believed rural living to be superior to urban. About half-way through, Anderson made it explicit, when he asked the audience how many lived in the country. About half raised their hands. "Oh good," he said. "I don't know what to tell you folks who live in the city."

Anderson represents rural life as responsible, rational, and morally superior to urban life. People stay in the city for jobs, diversions, or to partake of consumer culture, keeping themselves in positions of dependence, a quality that is feminized and racialized. For example, during a discussion about cutting wood for woodburning stoves, Anderson advises the audience to use an ax to chop wood, rather than a chainsaw, urging the audience to "go back to the way our forefathers cut wood. They were real men, back then."

This reference is made in the third person to a mostly white audience of mixed gender; the speaker assumes a shared national and racial identity marked by traditional gender norms.[7] In doing so, he invokes not only gender, but colonial heritage, and thus race as variables that shape the rural ideal of self-sufficiency. He calls upon mythic American imagery of the white frontiersman (Kimmel 2017), who is positioned as a masculine hero that modern-day preppers ought to emulate. Laying claim to the figure of the mythical frontiersman serves to maintain settler innocence—constructed as superiority and entitlement (Grandin 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012; Wekker 2016).

Claims to Superiority

The above meso-narratives serve to set up the main theme of the story of TEOTWAWKI and the feral people: a new hierarchy of value and deservingness to survive based not on race, class, gender, or citizenship, but on attainment of the ideals of individualism and the ability to reduce one's dependence. Those who do so are superior. Those who do not have failed to live up to opportunity and are thus deserving of what comes to them.

Just as John compares himself favorably with his neighbor who believes Safeway will continue to operate, preppers often distinguish between themselves and *most people*, with most people falling short of idealized behaviors. Survivalist blogger James Wesley Rawles, who is widely read among preppers, writes,

[7]In my field notes I estimate the audience to be somewhere between 160 and 200 people. I count between 5 and 10 of these to be people of color.

> People Run in Herds and Packs, but Both Follow Natural Lines of Drift. Most people are sheep ("sheeple"). A few are wolves that prey on others. But just a few of us are more like sheep-dogs–we think independently, and instead of predation, we are geared toward protecting and helping others. People naturally follow natural lines of drift–the path of least resistance (Rawles n.d.)

Sheeple, Rawles explains, refers to people who "parrot the MSM" (mainstream media), failing to be autonomous and rational "and who are in denial of potential TEOTWAWKI," failing to be realistic (Rawles n.d.). In short, Rawles claims, some people are naturally more inclined to think independently, act rationally, and protect others, due to inborn traits like intelligence, the capacity for rational thought and emotional control. These traits, historically associated with masculinity and white-ness, serve as a signifier of self-worth and moral superiority. While prep-pers believe in equality and freedom of all *in theory*, in conversation they continuously make claims to superiority that revolve around having abil-ities that "most people" do not have: foresight, intelligence, skill, and resources to prepare for coming disasters.

Individualism and Culturally Constructed Entitlement

Most preppers in my study genuinely do not believe race *should* deter-mine someone's life chances. But they fail to see how their ethos of deep individualism reproduces inequality. Hank and I explore this tension between racism and what I identify as *cultural entitlement* after he told me that he believed it was reasonable to tell people to leave his community because they didn't share his conservative political beliefs.[8] The politics of settler-colonialism includes not just the taking of land, but the power to set cultural standards to which all people on that land are held. Hank, who has told me, with only a thin veneer of jest, that liberals are not wel-come to move to Idaho, demonstrates this in the following exchange:

> Interviewer: [Earlier] you mentioned the Aryan Nation and you called them a bunch of jerks. And I believe you said [before] that you don't consider yourself racist, that this is not about race. What's the difference between saying that we should distinguish

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[8]Before agreeing to be interviewed by me, Hank asked me about my political leanings. I answered truthfully that I leaned pretty left of center. Hank was willing to be interviewed despite our differences, for which I am grateful. Our political differences as well as our shared ties to place surfaced at several points in our interview, such as when Hank jokingly asked if they had checked my papers when I crossed the border into Idaho, coming from California. I was welcome on a travel visa, he joked, but the very serious implication behind the humor was that as a liberal, I would not be welcome as a resident.

who can be in an area by political preference, versus some quality like race or ethnicity or sexuality, or some other criteria?

Hank: That's a great question. Ok. In that case, you have identifiable things like race or ethnicity or religion or something like that. You know, I don't care… like I said, I've got friends who are atheists! I want conservative values, I want people who believe in the US constitution and support the constitution and want to be among people who do the same thing, alright? I do not want a nanny state government. That's what you've got in California, that's what you've got in Oregon and Washington. I don't want that. Your race means nothing. Your ethnicity means nothing. Your religion? Um…that's where things get tricky, because…I don't want to get into the whole Muslim thing, but, because that's a whole 'nother tangent, BUT…um…if you got…I don't want to go too far, cause this is not what we're talking about here…I don't want people to think, oh, he's anti-Muslim. Um…I am anti…anti-the Muslim religion. If you moved up here and you are a Muslim but you don't go to church but you identify as a Muslim, I'm not going to tell you to get the hell out of my state. Now, I'm not gonna do that, but if I see you demanding that … people wear burkas and that you stop selling bacon, get the hell out of my state, alright?

Interviewer: What is it that you mind? The burka? Or the request to be accommodated?

Hank: Yeah! That! You can't have US Constitution and shari'a law. They are antithetical, alright? And not all Muslims are like that, and I admit that, ok, *but* … you start watching, as they move in, and their population increases, they start demanding more and more stuff.

Hank articulates an idea many preppers allude to. Physiological race was not Hank's concern—what he objects to is cultural power that challenges his own, a framing that enables him to castigate the religion of Islam, while claiming not to be anti-Muslim. This strategic move reflects what Bonilla-Silva (2014) calls *cultural racism*, a colorblind frame that relies on culturally based arguments—it is not Muslim people Hank objects to, but their cultural practices, such as wearing burkas or abstaining from pork. These practices are not welcome in Hank's ideal community of like-minded people. But it also goes beyond race, extending to me, a white liberal, on the basis not of race, but my political beliefs. Hank discursively shifts away from what he understands prejudice to be—disdain for people based on a quality like race or religion, to a cultural critique

predicated on any form of politically threatening difference. Hank, who has lived in his rural community for only several years, feels entitled to set the cultural standard according to his worldview, a worldview rooted in a conservative reading of the exceptionalism of Euro-American settlers, positioned as the rightful sovereigns of the land.

Discussion/Conclusion

Preppers' firm beliefs in bootstrap individualism and its related tenets (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Inwood and Bonds 2017; Tuck and Yang 2012) limit their "ecological imagination" (Norgaard 2016, 2018) to a mythic, colonial American past built on racialized (Feagin and Elias 2013) and gendered (Deer 2015) power. This commitment links prepping to other radical right-wing movements, as evidenced by the events of January 2021 in which white nationalists, militia members and members of the extreme right led an insurrection in the US capitol. The cultural logic of prepping is rooted in the same American exceptionalism, settler-colonial frontier mythology, and an individualism borne of white supremacy and patriarchy invoked in this event. This has important implications for the movement's increasing popularity as a response to environmental and social risk. Intersectional theories of race and gender, and settler-colonial theory help identify the common narratives that uphold axes of power and their material consequences (Norgaard 2019; Pulido 2015).

Both the narrative of the SHTF and TEOTWAWKI are rooted in, and contribute to, a metanarrative of collapse, which tells the story of a once great civilization in decline, reminiscent of Trump's rallying cry to "Make America Great Again." The metanarrative of collapse is paired with a second metanarrative that problematizes the first—that of the presumed greatness of the Euro-American civilization that is ending. This narrative reflects a national mythology of (white) American exceptionalism, predicated on the belief that the United States has offered unprecedented levels of freedom, equality, and opportunity. This narrative, while on the surface neutral, is racialized and gendered by way of omission. It is used widely to refute the evidence of structural inequality. This leads whites, and others who uphold dominant racial ideologies, to assume equal opportunity, despite evidence to the contrary, thus blaming the disadvantaged for their failure to achieve the ideals of individual freedom (Bellah et al. 1996; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Inwood and Bonds 2017; Kimmel 2017; O'Brien 2015). For preppers, this means that those who have failed to exercise their personal freedom have unduly burdened the system, which is now vulnerable to collapse.

The stories of the SHTF and TEOTWAWKI are presented as politically neutral; that is, their racial and class composition is never specified.

Indeed, preppers work to democratize their otherization by insisting that "anyone can prepare" and that those who fail to do so will be representative of all types. By focusing on choice, preppers claim superiority over those who are not prepared. Even stripped of racialized, classed, and gendered language, the story of the marauding hordes is encoded with fear and antagonism directed toward symbolic others. The basic racialized structure of *us vs. them* remains intact, even as colorblind conversational norms require the content to shift. This is consistent with the recognition that under a colorblind racial regime, hegemonic whiteness operates through "culturally hegemonic ideals and power" (Hughey 2010:1301; Lewis 2004) rather than physiological features alone.

The story of "feral" hordes of panicking, violent people appeals to a fundamental difference between those who are able to achieve the ideals of *deep individualism*—being a fully formed, rational, courageous, collected, agentic individual—and those who aren't. The ability to fall on one side rather than the other justifies claims toward controlling resources and the cultural uses to which they are put. This "de facto white privilege" accepts inequality as a neutral baseline that justifies the reproduction of white control over land (Harris 1993:1753). Colorblind rhetorical stand-ins for race allow for the continued justification of exclusion masked as a desire for cultural homogeneity: the distinction between urban danger and the rural idyll as engaged by preppers links colorblind racial ideology to the continued control of material resources upon which the settler state is predicated.

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