The Rhetorics of Crisis and Apocalypse in the Intermountain West

Shane R. Peterson

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Reading Committee:

Candice Rai, Chair

Anis Bawarshi

Jesse Oaks Taylor

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Abstract

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Shane Peterson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Candice Rai
English Department

The following dissertation contributes to a growing interest in the field of rhetorical studies in the rhetoric(s) of crisis, specifically focused on climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of white supremacist militias across the United States. This study also seeks to fill a lack of research concerning more rural publics outside of city centers in the United States—where access to higher education and opportunities for academic research are limited—as well as what kinds of activism and public engagement are possible within these places, which have become increasingly vulnerable the public crises list above. I argue that it is imperative for rhetorical scholars to understand how environmental or public health activism/advocacy in rural areas will meet some resistance (either apathy, skepticism, or outright hostility) from more

conservative, religious, and extremist publics in those locales. These impasses between these opposing groups present a unique challenge for communication across difference because they frequently exhibit and employ different conventions of apocalyptic rhetoric(s) when addressing a larger crisis such as the global pandemic and climate change. Scholars like Paul Lynch, Richard Miller, Marilynn Cooper, and Lynn Worsham have already alluded to an "apocalyptic turn" in composition studies, in which discourses surrounding the larger societal crises as well as the decline and potential end of human civilization have become more commonplace in our disciplinary conversations. In this same vein, I argue that we should begin to identify, call for, and theorize a new "apocalyptic turn" in rhetorical studies. As a broader contribution to the field of English studies, I will attempt to theorize how we, as an academic discipline, should address larger "apocalyptic" crises outside of academia or re-consider the ethics and practices of teaching, researching, and writing during times of disruption and uncertainty.

To conduct this study, I will take a multifaceted approach by primarily drawing from my background growing up in the LDS (or Mormon) Church in the Intermountain West, a region of the country with a long history of precarity, apocalypticism, and other environmental and public health crises. I will employ various theories of rhetoric—primarily the rhetorics of crisis, precarity, communication across difference, agency, narrative, circulation, affect, rhetorical ecologies, and rhetorical genre theory—to untangle some of the impasses of competing rhetorics in the Intermountain West and discover grounds for intervention with an eye toward action that promotes public welfare, climate justice, and ecological sustainability. In my first chapter, I will examine how apocalypticism has shaped the scientific discourses surrounding the climate crisis. Building off this foundation, my second chapter will analyze how the historical apocalyptic rhetorics from the Mormon faith tradition have circulated and helped create foster a widespread

sub-culture of anti-government activism across the Intermountain West. In my third and final chapter, I will draw from the findings of previous chapters and use theories of digital rhetoric and circulation studies to analyze how the infamous Mormon apocalyptist Ammon Bundy organized and led protests against government-mandated restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading up to his organization's involvement with the U.S. Capitol riot in early 2021. For my conclusion, I will discuss my findings from my case studies listed above to provide some final arguments about how rhetorical scholars should re-envision contemporary theories about precarious rhetorics, rhetorics of crisis, or apocalyptic rhetorics in this historical moment.

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DEDICATION

To Grace, with love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Living in the expectation of the Apocalypse is one thing; living after its realization is something else again.
—Bruno Latour

"I had grown up preparing for the Days of Abomination, watching for the sun to darken, for the moon to drip as if with blood." —Tara Westover

"It's the end of the world as we know it,
And I feel fine."
—R.E.M.

The deserts of southern Nevada and Utah possess a unique kind of beauty that is almost Biblical with its oceans of sagebrush, dry lakebeds that simmer with mirages at every horizon, and rocky mountain sides baked black and rusted red from the searing heat of the sun. One finds life in abundance in the most surprising of places, from large herds of bighorn sheep scaling the mountain slopes to hidden pine tree forests growing up mountain canyons to hot springs boiling up from the geothermal heat of the Earth's mantle, teeming with micro-organisms and fungi that comprise their own small ecosystems. With so little water and vegetation, it is an unforgiving, difficult land for humans to cultivate and survive on without irrigation or industrialized infrastructure that can sustain entire civilizations. Some creatures, such as the desert tortoise, have lived here for millions of years. Indigenous tribes of the Paiute, Shoshone, and Ute have called this land home for thousands of years before Mormon colonist arrived at the Great Basin in the mid-nineteenth century, mostly through displacing, converting, or massacring these same Indigenous communities to create their own sovereign kingdom that has since become the dominant political, religious, economic, and ecological force in the Intermountain West.[1] Other settler communities had success with less longitude, as evidenced by the multitude of abandoned ghost towns dotting the Nevadan landscapes, all left over from the Gold Rush and silver mining

[1] Encompassing the entirety of Nevada, Utah, and Idaho and large swaths of Arizona, Oregon, and Washington.

booms of the 1850s and 1860s. These deserts are full of forsaken buildings and empty town centers that became unsustainable and abandoned due to economic hardship, exposure to the elements, or extreme isolation. Now they stand as haunting reminders of humankind's limited capacity to subdue its natural surroundings. All the while, thousands of tourists, campers, hikers, wanderers, and adventurers travel through these deserts every year to enjoy this natural scenery, perhaps along the two-lane highways winding through the Valley of the Gods in southern Utah or making detours to the Valley of Fire while en route to Las Vegas. In all its chrome and technicolor glory, Vegas, as a city of glamour and excess, sits in stark contrast to generations of rural farming and ranching at its outskirts, all of which rely on what little water can be irrigated to survive, support their families, pay their taxes, and preserve cultural lifestyles that have become increasingly difficult to maintain in this new millennium.

At times, one may feel that these desert landscapes are far from idyllic, being nothing but badlands, the remnants of an Earth fallen from Eden. This same perception of these deserts as uninhabited "wastelands" gave the American military justification for testing atomic weapons here during the Cold War to prepare for nuclear war against Soviet Russia; however, both Indigenous communities and white settlers were directly harmed by the radioactive fallout of these tests, localizing this apocalypse in complicated, unpredictable ways that continue to shape the people, terrains, and politics of this place. The American Southwest now faces a different but no less dire crisis in the form of global climate change, particularly in the face of unnaturally long periods of drought that will disrupt so many people's livelihoods. In reaction to increasing economic precarity and political uncertainty inherent with late-stage capitalism, armed militia groups have formed at alarming rates across the region as they vie for revolution and sovereignty through threats of violence in the name of liberty and divinity, all helping to set the stage for the

entire region to become a battleground over the future of federally owned public lands, environmental policies, reactionary politics, and religious fundamentalism. This entire region provides a seemingly apocalyptic view of our planet's future as it becomes hotter every passing summer. Here in this place, we can find spiritualists, mystics, and religious adherents searching for solace from the ravages of modernity, to commune with the Earth, understand their ancestral ties to it, or perhaps hear the voice of God, whoever he, she, it, or they may be. Others find only silence but peace. Others, fire and blood.

Often, we find within American rural communities like the ones described above a conglomeration of conflicting rhetorics[2] from different, opposing publics, in which members of these publics experience an increasing sense of collective worry over decaying public infrastructure, economic instability, lack of access to essential services like healthcare, and depleted natural resources in their local environments. The Intermountain West has become a hotbed for contending and contradictory forces, discourses, and narratives all converging on various impasses around land use, environmentalism, and public policy. As I will explore throughout this dissertation, concentrated within this region are rhetorics and narratives that draw on apocalyptic beliefs that privilege either anti-government, hyper-individualistic settler-colonialism or collective action in favor of the public good for humans and non-human agents in global crisis like climate change or the coronavirus pandemic.

Given the complexity and the urgency of all these matters in the epoch of human-driven climate change or during the aftermath of a global pandemic, these rhetorics have been permeated with urgency and uncertainty. Yet, these place-based rhetorics—especially in

[2] Which I will define for now as a source of communicative energies and capacities for both human and non-human agents to shape or reshape a collective existence shared by other agents and actants within a given ecology or assemblage.

southern Nevada and Utah, which I once called home—have already exhibited or addressed issues of precarity, radical difference, and even apocalypticism long before our current political moment. This larger area of the United States provides a vivid snapshot of humanity's struggle over its ties to nature, its faith in the divine, its languages of power, and its own worst destructive tendencies. Or as Rebecca Solnit puts it in writing about this region:

> These lines of convergence are the lines of biography and history and ecology that come together . . . [from] the history of nuclear physics, the Arms Race, anti-Communism, civil disobedience, Native American land-rights struggles, the environmental movement, and the mysticism and fanaticism deserts seem to inspire in Judeo-Christians all come together . . . not as a piece of physical geography, but of cultural geography . . . when they come together it becomes possible to see new connections in our personal and public histories and stories, collisions even. (24)

These "collisions" of environmentalism, anti-Communism, mysticism, and fanaticism have become so entangled and enmeshed with their local environments that southern Nevada and Utah have become a contentious site in which communication across radical difference and deliberation over matters of environmental stewardship or political governance are fraught with conflict, to the point where collaborating across difference to respond to shared urgent public problems (let alone achieving consensus) has become extraordinarily difficult—perhaps even impossible. For all these reasons, it is an ideal site for researching theories of complexity, precarity, and apocalypticism within rhetorical studies.

In recent years, there has been growing interest within the overlapping fields of rhetorical theory and composition studies in research on more rural U.S. publics (e.g., Eli Goldblatt, Robert Brooke, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and others), as well as what kinds of activism and

public engagement are possible within these places/spaces that have become more vulnerable to global climate change and were ravaged by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. These rural communities or federal public lands in the American Interior are productive sites for theorizing, reconceptualizing, and researching how rural publics orient themselves in relation to exigencies of precarity, crisis, and apocalypse. In the face of this climate crisis, the current political climate, and the 2020-2021 global pandemic that ravaged the world during the writing of this work, it is critical for engaged scholars in rhetorical scholarship, English studies, and the humanities more broadly to understand the types of resistance that environmental or public health activism/advocacy in rural areas will meet (whether in the form of apathy, skepticism, or outright hostility) from more conservative, fundamentalist, or extremist publics in those locales. Our work as researchers and advocates, then, should take into serious consideration how collective, urgent, and dire societal crises are understood and responded to by these rural, and often conservative and religious, communities (including global climate change, the migrant crisis, the resurgence of white supremacy, and the recent pandemic, just to name a few). As my dissertation will explore in depth, many conservative rural communities in the American West interpret these public crises through the lens of antigovernment discourses and religious end-times narratives, which can disrupt coordinated responses between government officials, academics, and other advocates to these exigencies—even if it means resorting to physical violence by enacting their apocalyptic worldviews through armed resistance, hoarding resources, and perpetuating white supremacist ideologies.

Relevant to this case, Paul Lynch notes[3] an "apocalyptic turn" in composition studies, in which discourses surrounding the decline and potential end of human civilization have become

[3] Along with other scholars like Richard Miller, Marilynn Cooper, and Lynn Worsham.

more commonplace and are beginning to shape our disciplinary conversations. Even if those who engage with this emerging discourse in composition studies don't necessarily believe that civilization is literally about to end, the anxieties of the present moment should still force engaged scholars to address larger "apocalyptic" crises outside of academia more proactively and reevaluate the practices of teaching or researching during times of disruption and uncertainty. We should begin to identify, call for, and theorize a new "apocalyptic turn" in rhetorical studies as well to account for these same disruptions and crises within and outside of the academy. After all, addressing larger crises like climate change or COVID-19 requires coordinated, cohesive efforts across multiple publics unified in the same effort, interfaced with public policies, laws, regulations, and other government actions—through coalitions and with cooperation from other institutions or organizations like religions, businesses, courts of law, and activist groups—toward a common goal of safe, inclusive, sustainable living.

Therefore, to better understand this resistance to coordinated actions in solving public crises, my dissertation engages theories of rhetoric—primarily the rhetorics of crisis, apocalyptic rhetorics, public theory, narratives, agency, rhetorical ecologies, materiality, circulation, and affect—to untangle some of these impasses and to promote public welfare. As my work reveals, there will be intense resistance to public health and climate activism from certain individuals, organizations, and communities who will claim infringement on their personal rights, economic interests, or even religious convictions, perhaps going so far as coordinating together to actively fight against any efforts to limit the devastation from carbon emissions and regulations seeking to limit the transmission of a lethal virus. Given that challenges like the climate crisis and pandemic are "wicked" problems in the sociological sense as opposed to a moralistic or religious viewpoint, I would say that my own interests and investments in these specific topics are more

concerned with the cultural and political implications of these issues as opposed to the science behind them, in so far as they play out within religious culture within the Intermountain West.[4] Rhetoric and religion certainly intertwine at multiple junctures in rhetorical history and in public life, both of which having deep and important ramifications for both rhetorical scholarship and anyone who participates in the democratic process in the United States. As Kenneth Burke argues, "The subject of religion falls under the head of rhetoric in the sense that *rhetoric* is the art of *persuasion*, and religious cosmogonies are designed . . . as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion" [emphasis his] (v).

As for the impact of these religious "modes of persuasion" on contemporary contexts, Laurent Pernot claims that "we today are witnessing the return of religion" in the twenty-first century, which requires academics "to find new ways of thinking about religion in a world where unthinking and depraved uses of religion can be dangerous," even more so in a political environment full of militia violence, climate change skepticism, and other forms of anti-intellectualism (11). Indeed, many of the genres, conventions, narratives, and other discursive patterns of crisis/apocalypse, which I will explore throughout my dissertation, are frequently derived from historically religious discourses rooted in eschatological worldmaking. Understanding how these rhetorics work and circulate within various conservative publics can help us better understand not only how these publics grow in numbers and influence but also how they position, orient, and identify themselves ideologically to construct their worldviews discursively.

[4] Or as Amitav Ghosh puts it, "[T]he climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9). Religious discourse communities are not excluded from this question of culture, particularly American Protestantism given the pervasiveness of the Prosperity Gospel theology that equates one's faithfulness and favor in the eyes of God with material wealth.

Yet this is not to say that all religious denominations and their followers are reactionary fundamentalists or climate change deniers; rather, religious organizations may provide some unique and necessary avenues for progressive activism/advocacy in addressing larger societal crises like the coronavirus and climate change. For example, other power structures within political or capitalist institutions—from national governments to corporations—that address the climate crisis do so through severe restraints and limitations because of how enmeshed they are with carbon economies that they are largely responsible for creating and reinforcing in the first place. For these reasons, climate change author Amitav Ghosh argues that more religious institutions can be far more effective in terms of mobilizing large groups of people to address the climate crisis through calls for policy changes or changing cultural lifestyles. As he puts it:

> If a significant breakthrough is to be achieved, if the securitization and corporatization of climate change is to be prevented, then already existing communities and mass organizations will have to be in the forefront of the struggle. And of such organizations, those with religious affiliations possess the ability to mobilize people in far greater numbers than any others. Moreover, religious worldviews are not subject to the limitations that have made climate change such a challenge for our existing institutions of governance: they transcend nationstates, and they all acknowledge intergenerational, long-term responsibilities; they do not partake of economistic ways of thinking and are therefore capable of imagining nonlinear change—catastrophe, in other words—in ways that are perhaps closed to the forms of reason deployed by contemporary nationstates. (161-162)

Because of the powerful influence that religious leaders can exercise in response to current affairs and in galvanizing collective action, climate activists from religious organizations can

better circumvent these entanglements such as deeply rooted investments in fossil fuel industries and energy consumption, which is why Ghosh finds Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* to be more compelling and influential in shifting current attitudes toward climate change than the Paris Agreement of 2015. Therefore, Ghosh believes that if more religious figureheads like the Dalai Lama use their authority to make more emphatic statements about the necessity for climate action, then these religious rhetorics "provide the momentum that is needed for the world to move forward on drastically reducing emissions without sacrificing considerations of equity" (161).

There are elements of Ghosh's argument that I do find compelling, such as how he highlights the affective power that religious/spiritual rhetorics can have to motivate and compel people to take physical actions toward addressing larger crises. Yet as will be explored in more depth later, climate and public health advocates must consider where and how certain religious institutions become so enveloped in political affairs of a given locale, either directly or indirectly, initiatives that cause environmental harm—as is the case for the Mormon church, the Utah state government, and other legislative decisions concerning land use in that region of the country. More apocalyptic or fundamentalist faith traditions, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have historically been just as culpable as government institutions for creating settler-colonialist, capitalist, and hyper-nationalist systems of power designed to extract natural resources; displace or exploit Indigenous or other marginalized communities; accrue inordinate amounts of wealth; and embrace mass consumption as core components of their cultural and spiritual identities. These deeply entrenched, entangled systems of power (political, cultural, and religious) make climate reform or public health initiatives particularly difficult within certain regions of the U.S. where anti-government publics are already pervasive. Worse

yet, lay members of these faith traditions that anticipate their own preconceived versions of an apocalypse may resort to different forms of violence in response to any coordinated efforts—such as government regulations oriented toward larger societal crises like quarantines and mask-wearing during the pandemic—that contradict the religious, apocalyptic narratives that have become core components of their individual and communal identities.

Ultimately, my dissertation seeks to contribute to larger conversations in rhetorical studies about the rhetorics of crisis and apocalypse by studying the ways that apocalyptic rhetorics of scientific communities come to a head and conflict with apocalyptic rhetorics from religious communities in contemporary public discourse, specifically the Mormon conservative publics that inhabit the Intermountain West. I will be asking and attempting to answer the following research questions about how rhetorics of crisis/apocalypse circulate through local ecologies, entanglements, networks, and bodies materially and affectively as well as politically, religiously, and rhetorically:

1) In what ways does human rhetoric orient itself and evolve in relation to larger public crises nested in larger ecologies/materialities and marked by rhizomatic complexities amid the vast precarity of late-stage carbon capitalism?
2) In what ways are environmental rhetorics characterized by apocalypticism in relation to global climate change? How do they forward, embody, or circulate apocalyptic thinking on this issue? What are the risks and consequences of apocalyptic rhetoric in environmental discourse?
3) How does *apocalyptism* as a religious political ideology manifest itself in more hyper-localized, region specific spaces and contexts? How can the circulation of this mode of

discourse enable reactionary violence and inhibit coalitional, coordinated responses to larger public crises?

4) How does the rhetoric of Christian fundamentalists and apocalyptists shape (or disrupt) public policy in the U.S.? What are the material manifestations or public actions that come about as a result? How do these specific publics congregate or communicate in online spaces that then translate into public action?
5) What should rhetorical scholars more carefully consider when gauging and navigating the tensions, conflict, and discord within these impasses between rival publics in ways that are objective, generative, and ethical?
6) How must we, as an academic discipline, address larger "apocalyptic" crises outside of academia as the coming years and decades play out?

I will ground these research questions into case studies that explore apocalyptic rhetorics centered within the American Intermountain West that translate into public action (or inaction) during periods of ecological or epidemiological crisis. Based on my findings from these case studies, I will argue for a new apocalyptic turn in rhetorical studies in this modern era by calling for more hyper-localized research in rural spaces that consider region-specific affects, discourses, histories, and narratives nested with larger ecologies and materials that extend to more non-human as well as human realms. Doing so can help expand our understanding of how to understand the circulation and uptakes of crisis or apocalyptic rhetorics that can enable dangerous, harmful forms of either inaction or violent public actions that can hinder larger coalitions addressing and attempting to solve the myriad crises that beset us.

Theories of Crisis and Apocalypse in Rhetorical Studies

In what follows, I offer a literature review that serves as a summary of the different theories of crisis and apocalypse within rhetorical studies—from the classical Greco-Roman tradition to more modern contexts—to help introduce my case studies on apocalyptic rhetorics in American public discourse that I will lay out in the body chapters. Regardless, summarizing and examining how other experts have defined "crisis" or "apocalypse" can reveal the myriad ways in which the two concepts overlap and are taken up as forms of rhetoric that have significant impacts in terms of public action.

The term "crisis" originates as *krisis*, or the "turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death" when a physician must make a critical decision concerning the patient's fate (Harper). Alternatively, philosophers like Aristotle adhered more to the Greek word *krinein*, which refers to a similar critical moment in decision making in the realms of politics and governance, whether that be during times of warfare or plague. During the early fifteenth century, a Latinized form *crisis* was widely used in English to mean "vitally important or decisive state of things, point at which change must come, for better or worse" (Harper). While the medical sense of the word dwindled in English usage during the 1620s, the original etymological roots of the term "crisis" related to a process of selection and a decisive juncture remain surprisingly relevant to urgent events, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. Yet the understandings of the term "crisis" have shifted over the centuries to signify any collectively recognized exigency—whether political, economic, militant, cultural, ecological, or epidemiological—that is consequential enough to require immediate action to mitigate a situation's potential harms. For now, let me define rhetorics of crisis as arguments, narratives, affects, and discourses that capture and circulate a shared sense of urgency, harm, danger, and/or

violence that is widely experienced in response to an event or shared set of experiences. Crises usually occur whenever a rhetor addresses an exigency laden with larger and more negative consequences for a given community, usually by making public calls for action through coordinated (ideally unified) urgent response to the crisis itself, either to protect members of a community or more individualistic interests. The classical understandings of crisis also overlap closely with the rhetorical concept of *Kairos*, which, as Dana Cloud articulates it, "mediates the tension between structure and agency by positing a structural context, over which the rhetorical agent has little or no initial control, but which nonetheless comprises a crisis or opportunity for agentive transformation" (294).

Another important and contemporary connotation of the term crisis is the aspect of a crisis being collectively perceived as an "unprecedented" historic event. The complexities of globalization, industrialism, major advancements in technology, and larger material ecological factors can cause a given to overlap, compound, or build off other connected crises. According to Jenny Rice, "Crises and controversies are networks, and they invite our investigation into them. Inquiry is an endless survey of these networks within which a crisis is embedded" (*Distant* 168). These "networks" become entangled with each other in a confluence of multiple, rhizomatic agencies, movements, bodies, and affects, forming their own ecosystem or ecology. As Rice argues, this more "ecological" model of rhetoric consists of "a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" that distribute agency across wider networks and assemblages, even across material and non-human actors ("Unframing" 9). Within this framework, cultural values, ideologies, arguments, and beliefs are not necessarily created solely by a rhetor but inherently nested within a certain ecosystem, where these ideas are distributed across the interconnected,

emergent happenings. This same ecological model of rhetoric also applies to how people communicate about crises and orient themselves in relation to them.

At present, we are certainly experiencing an era of perpetual crisis as everyday discourses become dominated with messages, arguments, and texts concerning a global pandemic, economic depression, racial inequities, police brutality, civil unrest, and unmitigated climate change. Each of these crises overlap or bleed into each other, all forming "an extreme and cultural disjuncture in which dramatic events reshape the relations of many individuals at once to history" (Hall 3). Much like other transitory, unstable transitions in human history such as the Great Depression and the World Wars, experiencing these periods of collective anxiety and uncertainty firsthand are far different than analyzing them in hindsight. Yet we must distinguish here between an "acute" or singular crisis as opposed to chronic crises, namely how we understand and address a series of crises that are direct results of entangled phenomena or enveloping forces—namely late-stage, carbon capitalism created and maintained by white supremacist, patriarchal ideologies. One pertinent example of how crises "bleed" into each other can also be found in the inquiries and growing discourse concerning "climate justice," or how global warming affects human populations unequally—especially considering how millions of people of color from poorer nations in the Global South will bear most of the brunt of climate change disasters.

Often, major public crises create enough of a temporal disruption to become markers in historical time. The narratives of human history taught in American public schools consistently hinge on large-scale crises that transition a given society from older ways of living to newer modes of existence. These turning points in history could be induced external to human agency, such as natural disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and viral outbreaks like the Black

Plague in the fourteenth century. These turning points represent key moments when certain societal structures seem to fail or utterly collapse, leaving large swaths of human populations economically vulnerable, displaced, or discriminated against—as was the case during Great Depression from the 1930s or the Great Recession of 2008. Otherwise, these turning points are often the result of internal societal factors brought about by a series of violent conflicts, namely genocides enacted by nation-states such as Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The political, economic, cultural, or temporal ruptures of these crises can be large enough in scale that interpreting or reflecting on them requires both rigorous academic research and more artistic projects such as composing new literature. Sometimes these pivotal crises create temporal markers that mark one generation from another, signaling the beginning or end of one period of history so far as people inhabit or understand it. This phenomenon is best represented in vernacular, everyday discourses when people ask themselves where they were during major historical events like the assassination of President John F. Kennedy or the September 11 terrorist attacks; furthermore, the ways that we discuss them, argue about them, and remember them in public or private consist of a fluid, dynamic, ever-evolving act of communal worldmaking that determines what we see or don't see, what we choose to make visible or invisible concerning a world-altering disruption.

With that said, what does this interrogation of the term crisis relate to or connect with rhetorical theories of apocalypse? Quite simply, the ways in which we conceive of a given crisis or a series of crises ontologically, epistemologically, and rhetorically often adopt key conventions from apocalyptic discourses and traditions that stem from mythic or historical catastrophes. Furthermore, the history of rhetoric has, at times, been steeped in concerns about apocalypse either as myth, belief, or mode of discourse. As early as ancient Greece, Socrates and

Plato were acutely aware of the instability of their democratic government, the city-state of Athen's standing in relation to the rest of the Mediterranean world, and how easily those in power could resort to various forms of corruption and exploitation. Plato's dialogues *Critias* and *Timaeus* both contain the famous, mythic allegory of Atlantis, the legendary island that was once the pinnacle of human civilization in the Mediterranean before a volcanic eruption sunk it into the depths of the sea in an apocalyptic event attributed to the wrath of the gods, human greed, overconsumption, and exploitation of natural lands originally created by the gods themselves. As Madison P. Jones claims, both Socratic dialogues seem to "offer a regionalist critique of Athenian capitalist and imperialist practices using apocalyptic rhetoric . . . [to] undermine the global capitalist forces which demanded the enslavement of nations to extract natural resources," as though Plato/Socrates were acutely aware of the precarious and uneven relationship between nature and humankind (548). Centuries later, St. Augustine—himself a Neo-Platonist—wrote and theorized about rhetoric in contrast or conjunction with religious conviction extensively, especially in his eschatological work *City of God* that he composed to help Christian followers make sense out of the ongoing collapse of the Roman Empire in 410 A.D.—a premier apocalyptic event of ancient Western history that transitioned the world into the Dark Ages. Even within non-Western rhetorics, Indigenous communities have experienced their own apocalypses because of their devastating encounters with European colonizers and natural disasters that often resulted in genocide through disease, war, cultural erasure, and displacement. It's estimated that around 56 million Native Americans were killed during the first hundred years since Christopher Columbus' arrival to the New World in 1492, which decimated enough of the world population to throw the global climate off balance by decreasing levels of carbon emitted to the atmosphere and resulted in a period of worldwide cooling by 1610 (Koch, Brierley,

Maslin, and Lewis). For survivors of these ethnic genocides and their descendants, their apocalypse has already occurred, and they must navigate a post-apocalyptic landscape. More often than not, any belief system or mode of discourse that evokes "apocalypse" draws from and alludes to historical trauma and the potential for more instances of unspeakable violence. Apocalypse as a genre or any mode of discourse certainly instills expectations for future violence or oppression within its adherents.

Given that genres are commonly understood as patterned rhetorical actions that are sedimented within various discourse communities (as theorized by Miller, Bawarshi, Reiff, Freadman, and others), certain religious or spiritual communities do adhere to apocalyptic genres as part of their core identities. One of the foremost theorists on apocalyptic rhetoric, Barry Brummett, describes apocalypticism as a "rhetorical genre . . . *in which speakers and writers use apocalyptic themes, forms, arguments, and style to address and to persuade real people in their actual, lived situations*" [emphasis his] (10). He emphasizes the importance of distinguishing "*apocalypticism*, a worldview or 'symbolic universe,' from *apocalypse*, a literary genre" that may include scriptural texts like Revelations or early dystopian novels like Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (24). A rhetor from any religious background or political positionality sometimes cannot help but bring in spiritual or mythic undertones, histories, and genre conventions inherent within the very word apocalypse itself. Fundamentally, apocalypticism relies on narratives informed by cultural legacies and public memories of the tradition that the rhetor draws from. Other scholars writing about apocalypse such as Alison McQueen, James Berger, and Lois Parkinson Zamora agree that in whatever modality in which apocalypse occurs, it relies so heavily on narrative, namely on how an adherent, participant, or rhetor conceives of their place in some overarching metanarrative and their own capacities to determine their fate within it. In

turn, these narratives condition certain uptakes,[5] whether that is alerting other members of a given public of an imminent threat, materially preparing for this crisis by stockpiling supplies to help ward off disaster, or creating some organized intervention to prevent cataclysm altogether.

Yet often, these same apocalyptic texts and narratives "form and constrain the imagination of political possibilities for responding to" external exigencies ranging from a pandemic to climate change, discursively imposing limits on what people can imagine how these crises will unfold (Fiskio 13). And because "one of the most venerable, if varied, genres in Western history have been apocalyptic," the various and rhizomatic "expectations of the audience create generic parameters for this type of discourse" (Brummett 21). With that said, the role of human agency[6] is pivotal to the apocalyptic narrative's purpose and the experience it provides for its participants. Much like how crisis and *Kairos* overlap in how they both present an opportunity or necessity for action in response to a communal exigency, "apocalypse is a moment; it is sudden, decisive, and quickly finished (although nothing remains the same thereafter)" (Brummett 48). Other writers like James Berger have pointed out that apocalypse has an interpretive, explanatory function in its original etymological sense: as "revelation, unveiling, uncovering" (Berger 5). A large enough crisis deemed apocalyptic can therefore "reveal" truth or deeper knowledge about our world, systemic injustices, and the intricacies of humankind's capacities for either cruelty or positive change.

[5] Which scholars like Anne Freadman, Anis Bawarshi, and Kimberly Emmons describe as the event of crossing boundaries between genres through reinterpretation, translation, mediation, or reaction to an action that a genre enables in the first place. Thereby, an uptake moves previous meanings into different conceptual frameworks, influencing and naturalizing how people understand different situations.

[6] As understood by Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad, in which agency serves as the means by which an agent performs a rhetorical action. The term itself has certainly become tenuous within rhetorical studies with the advent of recent theories on ecology and materiality, given how agency does not rest within the capacities of an individual subject but is distributed across a wider network of other actors and actants—both human and non-human—within a larger assemblage/enmeshment.

In relation to this understanding as apocalypse being revelatory and transitory, any adherent of an apocalyptic tradition or participant in apocalyptic discourse orients and positions herself "at a rupture in time, at the edge of a great transformation" during a transition from the old world into the new or unknown (McQueen 2). These traumatic ruptures imbue apocalypticism with "cosmic dualism" often defined by a Zoroastrian struggle between good and evil with little to no middle ground in between; this outlook is "marked by a pessimistic historical determinism," in which cosmic forces hold absolute control over the course of history and engineer a larger metaphysical drama that "will happen independently of human agency" (26). These characteristics represent some of the most core ideals of apocalyptic rhetoric, namely that human history is leading up to some end-times scenario that will occur beyond humanity's capabilities to intervene. As a result, those with this apocalyptic mindset "see themselves as living at the edge of time" itself, giving all of their actions a heightened "sense of urgency and imminence" as they try to impose self-selected narratives on the disruptions that large enough crises may cause (26). Other core ideals—or "topoi," as I will describe later—include perceiving this ending as being unpreventable; calling for either collective action or individual preparations for a catastrophe; and drawing moral lines in which some people are worthy of being saved and others are not.

Certainly, among Western nations over the past few hundred years, apocalyptic rhetorics, narratives, and their core ideals have receded and resurged within public discourse, often in alignment with societal trends ranging from fluctuations in economic stability, instances of armed conflict, questions about the standards of cultural morality, and the recurrences of natural disasters. Apocalypticism has now re-entered contemporary, non-academic public discourse from all sides of the political spectrum in response to similarly precarious events ranging from

the rise of right-wing nationalism across the globe; the ascendancy of autocratic, populist national leaders such as Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump; the resurgence of white supremacist actors within the United States; the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories like QAnon and "anti-vaxxer" narratives; and mass deportations, imprisonment, brutality, and other forms of violence against immigrants, people of color, or other marginalized communities. In this current moment, widespread concerns about the stability of public infrastructures, global economies, governments, and other systems of power have become so commonplace that these affects of collective anxiety are palpable, almost tangible. Even outside or tangential to apocalypse as a rhetorical genre, the discourses and rhetorics tied to this moment have been theorized as being "precarious" by scholars like Wendy S. Hesford, Adela C. Licona, and Christa Teston, who point to the "increasing and increasingly harsh restrictions on movement and mobility of entire populations and the politically induced causes and precarious conditions of displacement and dispossession" (2). Scholars in other academic disciplines have also noted and studied the precarity of our global standing as a human species, with critical theorists like Slavoj Žižek arguing that "the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point," in which the Four Horsemen "are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself . . . and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions" (x). In other words, carbon capitalism is no longer sustainable because of how it over-extracts limited natural resources and enables human conflict by design.

Though, for the sake of my project, I understand apocalyptic rhetorics as any mode of discourse—written, verbal, visual, performative, material, or otherwise—that draws from an eschatological genre tradition to influence audiences' beliefs about a current or imminent crisis

and motivate them to act in preparation for this event (or prevent action altogether, as case studies later in my dissertation will reveal). Participation in apocalyptic rhetoric could be ideological, philosophical, spiritual, religious, or academic, all intended to spur action toward changing one's life or public life in anticipation of disaster. Those who do draw from apocalyptic discourses in response to these disasters will adhere to discursive patterns and logics derived from accumulated archives, texts, and genres centered with a given public and its larger history. With that last point in mind, there are multiple, various cultures of apocalypse—which should be thought of as "apocalypticisms" plural as opposed to the singular—that all contain their own unique patterns based on more local, material, and ecological factors. In other words, apocalypse is not strictly linguistic or rhetorical at all, when considering the agencies and capacities of non-human agents/actants that cause enough disruption in the everyday lives of the human species, whether it is with the radioactive isotopes that remain after nuclear fallout, the warming atmosphere that creates decades long megadroughts, and a single strain of virus that can cause an entire global economy to slow to all but a halt.

Therefore, any subject, actor, or agent—human or otherwise—that participates in apocalyptic discourse can do so with bodily action in response to physical/material changes in their immediate environs. In other words, any academic study in apocalyptic rhetorics, or rhetorics of crisis and precarity, should reorient themselves closer toward materiality, ecology, affects, bodies, and other non-human agencies and capacities to understand apocalypticism as dynamic, emergent, fluid, and complex more fully. As Wendy Hesford has argued, "Precarity as an analytic . . . helps to bridge what are often viewed as distinct critical traditions, namely historical materialism and materialism of the body, and in so doing calls upon scholars in rhetoric and communication studies to reappraise concepts such as materiality, ontology,

causality, political agency, embodiment, and power" (3). Doing so can offer greater insights into how contemporary apocalyptic rhetors in the public sphere construct meaning and create such large, toxic communities that can hinder more progressive, activist movements.

Apocalyptic Religious and Political Rhetorics in the Intermountain West

Thus far, I have grounded my exploration of broader questions about crisis rhetorics and apocalyptic rhetorics within contemporary rhetorical theories exploring these terms more broadly. Now, I will shift my focus to more localized events and exigencies that garnered hostile responses from more conservative, fundamentalist publics in these areas. To be more specific, the case studies of my dissertation will focus on Christian conversative groups in the Intermountain West, namely Latter-day Saint political figures and state militia leaders that perpetuate apocalyptic beliefs that oppose any form of government action and favor hyper-individualism over collective response to societal crises like climate change or pandemics. Further, I argue that rhetorical scholars must contend with the coming together of apocalyptic logics and antigovernment sentiment in contentious ways. To support and expand upon this argument, I will now summarize key rhetorical theories about Christian apocalypticism in American political discourse and how violent militias responded to local, place-based exigencies like land policies and COVID-19 health measures in the Intermountain West. As part of the precarious nature of this current moment, armed militias, Christian fundamentalists, and other extremist groups have become a mainstay in American political discourse, meaning that rhetorical studies on how these more apocalyptic publics congregate, recruit members, gain more support, and conduct public actions that have manifested as both harassment and armed revolts.

In her own work on how these fundamentalist groups originate and grow within the American public sphere, Sharon Crowley describes a pervasive religious ideology among conservative American Evangelicals that she calls "apocalyptism" (which she distinguishes from "apocalypticism") and describes as "belief in a literal Second Coming of Jesus . . . [and] the ascent of those who are saved into heaven" if they adhere to Christian teachings, leading up to "a period of worldwide devastation and suffering" (7). As an apocalyptic tradition, Crowley's conception of apocalyptism aligns closely with premillennial dispensationalism, in which believers view human history as being divided into Biblical periods called dispensations and see themselves as living in the final dispensation that will end with the ascension of the God's chosen people into Heaven and the destruction of the wicked before Christ returns to Earth. Because believers tend to see themselves as living within a sinful world and on the precipice of world-ending cataclysms, "premillennial apocalyptic [rhetoric] has often been described as appealing particularly to those who see themselves as oppressed, persecuted, or in a minority" in an increasingly secular world (Brummett 54). As a result, apocalyptism relies entirely on binary thinking and "us vs. them" frameworks that makes negotiating or communicating across radical difference especially difficult (as will be analyzed throughout my dissertation moving forward). Because of these claims toward persecution and martyrdom, adherents of apocalyptism privilege faithful adherents over non-believers who do not observe their same beliefs about socio-political issues or matters of faith. In this paradigm, there is consistently a "flavor of dominion theology" in which believers are obligated to "hasten the Second Coming by creating a Christian kingdom here on earth" by either converting others or opposing those who may stand against it (Crowley 7). This manifests itself in a variety of public policies that the Christian right and social conservatives enact from discriminating against members of the gay community or criminalizing

abortion. Their opposition to these progressive causes is more than mere disagreements over matters of policy but are conceived by apocalyptists as spiritual battles against sin and wickedness that will incur God's wrath.

What I find equally insidious about this Christian fundamentalist belief system entrenched in American culture is the pervasive sense of fatalism that informs its believers. This fatalism causes them to become apathetic toward more salient issues that affect all of society like global climate change because of their mindset that the planet will be destroyed anyway during the Rapture or any variation of Christ's return. This apathy frequently manifests itself in public policy and governance whenever conservative religious legislators and lawmakers favor their socio-economic interests over environmental stewardship. Indeed, Christian fundamentalists, social conservatives, and adherents of apocalyptism are far more likely to not only ignore the scientific data on climate change but also want their audiences to believe that human-driven climate change is nothing more than a hoax. They are also more likely to attribute natural disasters worsened by climate change to Biblical prophecy as opposed to scientific theory to obfuscate the material, manmade causes of climate change. As one example, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina from 2005, some religious leaders wove more Biblical language into their responses of the event by labelling it as an "act of God," thereby being an unpreventable phenomenon as opposed to being a direct result of human-driven climate change. Some religious rhetors like Pat Robertson went so far as to claim that the hurricane was divine punishment for the legalization of abortion in the United States; though in any case, the "usage of the term [act of God] often absolved individuals and institutions from personal responsibility and economic liability" (Vaught 408). In addition to using religious rhetoric to create meaning in relation to these larger crises, these premillennialist frameworks like apocalyptism have both ideological

and material impacts on public policy as well as organized responses to moments of crisis. All this being said, American apocalyptism arguably has a greater rhetorical impact on environmental policy than lobbyists from the fossil fuel industry.

Crowley's studies into apocalyptism as conservative religious rhetorics mainly focuses on Evangelicals in the American South as opposed to mainstream Christian Protestantism more broadly, yet I contend that apocalyptism also emerges and circulates among other fundamentalist Christian denominations across the country. Within the Intermountain West, more specifically, the anxieties and conflicts inherent in Crowley's apocalyptism—or how it manifests itself in localized rural contexts—are best encapsulated within the Bundy standoffs in early 2014, when the Bureau of Land Management seized possession of some of Cliven Bundy's livestock after he accumulated over a million dollars in grazing fees and let his cattle graze on federal public lands designated to protect the desert tortoise, an endangered species native to the area. The Bundy family has a long history of anti-federalist convictions, largely influenced by their faith in ultra-conservative doctrines of Mormonism,[7] the rugged individualism of their ranching lifestyle, and the deaths of older family members from the radioactive fallout from nuclear testing in southern Nevada during the Cold War. So, in response to the BLM confiscating his cattle, Cliven Bundy and his sons raised a militia of hundreds of armed protestors, most of them members of state militias and self-proclaimed sovereign citizens. Their protests culminated in an armed standoff on April 12 between the Bundy militia and federal agents near Bunkerville, yet BLM and law-enforcement agents stood down and let the Bundy family reclaim their cattle to avoid

[7] While recent church leaders like church president Russell M. Nelson have asked that people not use the historically pejorative nickname "Mormon" when referring to members of this faith and instead use the church's full name (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), I will use the term "Mormon" throughout because of its prevalence among Mormon studies scholarship and for the sake of brevity.

bloodshed.[8] While no one was killed at any of the Bunkerville protests, two participants at the standoff (Jerad and Amanda Miller) shot and killed two Las Vegas police officers and a nearby civilian before dying in a subsequent shoot out with local police June 8, 2014. Yet anti-government groups and other ultra-conservative activists across the country viewed the Bunkerville standoff as a victory for their cause, which helped galvanize the entire Patriot movement across the country.

Almost two years later, Cliven's son, Ammon, resumed their anti-federalist crusade by occupying Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon. The goal of this second armed standoff was to demand the release of two local ranchers, Dwight and Steve Hammond, from custody but also to demand that ownership of all public federal lands in the U.S. be transferred to state and local governments. Despite the dozens of right-wing protestors who joined the standoff, the whole endeavor was a failure for the Bundy militia this time around, ending with the death of one of the Bundy's followers and another Mormon militiaman, Robert LaVoy Finicum,[9] on February 11, 2016. While Ammon and Cliven Bundy were arrested and prosecuted for their involvement in organizing the standoff, they were eventually acquitted and are still at large, frequently arguing that climate change is nothing more than a hoax designed to strip hardworking Americans like ranchers of both their lands and their liberties. Now in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, Ammon Bundy has created his own network of homegrown militia to help stage public protests in Idaho, Utah, and elsewhere to resist the federal stay-at-home orders and mask mandates, all by evoking the same apocalyptic and religious rhetorics

[8] Similar to what happened at other standoffs with other apocalyptic, anti-government groups such as at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas.
[9] Who has since become a revered martyr among many anti-government circles.

stemming from his background in a particular sub-culture within Mormonism that is largely survivalist, conspiratorial, and overtly apocalyptic in its ideology.

Since most reactionary conservatives, including members of right-wing militias like the Bundys now "view climate science through a conspiratorial lens, linking it with socialism, communism, and so on," the main challenge of communicating across difference concerning climate change is contending with a broader ideological battle leftover from the Cold War, in which those of a more conservative outlook will inevitably view environmental activists as a part of some sort of global conspiracy that seeks to destroy their entire way of life (Ghosh 137). The Bundy family standoffs at their family ranch in southern Nevada in 2014 and at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in 2016 are excellent examples of how this anti-environmentalist and anti-federalist sentiments can easily erupt into violence. Jennifer Rokala from the Center for Western Priorities sees the 2016 Malheur standoffs as a "dress rehearsal for what we saw at the Capitol" on January 6, 2021, making it possible to "draw a straight line from the Bundy Ranch standoff and Malheur takeover to the Trump insurrection in Washington" (qtd. in Bernstein). The potential for more violence as the climate crisis worsens—both because of the disasters to follow and armed resistance against government legislation meant to address the crisis itself—should be a matter of grave concern for rhetorical studies and climate activism moving forward.

Main Thesis and Methodology

As I have argued previously, amidst crises as all-encompassing as climate change and a global pandemic, rhetoricians and other engaged scholars and climate advocates must find new ways to navigate the radical difference between conflicting groups within these rural spaces as along with considering how these rural publics interface with larger public concerns in the

United States more carefully. Aside from the need to prevent harm and protect vulnerable populations from extremist rhetorics that align with and shore up white supremacist discourses, finding means of both intervention and persuasion when contending with conservative apocalyptic publics matters greatly for our work as both educators and human citizens in a precarious world. By turning to the Intermountain West region, its religious communities, and political advocacy movements as my sites of study, my dissertation will primarily be a study of the rhetorics of rural, religious publics engaging with issues related to environmental stewardship and public health measures. My project will also theorize how affects and ideologies related to Crowley's apocalyptism, anti-federalism, militarism, and religious extremism circulate among these more conservative publics, mobilizing them and influencing them to resist public initiatives to preserve/protect their own natural environments and to work toward a more equity-oriented and inclusive society. I will also examine how the ecologies/enmeshments in those locales determine the circulation of ideologies, texts, genres, arguments, affects, and discourses that influence civic action as well as how apocalyptic rhetorics are materially and ecologically enmeshed in specific places in terms of how they are created, evoked, circulated, or taken up. Just as importantly, I hope to reveal how these religious, conservative, and apocalyptic rhetorics manifest themselves materially, culturally, and affectively in day-to-day, everyday, lived-in, rhetorics of these communities and the people inside of them.

As my primary methodological framework, I draw on what Wayne C. Booth called "rhetorology" as a method for studying the disputing rhetorics over what constitutes an apocalypse. As Booth understands it, rhetorology isn't necessarily the practice of persuasion nor the study of how audiences are persuaded but "a systematic, ecumenical probing of the essentials shared by rival rhetorics in any dispute—whether about religion or about other important

matters" ("Confessions" 26). As both a methodology for studying and theory for conceiving rhetoric, rhetorology is "grounded in a daily practice that developed habits of probing . . . *topoi*, or 'topics,' in the Aristotelian sense" to study how publics communicate across difference, analyze sources of common ground, and mediate contested matters of public concern. Though this vision of rhetorology's potential for mediating conflict is an idealistic goal to strive for, I am confident that some variation or enactment of rhetorology can be an effective methodology for studying how different, opposing publics draw from the same commonplaces in terms of similar but diverging ways of communicating, knowing, and being in the world. Namely, I will use rhetorology in my dissertation to identify, trace, probe, and analyze the topoi of apocalyptic rhetorics among science advocates and anti-government activists (both secular and religious) within the Intermountain West, namely the topoi of the "end times" fast approaching; the same end times being "inevitable" or unpreventable; variations of "us vs. them"; and American rights and individual liberties "hanging by a thread" or being threatened by insidious, demonic forces.

To elaborate further, the term "topoi" in rhetorical studies is contentious, mostly because there is still some ambiguity over what Aristotle meant by this term and how much the field of rhetorical studies have shifted from classical Western frameworks to more ecological, material, non-human, and non-Western orientations. Traditionally, since the Greco-Roman period, students of rhetoric understood topoi as places to construct an argument as a means of invention. Aristotle himself distinguished between "special topoi" specific to a given genre—or category of study from physics to ethics—and "common topoi," or common topics of interest that a rhetor shared with her audience from justice to beauty. In other words, topoi could function as both a heuristic to find the best "available means of persuasion" during the invention process and a commonplace of shared knowledges, logics, and values concerning a given topic (Aristotle

Rhetoric I.1.2). Or as Crowley explains concerning these commonplaces, "In ancient rhetorics the defining characteristic of a commonplace was not its truth value but the frequency of its use; that is, the chief mark of a commonplace is its wide dispersal among members of a community" (76). These same commonplaces may include frequently used phrases or arguments such as "support the troops," "freedom isn't free," and "traditional marriage" within conservative discourse, all of which contain a multitude of underlying ideas, logics, texts, evidences, and archives beneath each of these topoi.

Therefore, understanding topoi as simply formulations of arguments or sources of information is far too limited, especially given more contemporary theories of rhetoric that view rhetoric itself as fluid, dynamic, capacious, affective, ever-changing, and ever evolving. George Kennedy, himself a classical rhetorician by training, revised his own previous definitions by suggesting that rhetoric "may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication: the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message" (2). Candice Rai further adds to this understanding by identifying this energy or "rhetorical force" as the impetus behind a rhetorical act as it unfolds in various manifestations across a broader network or ecology in all its entanglements or enmeshments within a given place or the publics that inhabit it (*Democracy's* 5). As she sees it, a text or argument possesses rhetorical force whenever it forms a relationship to or is embodied as materiality that is "remade through our everyday practices, institutions, and spaces" along with other "material vehicles such as bodies, genres, institutions, newspapers, and so on to carry it, circulate it, maintain it, [and] reproduce it" across a myriad of everyday, lived-in contexts (6). In this sense, the act of rhetoric is in a constant state of flux, evolution, and reinvention within

certain—often material—constraints but never remains static, having the power to recreate any bodies that these flows of energy may encounter. Therefore, topoi can best be viewed and analyzed as "reified tools, material conditions and mechanisms (objects, spaces, genres, bodily habits, and other materialities) that constrain, enact, generate, circulate, and mobilize salient rhetorical structures" (37). Other rhetoricians have also developed similar conceptions of topoi based on their own readings of rhetoric as energy or *energeia*, such as Ralph Cintrón defining *topoi* as "storehouses of energy," which help "organize our sentiments, beliefs, and actions" in public discourse (100). Based on this commonly cited definition of the term, the topoi that a rhetor uses, draws from, aligns with, embodies, and enacts is affective in its properties and carries with it a vast history of discourses and myriad ways of knowing and being in the world. For the sake of my research, most of my dissertation will be devoted to the apocalyptic topoi listed above—"end is nigh," "end is inevitable," "God saving the righteous instead of the wicked," and others—to examine how the rhetorical energy and force behind these topoi condition the ways in which an apocalyptic rhetor constructs meaning within a multitude of contemporary public crises.

Therein, I will also expand and update Sharon Crowley's theory of apocalyptism based on recent discourses surrounding both the climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic by probing the topoi that both scientific advocates and anti-government activists draw from within ongoing public debates on how to respond to each of these crises. Given its publication date, Crowley's book doesn't account for the effect Internet communication has on conservative Christian communities, how they responded to the Obama presidency, or how these publics helped give rise to the Trump administration or other contemporary reactionary movements. More importantly, Crowley's theory of apocalyptism also does not address climate change

directly and how Christian fundamentalist communities engage with this issue through rhetorics of anti-environmentalism. Though again, these absences in her work are more a result of timing, given that her research on apocalyptism occurred largely during the Bush administration of the early 2000s. Much has changed since then but not for the better, meaning apocalyptism as a rhetorical theory is worth revisiting, expanding, and recontextualizing in our current moment. For the sake of my own project, I will shift the focus away from American Evangelical publics toward Mormon publics to theorize how apocalyptism as a rhetorical theory manifests itself within region specific contexts within the Intermountain West.

As for other methodologies for examining or exploring these topics related to apocalyptic, religious rhetorics in public discourse, I draw on various methods of circulation and genre studies to trace and analyze the dissemination, distribution, and uptakes of the particular topoi/genres that belie my specific case studies (as described in the section above). As far as genre is concerned, Anis Bawarshi advocates for viewing and studying genre less as categories of writing and more as "situated topoi within which invention takes place, habits as well as habitats for acting in language" (13). Other genre theorists such as Carolyn Miller, Anne Freadman, and Mary Jo Reiff also view genre as patterned rhetorical activities that not only evolve over time based on an audience's changing expectations for what a particular genre should make possible but are also nested within larger networks, ecologies, and enmeshments of other materialities, agents, actants, energies, and forces that shape both a genre's capabilities and how an audience takes them up in a given rhetorical context. For these reasons, I will adhere to the conceptions of genre within rhetorical genre studies (RGS) to better evaluate "how the inter- and intrageneric conditions (material, embodied, temporal, affective) . . . inform individuals genre performances" and certain uptakes within larger ecologies (Bawarshi and Reiff 3). The

goal here would be to determine how these "performances of public life are textually embodied and mediated" within more rural, conservative spaces or networks (5), even as they extend to "spreadable genres" from social media forums to YouTube videos to folkloric church teachings that make some of these actions—including armed protests—possible.

With all of this in mind, I also draw from circulation studies (or research on how texts and discourses move through time and space), insofar as they attempt to account for rhetoric's unpredictable nature once a text is delivered, received, or embodied (Ridolfo, Gries, Hawk, Dobrin, and Rice). As Thomas Rickert argues, circulation is "more than just the flow of communication, affect, and material" since it also "takes on a dynamism marked by forms of transformation" as texts experience continual renewal or recreation across different bodies that interact with them (301). And if we are to accept a particular notion of publics as dynamic, emergent, and fluid entities that come about from circulation of key texts,[10] then capturing or tracing the movement of these texts that create them is as important as it is difficult in the vast array of networks to which rhetors and audiences may have access. Now in the age of new media, it has become all the more evident that "public rhetoric is successful only if it effectively negotiates the material-cultural challenges of circulation" alongside production and distribution across given networks (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel 63). Finally, to trace and examine this circulation of apocalyptic rhetorics across wider networks/ecologies embedded within the Intermountain West region and how they are taken up and enacted in everyday contexts, I draw from various methods of autoethnographic research, particularly digital ethnographic practices, to follow Ammon Bundy's anti-COVID, online activism during the pandemic to help illustrate and develop my analysis of apocalyptic rhetorics within conservative, orthodox Mormonism

[10] As well as any ideologies, discourses, arguments, values, inequities, harm, violences, and other ways of knowing and being embedded within these ecologies/enmeshments.

(given my own background coming from this same community despite having left the faith several years ago and no longer identifying as a Mormon myself).

Chapter Outline

In sum, my dissertation will examine questions (listed above) centered on crisis rhetorics and apocalyptic rhetorics addressing contemporary crises like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, so far as they have affected the Intermountain West. By answering these questions using the research methods of rhetorology, ecological/materialist frameworks, affective/circulation studies, and (auto)ethnography, I will ultimately seek to provide alternative topoi and narratives to guide our action in the work of rhetoric to provide for more generative, inclusive actions that do not give way to despair, inaction, and hostility. I'll organize my work around the following chapters and each of their case studies listed below.

In my first chapter, I will first study the intersections between environmental rhetorics and religious, apocalyptic discourse, with climate change advocates being the first public I will analyze using Booth's methodology of rhetorology. After providing a literature review of theories of apocalyptic rhetorics in environmental/ecology studies via M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Jacqueline S. Palmer, Beth Joregensen, Esbern Bjergaard Nielsen, and others, I will then turn to the apocalyptic rhetorics from popular authors writing about climate change like Bill McKibben, Roy Scranton, Paul Kingsnorth, Jonathan Franzen, Rachel Carson, and Terry Tempest Williams by unpacking the *topoi*, genre conventions, and other discursive patterns of apocalypticism within their own rhetoric about this issue.

In my second chapter, I will continue using Booth's methodology of rhetorology by analyzing the topoi of apocalyptic rhetorics within conservative Christian fundamentalism—in

this case, conservative members of the LDS Church—who resist government policies or initiatives on collective crises like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic because of how these regulations or restrictions seemingly contradict their most sacred values. To accomplish this, I will first summarize, unpack, and expand upon Sharon Crowley's theories on apocalyptism in American political discourse to lay the groundwork for analyzing the Mormon apocalyptic rhetorics that shaped the Bundy's militia movements from Bunkerville to Boise. From there, I will summarize the historical roots of Mormon apocalyptic rhetorics dating back to its founding with Joseph Smith and the composition of the Book of Mormon as an eschatological text. Finally, I will trace the circulation of other Mormon apocalyptic texts (such as the White Horse prophecy), using circulation studies in conjunction with rhetorical genre theory to examine how these accounts influenced the political rhetorics and rhetoric of prominent Mormon spokesmen like Ezra Taft Benson, Glenn Beck, and Senator Mike Lee. The purpose here is to examine the implications and real-world impacts of these rhetorics for environmental and public health advocacy/activism in the Intermountain West and the U.S. more broadly.

In my third chapter, after summarizing contemporary theories of public rhetorics from Michael Warner, Nancy Fraser, Jenny Rice, Kyle R. Larson, George F. McHendry, Jr., and Zizi Papacharissi, I will analyze Ammon Bundy's recent political advocacy in protesting against the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders in the state of Idaho and elsewhere across the country. Some of the texts I will analyze include his Facebook posts, live-streamed videos, recorded speeches or sermons, and reporting from these events themselves. I will incorporate theories of multi-modal digital rhetorics (from David Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, Anthony Michel, Amber Davisson, and Angela C. Leone) to examine how Ammon Bundy has galvanized national discourses concerning public safety in the face of this global pandemic, spread misinformation about the virus, and

garnered further enough support to orchestrate violent protests at the Idaho statehouse. This case study shows how the Bundy's religious convictions, anti-federalist philosophy, and apocalyptic rhetorics stem from an overtly conservative strain of Mormonism that also influenced armed standoffs in Nevada and Oregon, all of which helped create the possibility for armed violence in both Idaho and at the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021.

For my conclusion, I synthesize and discuss my findings from my case studies listed above to provide my final arguments about how rhetorical scholars should re-envision contemporary theories about precarious rhetorics, rhetorics of crisis, or apocalyptic rhetorics in this historical moment, namely how we should reexamine current theories about communication across radical difference. Here, I return to Booth's theory of rhetorology and put it in conversation with some contemporary feminist theories about hope and resilience from theorists like Leslie Davenport, Cheryl Glenn, Krista Ratcliffe, Sonja Foss, and others to describe possible means of intervention for public scholars and activists hoping to communicate across radical difference and create generative change toward sustainability within vulnerable rural areas. Finally, I use this conclusion to theorize what effective action toward addressing climate change in the Intermountain West might look like, especially within the context of Mormonism.

My hope for this project is not to provide simple answers or solutions to any of these wicked problems tied to precarious issues such as global climate change. Rather, I hope to illuminate the complexities and challenges of scientific activism or other academic research within rural spaces inhabited by more conservative, fundamentalist publics as well as offer possibilities for hopeful, generative dialogue within these discursive spaces by offering more effective strategies for communicating across such radical difference (or else avoiding extremist responses altogether). After all, environmental or public health advocates can only be so

effective without further analysis of these myriad publics and their material, place-based ideologies concerning their local climates. With all of this in mind, I believe it is also essential for rhetoricians or engaged scholars to consider how different cultural, ideological frameworks of apocalypticism come into conflict with each other or become so embedded and entangled within a given place that influences and reshapes the rhetorics of converging publics responding to collective exigencies in diverging, dynamic, and unpredictable ways. Indeed, these apocalyptic rhetorics can be so intertwined with conceptions or identity of place, which I will call for the sake of this project "the metaphysics of place" in reference to John D. Caputo's description of the goals of critical theory being "to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue" (231). As I see it, we will need to be aware how our work in environmental advocacy/activism, ecological studies, and public health meet some resistance (either apathy, skepticism, or even hostility) from more conservative publics in more rural locales, including from more militant and threatening responses from militia movements as exemplified by the Bundy family. In other words, we should retheorize how to communicate about progressive causes in relation to modern precarity and their inherent crises with audiences who are openly hostile to these mindsets or even reside within positions of power that prolong or defend structural hierarchies, hegemonies, or institutions that cause irreparable harm to local and global ecosystems.

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Chapter 1 – Theories of Apocalyptic Rhetorics of Crisis in Environmental Communication

"I have heard the languages of apocalypse, and now I shall embrace the silence."
—Neil Gaiman

"Apocalypse has come and gone. We're just grubbing in the ashes." —Samuel R. Delany

Introduction

As stated previously, I have both a professional investment in climate change rhetorics and personal connections to the Intermountain West itself. I grew up in a small town south of Vegas called Boulder City, the home of Lake Mead—the American West's largest water reservoir—and the iconic Hoover Dam. This place that I call home, situated in the northwestern region of the Mojave Desert, is one of the driest and most arid regions of the United States. Usually averaging only four inches of rainfall per year, the city of Las Vegas recorded the highest temperature in all its history, 117 degrees Fahrenheit, on July 20, 2017 (Lawrimore). That number continues to rise every few years, as an almost twenty-year long drought has caused the water levels of Lake Mead to plummet 138.7 feet as of July 2015, its lowest level since the lake was created following the completion of the Hoover Dam construction in 1936 (Kennedy). Now resting at just above 1,000 feet, a very noticeable white ring has formed around the rim of the lake as the once underwater minerals become visible, revealing a sharp contrast to the black and red stones of its rocky shores. It has been estimated that Lake Mead loses up to 400 billion gallons per year as the lake continues to shrink in water volume due to overconsumption (Wallace-Wells 88). These alarming trends have caused some hydrologists to predict that the reservoir of Lake Mead will begin to dry out by the year 2022 (if not sooner), which could create water shortages in large areas across the Southwest that rely on the lake for water and power, ranging from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City (Apgar). The population of all these metropolitan

areas have still continued to grow annually and strain increasingly limited water and power reserves, which "would push the curve of water need to the limit of what the rivers and aquifers can provide" (DeBuys 310).

This alarming trend is not limited to Lake Mead since most of the Southwest is facing a dire water crisis with other reservoirs like Lake Powell dropping in water levels and branches of the Colorado River often drying out before it can reach the Gulf of California. As far back as 1986, Marc Reisner predicted in the famous and pivotal *Cadillac Desert* that the history of over-irrigation and overconsumption from the Colorado River would serve as "a metaphor for our time" in which human civilization will push the limits of exploiting natural resources beyond their capacity to sustain limitless consumption and growth (121). Across the American West, the question of water and desertification has become ubiquitous as climatologists have now begun to classify this aforementioned drought beginning in the year 2000 as a "megadrought," the worst and the longest in more than 1,200 years (Williams et al 314). What makes this drought so unprecedented is the fact that the driving force behind it is undoubtedly anthropogenic climate change largely caused by industrialization and the rise of carbon economies. Dryer regions of our planet have become more vulnerable to these sudden shifts in the world's climate, raising some fears among climate scientists that large swaths of the Southwest will "be rendered uninhabitable by direct heat [and] desertification" within a matter of decades (Wallace-Wells 6). The implications here are so dire that science writers like William DeBuys believe that "the North American Southwest promises to be center stage for the continent's drama of climate change" (7). He goes on to say more graphically and metaphorically:

> In apocalyptic visions of global climate change, the North American Southwest makes an easy protagonist, the geographical equivalent of a stalled car on railroad tracks with a

> speeding train approaching . . . the silhouetted riders just now appearing over the ridge are not the Seventh Cavalry bringing aid and deliverance, but a rougher crew that includes Drought, Fire, Pestilence, Discord, and other apocalyptic horsemen. They pose a threat to every community in their path. (9-10)

Using these explicitly Biblical or religious metaphors and allusions are certainly useful in terms of better evoking recognizable symbols like the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse or a train wreck and encapsulating the increasingly probable cataclysmic manifestations of human-driven climate change. DeBuys also uses these Biblical apocalyptic references to imbue an overwhelming sense of urgency and fear within his readers, relying more on evocative imagery and figurative language to illustrate the potentially apocalyptic consequences of climate change in ways that scientific data simply can't. Regardless, climate scientists making predictions about how the future of humanity based on their findings through academic research all seem to indicate that rising temperatures and ensuing desertification will only cause more droughts, make water even scarcer in desert regions, dry up the soil, destroy crops, disrupt already fragile ecosystems, cause food shortages, displace millions of people, and make it dangerous for most living organisms to venture out into broad daylight. As British environmentalist James Lovelock puts it, this "imminent shift in our climate . . . could easily be described as Hell: so hot, so deadly that only a handful of the teeming billions now alive will survive" (147).

As the effects and consequences of climate change continue to accelerate and worsen, far sooner than previously estimated, scientists' public rhetoric about this crisis has become more and more dire and urgent. For example, in 2019, a global coalition of renown climatologists warned that the international community may have only a few years to make drastic steps toward decarbonizing to avoid the collapse of human civilization by 2050 and the "untold human

suffering" that would follow (Rippling et al. 8). These apocalyptic and emotionally fraught statements from professional scientists represent only a few selections from numerous studies that emphasize how dire the climate crisis has become. In the face of this crisis, many climate scientists and other environmental advocates often draw from or allude to historically apocalyptic traditions and texts like the Book of Revelations when communicating to others about the climate crisis because both contexts contend with visions of disaster and end times that have started to look similar in many respects. Apocalypticism has now shifted into being a defining characteristic of climate change discourse, whether from secular or religious/spiritual participants. As stated in my dissertation introduction, I understand apocalyptic rhetoric as a mode of discourse that anticipates/evokes society-altering cataclysms and influences others toward either action or inaction, depending on the larger exigency itself and the larger discourses that an apocalyptic rhetor is drawing from. While climate denialists, conspiracy theorists, militias, and insurrections also draw from these same apocalyptic traditions and evoke Biblical, religious imagery for their own purposes, there has also been a rising trend among climate advocates of what Mary Annaïse Heglar from the Natural Resources Defense Council[11] has called climate "de-nihilism," a philosophy that believes a climate apocalypse is now inevitable and that any efforts to prevent it are futile (qtd. in Sigal). As will be explored in this chapter, many prominent environmental authors from Roy Scranton to Paul Kingsnorth have subscribed to this ideology that still relies on the pitfalls of neoliberal, absolutist, even tribalist thinking often found in religious, American, fundamentalist discourses, namely the inclinations toward hoarding resources and withdrawing from collection action in favor of individualistic, isolationist approaches that only the most privileged and affluent can fully undertake (and benefit from).

[11] A non-profit international environmental advocacy group

Moving forward, this chapter will further examine the intersections between environmental discourse and religious apocalyptic rhetoric, in which apocalypticism as a genre often serves at these intersections' fulcrum whenever climate advocates construct their arguments and frame their evidence to support these arguments. Rather than providing a summary of the entirety of climate change discourses—which is beyond the scope of this project given that studies on apocalypticism and environmental rhetorics consist of such a vast body of work—I will focus my analysis on a specific subset of environmental rhetorics arguing that a climate apocalypse is "inevitable" and calling for withdrawal in preparation for a complete unraveling of human civilization. Climate advocates are the first public I turn to trace the topoi of apocalyptic rhetorics by using Booth's methodology of rhetorology described in this dissertation's introduction. To accomplish this, I will first review literature on how religious or spiritual apocalyptic rhetorics occur within otherwise secular environmental discourse as examined by prominent scholars like M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Jacqueline S. Palmer, Beth Joregensen, Esbern Bjergaard Nielsen, and others. I will then build off of these overarching theories on environmental apocalyptic rhetoric as a lens to analyze the apocalypticism within the works of various authors writing about environmental topics such as Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams, Bill McKibben, Roy Scranton, Paul Kingsnorth, and Jonathan Franzen. My purpose behind the analysis of these authors is to trace, identify, and unpack key topoi of apocalypticism—namely "the end is nigh," "we must band together to prevent catastrophe," or "the end is inevitable"—embedded within each of their works that may manifest as climate nihilism, realism, or defeatism, however each author articulates his own positionality. By studying the coming together of these discourses in terms of how they both draw on apocalyptic tropes, topoi, conventions, and other genre moves, we can better understand the impasses and

dispositions that prevent climate action within certain publics. Through tracing the terrains of persuasion available to us, we can act and work across radical difference to respond to the various, insidious forms of climate denialism and intervene through ecological perspectives that rely on entirely different conceptions of time from apocalyptic narratives—namely by acknowledging that matters of ecological care is always in progress, always emergent, never finished, and never with a definitive endpoint.

Apocalyptic Rhetorics in Scientific Communication

This first section provides a brief examination of the intersections between rhetorics of crisis/apocalypse and environmental communication, first by summarizing different theories of how religious discourse overlaps with modern environmentalism movements and then by tracing and analyzing the topoi of apocalyptic environmental rhetorics (i.e., "the end is nigh" and "the end as inevitable"). The goal here is to lay the foundations for the analysis of my chosen texts and artifacts that are emblematic of how scientific writers adhere to apocalyptic topoi, themes, tropes, and other genre conventions in their rhetoric.

Historically, a major component of religious belief has always been the adherents' conception of their relationship with the lands they inhabit, from how a given deity created the Earth, how it was peopled, and how that same deity (or deities) expects these people to cultivate/care for it. Perhaps the most famous example in Abrahamic traditions comes from the Book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve commands his first children: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Though derived from creation myths, these same accounts will often continue to shape a religion's

teachings about the environment into the modern era, insofar as some Abrahamic religions sanction holding "dominion" over the earth as a sacred endeavor. Perhaps for this reason, the term "steward" or "stewardship" over the earth in environmental discourse has become contentious because of how it denotes private ownership and an anthropocentric hierarchy that perpetuates both settler-colonial practices and carbon capitalism; those who claim to be responsible stewards will still privilege extracting natural resources for profit over ecological preservation, as is the case for Mormon cattle ranchers like the Bundy family, who see themselves as stewards over the lands that their pioneer ancestors stole from the Paiute people and that their cattle graze on. The Bundys and their cattle ranch operations that ignore federal environmental regulations are simply one illustration of Lynn White's famous claim: "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1206). Indeed, literalist interpretations of Christian texts like the Bible will certainly instill a fundamentalist reader with a sense of superiority over other species and non-human entities in their natural surroundings, as part of the dominion theology of modern fundamentalist American Christians acting on Biblical precedence. After all, "any dispassionate view of the past indicates that religion is partly responsible for the environmental crisis" in how anthropocentric Abrahamic religions are in their theologies, orientations, epistemologies, and ontologies in relation to their followers' natural environments (Gottlieb 6). Yet with a crisis as pervasive, all-encompassing, and urgent as climate change, many religious denominations—Abrahamic or otherwise—may feel compelled to reevaluate not only their core doctrines but also their standing on political policies, governance, and action, whether it comes in the forms of climate denialism or climate activism.

As stated previously, the devastating and seemingly inevitable outcomes of the climate crisis often appear so dire that perhaps it is no surprise that many scientific and public accounts of climate change draw on Biblical apocalyptic themes, tropes, symbols, and narratives in their rhetoric, as has been examined by other scholars like M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Jacqueline S. Palmer, Laura Johnson, Christina R. Fous, Michael Salvador, Todd Norton, and Stephen O'Leary. As environmental rhetoric scholar Beth Jorgensen has noted, "[e]nvironmental discourse has been marked by apocalyptic rhetoric" throughout its history over the past few decades, often "intended as wakeup calls"; for this reason, the very idea of "apocalypse can be seen as a narrative frame, within which certain of the *topoi* central to climate change debate may operate" (67). One common topos central to climate change discourse is the need to gather and act collectively to address this crisis, whether that be through climate marches, strikes, social media campaigns, and other political actions that require a large number of bodies to move and act as one. This topos of collective action to create political reform relies on a narrative structure in which individuals are protagonists that must learn to cooperate and unite in the face of a common antagonist, whether that is climate change as a larger dangerous phenomenon or systems of power responsible for environmental disasters such as the fossil fuel industry. As a means for influencing action and belief about these topics, these sorts of apocalyptic narratives also function as rhetorical genres, as Brummett conceives of them, to "warn of impending and severe ecological crises" by evoking images of "potentially catastrophic effects of global warming" (66). Overlapping closely with the "end is nigh" topos, key genre moves in these climate change narratives evoked by scientific organizations—like the IPCC and embodied by activist movements like the Youth Climate March—rely on these warnings of danger and urgent calls to action, usually framed simply as "we must act soon to avoid the worst outcomes."

Especially for more public-oriented scientific texts, articulating the grim realities of this crisis requires climate rhetors to adapt the conventions of familiar genres that would resonate with their intended audiences, which is why framing climate change research through recognizable narrative structures usually have the most impact in the long term. Given how broad, complex, pervasive, and all-encompassing climate change is, there are good reasons to believe that there exists "no analogy to draw on, outside of mythology and theology—and perhaps the Cold War" when deliberating or arguing about this issue (29). Again, the unprecedented nature of this crisis gives scientific rhetors few genres or other discursive structures to work with other than mythological or spiritual accounts of apocalypse.

Referring to the IPCC report described in the introduction, provocative and apocalyptic statements like "untold human suffering" demonstrate this lack of linguistic or imaginative capacities to fully comprehend and accurately predict the most cataclysmic implications of humankind's future during the climate crisis, with ambiguous but foreboding word choices like "untold" carrying a lot of weight (Rippling et al. 8). As James Berger has explained, "The language of post-apocalypse demands a 'saying the unsayable,' providing an account of an unimaginable aftermath" (xx). Any attempts to envision the planet's future can be so overwhelming that "when it comes to contemplating real-world warming dangers, we suffer from an incredible failure of imagination . . . we can be mesmerized by the threat directly in front of us without ever perceiving it clearly" (Wallace-Wells 143). Or as Janet Fiskio explains, "[T]he narratives employed to describe climate change are familiar: apocalyptic visions inflected by utopian, dystopian, and millenarian imaginaries drawn from speculative fiction, disaster films, and biblical texts" (13). So in the absence of clear analogies or narrative structures to accurately portray the material consequences for ecological disasters as Earth shattering as melting ice caps,

rising sea levels, and megadroughts, climate advocates composing about this issue will draw from the same Biblical sources, texts, and narratives that are also partially responsible for the cultural driving forces behind carbon capitalism and the political apocalyptism that impedes meaningful climate action (as Chapter 2 chapter will later explore).

In any case, the idea or invocation of "apocalypse" carries with it some elements of religiosity or spiritualism as part of its larger framework, even within environmentalist and scientific discourses. As Roger Gottlieb notes, modern environmentalism already "tends to have a spiritual dimension which other liberal or leftish political movements lack" because of how it envisions humans' relationship with the natural world as being more metaphysical, such as by conceiving this planet as Mother Earth as though she were a conscious deity that we have harmed and violated (14). For this reason, much of apocalyptic rhetoric surrounding climate change drawing from religious traditions has been co-opted by secular authors discussing the grim realities of climate change as news about the crisis continues to worsen. As simply one example, in his book about the impending water crises in the American Southwest, science writer and conservationist William DeBuys declares early on:

> Metaphorically speaking, the silhouetted riders just now appearing over the ridge are not the Seventh Cavalry bringing aid and deliverance, but a rougher crew that includes Drought, Fire, Pestilence, Discord, and other apocalyptic horsemen. They pose a threat to every community in their path. The sooner the people of those communities come to terms with them, the better their chances of continuing to live in the arid lands with a measure of grace. (10)

Throughout the rest of *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest*, DeBuys identifies and explains how each of these symbols of the Four Horseman

from the Book of Revelation correlate with the crises that he identifies here, namely the risk of droughts or megadroughts that could cause enough water shortages to render even heavily populated areas such as in Phoenix uninhabitable; more wildfires from dried out vegetation on par with the almost yearly wildfire seasons near the coast of California; invasive insect and plant species that could destroy and replace native fauna; and physical violence in the form of heightened border security along the US-Mexican border and other "jingoistic overreactions" as predominately white, richer communities fight off predominately non-white, poorer communities from dwindling resources like access to water (10). This entire metaphor of recasting the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse as region-specific woes that will beset the Southwest during climate change helps DeBuys succinctly outline these overlapping, unfolding crises by using Biblical imagery his readers would immediately recognize and resonate with. The metaphor also enables DeBuys to tap into the genre of prophecy to make predictions about the future of climate change in the Southwest in ways that feel both general enough to seem accurate despite the climate crisis' endless complexity and enough concrete details derived from his studies and research into the region's water crisis that they feel palpable, even too close for comfort.

As another example, the exactitude of some of the more concrete predictions and deadlines that climate scientists set—such as predicting "untold human suffering" by 2050 if no further actions are taken to prevent climate change—may align with the timeline of predictions made by some religious authors about when the Second Coming, Rapture, or some other apocalypse will happen. Yet, as rhetorician Brummett argues, "the changes portended by secular apocalyptic are rarely or never as absolute as are the changes of religious apocalyptic" (44), meaning that often non-religious rhetors argue for avoiding a catastrophe as opposed to welcoming it as some religious adherents do, hence why climate activists argue for action on this

issue to prevent a climate-driven extinction. This is a key move for those who adhere to the topos of "the end is nigh" in climate apocalypse rhetoric: instilling urgency in their messages or attempting to shock their audiences into action through depictions, allusions, and imagery of apocalypse drawn from other sources like books of scripture or ancient myth, given that the underlying logic is that an end is possible but preventable if everyone bands together soon enough. And setting deadlines or making projections as to when disaster may strike can certainly elicit more active responses. Yet, rhetors who rely too much on apocalyptic modes of discourse are perceived or dismissed as alarmists; furthermore, there are risks of instilling audiences or participants with a sense of fatalism and helplessness that prevents them from taking any action against this larger crisis (as will be explored later in the next section).

Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetorics in Climate Discourse

Building off the previous section's review of apocalyptic rhetorical theory, I will now use these aforementioned theories of environmental rhetorics and rhetorics of apocalypse as an optic for analyzing and critiquing recent literature on a potential climate apocalypse from authors like Bill McKibben, Roy Scranton, Paul Kingsnorth, and Jonathan Franzen. This section will also trace and probe the apocalyptic topos of the end as inevitable, which contrasts from "the end is nigh" topos as opposed to how the former anticipates, plans for, and perhaps tries to prevent apocalypse—whereas "the end is inevitable" leads to arguments about how the fate of the world has already been pre-determined and that any attempts to change it are futile. Finally, the goal here is to not only reveal the ways in which secular climate change discourse draws from historically religious traditions but also the ways in which apocalypse as rhetoric can be either

helpful, problematic, or harmful—a consideration that absolutely matters for climate change communication moving forward as this crisis continues to worsen.

Arguably the earliest and one of the most influential books on American environmentalism that uses more spiritual tropes of apocalyptic rhetoric is *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, which was published during a resurgence in apocalypticism during the Cold War. Carson's book "appeared just weeks before the Cuban Missile Crisis" and "exhorted an America awash with paranoia to take charge of its fears by changing the way it lived in the short term to reduce long-term catastrophic risk" (Nixon xi). Given the timing and her audience's preoccupations with the catastrophic potential of nuclear war, Carson "tapped into . . . the public's growing uneasiness over science and the military in the Cold War era, when the threat of Armageddon seemed ever more real" (17). To tap into these apocalyptic fears that were pervasive across the U.S., Carson begins her book with a brief, accessible narrative titled, "A Fable for Tomorrow," which reads more like a children's tale than a non-fiction account about the dangers of pesticides and declining ecosystems. This fable describes an average rural American community that lives in perfect harmony with its natural surroundings[12] until its inhabitants notice that an "evil spell had settled on the community" once both human and non-human residents fall sick and die unexpectedly (2). One of the more haunting images in this opening chapter and the inspiration behind the title *Silent Spring* is when the narrator highlights the noticeable absence of birdsong: "There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? . . . It was a spring without voices . . . there was now no sound; only silence" (2). The silence of environmental devastation that Carson portrays in this fable certainly provides a sharp contrast to the anticipated nuclear explosions that her readers had begun to

[12] Devoid of any Indigenous communities or histories that would have lived there before European colonization.

brace themselves for and a clear indicator for the loss of natural life in Americans' natural surroundings. It also helps illustrate Berger's point that the language of apocalypse seeks to give a voice to the "unsayable" or imaginable (5); though for Carson, the unsayable simply manifests itself as complete silence. Finally, silence itself is one of many defining characteristics of post-apocalyptic landscapes in any media, given that the purpose of any apocalyptic rhetor is to envision a future devoid of a society's current existence and warn audiences of what is most at risk if swift action is not taken.

The entire fable mostly illustrates the cancerous impact that hazardous pesticides have on a single place, emphasizing what has been or will be lost on a wide-scale level from pollution if we continue our harmful practices. Aside from Romantic pastoral imagery juxtaposed with a sudden but silent apocalyptic event, the town described in the opening chapter of *Silent Spring* functions as an allegory for the entire United States put at risk from widespread pesticide use that had started poisoning its citizens and natural, non-human denizens. To make the topos of "the end is nigh" palatable to a much wider audience, the fable also serves as a sort of parable, not unlike Jesus Christ's parables in the New Testament that were fictional but served as cautionary morality tales. The use of fable, allegory, or other narratives to teach morals is a primary feature of religious discourse, one that is not lost on Carson as she attempts to instill a new environmental ethic within her predominately Christian readership already familiar with possibilities of their world ending. She notes at the end of this section that this rural community "does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere" before devoting the rest of her book to exposing how federal agencies like the Food and Drug Administration permitted the use of pesticides like DDT in America's agricultural sector despite knowing that ingesting these chemicals can lead to potentially lethal illnesses like

cancer (3). Her focus on how pesticides and other harmful chemicals were harming human bodies as much as local ecosystems were ahead of its time, and "her concept of the ecology of the human body may well prove to be one of her most lasting contributions" to environmental rhetoric, especially considering that the Kennedy administration began investigations into the issues that Carson raised and that Congress eventually created the Environmental Protection Agency several years after the books' publication (xvii). Yet Carson's book was controversial and widely criticized among conservative American Christians in ways that often resorted to sexist attacks or accusations of unpatriotic motives. For example, Ezra Taft Benson, who served as both the Secretary of Agriculture and an apostle for the LDS Church (more on that in the next chapter), wrote to President Dwight Eisenhower and wondered if Carson was a communist because she was a "childless spinster" (Lear 36).

Aside from Carson's *Silent Spring*, more explicitly spiritual books by other feminist authors can provide some salient frameworks for how to conceive of and describe environmental devastation, especially those hyper-focused on regions of the mainland United States that face their own unique geographical, ecological challenges. As one example, the foremost text in Mormon environmentalism is arguably Terry Tempest Williams' memoir *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. The book functions as more of a collection of essays weaved together by common themes and a unified narrative, detailing Williams' experiences observing the Great Salt Lake rise to historic levels to the point where it threatens her favorite bird refuge, reflecting on the history of the Mormon people's relationship to this land, and watching her own mother slowly die from cancer as a result from the nuclear bomb tests in the Great Basin during the 1950s. Her writing on the loss of non-human life during environmental devastation are

simply one way in which scientific apocalyptic discourse can merge with more ecological, materialist perspectives of rhetoric alongside religious convictions.

Much like *Silent Spring*, Williams uses native bird species (like local seagulls that swarm the inland sea) to contemplate and gauge increasingly fragile and disappearing natural landscapes; as a subtle reference to Carson's work, Williams even notes how marshes and other wetlands in Utah and "all across the country are disappearing without fanfare, leaving the earth devoid of birdsong" (112). Once the Salt Lake reaches a historic level of more than 4,200 feet and floods the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, she states: "The birds have abandoned the lake. Borders are fluid, not fixed. There is no point even driving out to the Refuge. For now it is ocean. I hardly know where I am . . . I have nothing to hope for because what I hoped for is gone" (239). For a dying earth and threatened species, wildlife refuges like at Bear River and Malheur (which she mentions by name when she finds flocks of birds escaping the flooding from Salt Lake) are necessary and miraculous in an almost spiritual sense for how they provide actual refuges to displaced wildlife. Granted, any threads of apocalyptic rhetoric woven into her book are more subdued, but those threads remain and are pivotal to how she constructs her narrative and variations on the theme of environmental devastation. These devastations leave a "blank spot" on human geography that "translates into empty space, space devoid of people, a wasteland perfect for nerve gas, weteye bombs, and toxic waste" (241). For Williams, apocalypse is displacement. Apocalypse is ecological. Apocalypse is silence. Her world ends with a whimper, not a bang.

Aside from William's memoir, the influence of *Silent Spring* on other science writers and the ways it weaves scientific research with apocalyptic rhetorics can't be overstated. Carson's book "helped spark a small tsunami of catastrophe rhetoric in environmental science and screeds

and in popular literature" over the following decades when human-driven climate change became an all-encompassing interest for environmental writers and advocates (Buell xiii). Indeed, over the past couple of years, books about climate change—either about the actual science behind it or its cultural and ethical implications—with much harsher tones and titles have frequented bestseller lists and enjoyed widespread acclaim from David Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth* to Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. As the dangers of the climate crisis have become all the more apparent in both scientific and non-scientific circles, the threads of apocalypticism in these more public-oriented books have become more overt, ranging from Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* to Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*.

In particular, McKibben engages with the possibility of apocalypse as a direct inquiry in his 2019 book *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* As the full title indicates, the primary metaphor that serves as the driving force behind McKibben's main argument is that human civilization is a game that humans are ultimately losing when it comes to climate change. Much like Carson's use of children's fables in *Silent Spring*, using sport or game analogies when addressing climate change may seem overly simplistic and reductive at first glance, though experienced and well-educated climate activists like McKibben are aware of the climate crisis's overwhelming complexity; again, the purpose here is make the issue more palatable, accessible, and understandable for non-scientific audiences. As a result, McKibben's awareness of climate change's most vexing, difficult challenges can have adverse effects—namely apathy or despair—even if there is some potential for frightening audiences with evocations of apocalypse given what scientific data now suggest.

He does admit at one point that terrifying people with the harsh realities of climate change might have its place, even if that is not necessarily his main approach in *Falter*. Or, as

McKibben puts it, “I could, in other words, do my best to scare you silly . . . changing something as fundamental as the composition of the atmosphere, and hence the heat balance of planet, is certain to trigger all manner of horror, and we shouldn’t shy away from it” (35). Such horrors are certainly warranted, given how many climate deniers there are in government and business even if the roots of this denialism stem more from a larger culture of individualism over collectivism in the United States: “If, as antigovernment rhetoricians[13] insist, we view ourselves only as individuals, then the game is lost” (192-193). Yet despite all his conclusions that neoliberal economics, industrialization, wealth inequality, and climate denialism pose seemingly insurmountable obstacles toward major policy changes like decarbonization, McKibben also has little to no patience toward any justifications or arguments for inaction, more so from those who do take climate science literally. As he puts it:

> If “Let anyone do what they want” is a flawed argument, then “No one can stop them anyway” is an infuriating one. Insisting that some horror is inevitable no matter what you do is the response of people who don’t want to be bothered trying to stop it, and I’ve heard it too often to take it entirely seriously. (195)

Like many other climate activists, McKibben’s primary concern of employing apocalyptic rhetoric concerning climate change—or any potentially devastating crisis like a global pandemic—is that those who are persuaded by the evocation of apocalypse will only be scared into inaction, defeatism, and despair. The difference here, however, is that McKibben does his best to use more secular conceptions of apocalypse in his latest book, divorced from any entanglements or allusions to religious discourses perhaps because he sees religion as one of

[13] What he means here is “rhetors,” or those who use rhetoric to accomplish a goal. The use of “rhetoricians” here is technically inaccurate since rhetoricians are the ones who study rhetoric as an academic endeavor.

many social forces or human institutions partially responsible for bringing about hegemonic culture of overconsumption—part and parcel with capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Many other authors have also used this pervasive despair about the future of our planet more directly as the main focus in their writings and activism, with some writers concluding that the entire issue has become so hopeless that they advocate for a range of responses from acceptance of humankind's fate to withdrawal from any form of climate action as opposed to intervention and collective action. In his manifesto *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, Roy Scranton takes McKibben's rhetoric of inevitability a few steps further by arguing that the amount of damage that humans have wreaked on this planet through carbon emissions have now become so irreparable that preventing civilization's collapse has now become impossible to avoid, given the insurmountable challenges to the complete decarbonization required to avoid catastrophe entirely. Or as he puts it more profanely, "We're fucked" (16). Most of Scranton's commentary on the scientific data that he presents in this book are equally blunt, at least in tone; his entire account of how much carbon-capitalism has destroyed the planet and how difficult it is to reform this system in time reads more like an elegy for a dying planet.

Although he makes no arguments on behalf of a complete withdrawal from human society, Scranton does offer some skeptical critiques of many of the proposed techno-fixes in reversing climate change from carbon capture to transitioning to a renewable energy economy. Yet what Scranton argues for is not so much withdrawal but deeper meditations on how we, as a human society, should contemplate and approach civilization's decline with grace, inclusivity, and wisdom. More specifically, he advocates for what he calls a "new humanism" as a method for studying, understanding, and accepting humankind's demise in conjunction with ecological

care and community resilience, namely through resisting the worst impulses of carbon-capitalism and consumerism by preserving and fostering a culture more oriented toward the arts, culture, and literature for future generations who may survive our civilization's demise (19). In other words, "The fate of the humanities, as we confront the end of modern civilization, is the fate of humanity itself" (109). Preserving stories, histories, art, and other related artifacts from humankind's past would need to be more of a priority moving forward, for the benefit of both whatever form of human civilization would remain after the planet's ecological collapse and contemporary publics deliberating on how to prepare for this ongoing collapse. Though despite these calls to action, Scranton's argument draws from the topos of "the end as inevitable," as though the story of humanity has played itself out. It's almost as fatalistic as most fundamentalist Christian narratives about the outcome of human history being forever the same—a wicked world being destroyed and only a select few being saved.

The logics underscoring this line of reasoning are more spiritual or philosophical as opposed to religious since he does not posit a single denomination like Christianity as holding key answers to humanity's survival. Rather, what he envisions is more of a "synthesis, grounded in a faith in human community existing beyond any parochial identity, local time, or single place" by incorporating the most salient lessons that everything from literature to myth to religious practices have to offer in the Anthropocene (24). Drawing from his military service with the American military during the Iraq War, he describes his stoic meditations on death derived from Japanese philosophy and samurai traditions during dangerous missions through a war-torn Baghdad, believing a similar, collective and cultural methodology will need to be implemented in the face of humanity's potential death. It's a bleak outlook on the future of humanity, one that requires more humanistic and spiritual approaches to how we talk about

climate change, even if his arguments about Earth's fate now being predetermined is a far cry from the calls for collective action from other climate activists from McKibben to Greta Thunberg.

British author Paul Kingsnorth goes one step further with the topos of inevitability and more explicitly argues for (at least his own) complete withdrawal from any public, social endeavors—even away from climate activism because of this same *topos* of inevitability of a climate apocalypse that Scranton also evokes. He claims in "Dark Ecology" that withdrawing from both activism and other societal affairs is one of the few things humans can do that isn't a "waste of time." He recommends that those with the capability should ignore accusations of defeatism and "[w]ithdraw not with cynicism, but with a questing mind . . . [to] allow yourself to sit back quietly and feel, intuit, work out what is right for you and what nature might need from you." As he puts it, any gains from climate activism, policy changes, or other actions are only small victories at best that merely stem the coming tide. The goal of this withdrawal should be for each person to preserve nonhuman life, reconnect with the material world, and create refuges in preparation for an "ongoing collapse of social and economic infrastructures, and of the web of life itself, [that] will kill off much of what we value." As part of his ongoing Dark Mountain Project, Kingsnorth has been recruiting other artists and collecting/archiving what he calls in the project's manifesto "Uncivilised" writing aimed toward helping audiences rethink humanity's status as a species on planet Earth. And anyone who does participate in this new environmental art movement and undergoes this larger withdrawal from carbon society ultimately participates "in a very ancient practical and spiritual tradition" akin to monasticism, not unlike Scranton's proposed methods for learning "how to die" in the era of climate change. Kingsnorth does interpret this withdrawal as a spiritual endeavor, almost a full circle but to pre-modern mysticism

through re-establishing one's connections with the natural, physical world as a methodology of hope. Interestingly enough, Kingsnorth, although formerly an atheist, ended up being baptized to the Romanian Orthodox Church in early 2021 after the cataclysmic events of 2020—from the coronavirus to a global recession on top of further environmental devastation—pulled him back toward Christianity ("Writer"). His participation in climate apocalypse rhetoric seems to have brought him into an active belief in an apocalyptic faith in Christianity and the hope for some version of Earth's salvation and redemption that this faith entails.

As for more openly secular authors, Jonathan Franzen is perhaps even more pessimistic and defeatist than either Scranton or Kingsnorth in his own article on climate, titled "What If We Stopped Pretending?," published in September 2019 in *The New Yorker*. Franzen fears that, in the midst of climate chaos, people will retreat deeper into "tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law, exacerbating current issues tied to nationalism and xenophobia in the face of mass migrations and dwindling natural resources." As he sees it, this potential for more armed violence will only complicate or disrupt any meaningful climate action, to the point where "human psychology and political reality" will make effective climate action impossible (the same conclusions that Scranton also reached in his book). Therefore, Franzen's rhetoric also evokes the topos of the end as inevitable by advocating for a wider collective acceptance that a climate apocalypse is now predetermined, not unlike what Scranton and Kingsnorth argues; yet Franzen is more direct in critiquing ongoing climate action initiatives like the Green New Deal, claiming that such projects are ultimately not worth our time or energy because average, more conservative Americans will vehemently resist any suggestion or implication that they would need to pay more in taxes in order to fund such a massive reordering of our entire energy

economy. Rather, Franzen calls for withdrawal that includes a component of more mindful, ethical local practices as opposed to collective action aimed at national or international levels:

> There may come a time, sooner than any of us likes to think, when the systems of industrial agriculture and global trade break down and homeless people outnumber people with homes. At that point, traditional local farming and strong communities will no longer just be liberal buzzwords. Kindness to neighbors and respect for the land nurturing healthy soil, wisely managing water, caring for pollinators—will be essential in a crisis and in whatever society survives it.

His focus on building "strong," local communities and rethinking our direct relationship with the land—at least in terms of food production—is noteworthy given that many other climate activists argue for fostering community resilience at more local levels. If anything, apocalyptic climate change discourse may have pushed Franzen more toward ecologically oriented, place-based theories of building communities and fostering public engagement at more local levels. Herein, Franzen is deeply invested in questions of place and local ecologies. To this same point, Esbern Bjergaard Nielsen makes a similar argument that scientists and climate advocates shift their focus of "presenting the effects and realities of climate change . . . from the abstractions of time to a more concrete topos of place" in favor of more local, immediate consequences of this event and the publics affected by them (91). Franzen does find hope out of hopelessness by at least hinting at the need to draw from topos of place like "kindness to neighbors" and "respect for the land" when arguing for building more resilient communities.

Granted, Franzen's article was heavily criticized online by both climate scientists and activists as soon as his piece was published because of how he emphasizes more isolationist approaches like withdrawal in response to climate change, which directly opposes any notion of

collective action like the Green New Deal (which Franzen argues is not worth investing in because of his pessimism that massive energy reforms are not possible in the face of widespread climate denialism in American politics). Franzen is certainly no stranger to controversy in the literary community, and his article was immediately criticized online for being solipsist and misinterpreting some of the actual data, particularly concerning how he frames the often quoted benchmark from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of global temperatures rising by two degrees as "a point of no return," despite the fact that the original authors of the study that Franzen cites never intended their findings about a two degrees increase "to be treated as a scientific threshold, [or] a 'point of no return'" (Sigal). To a certain extent, less careful readers may certainly interpret these findings as a threshold or deadline for a global apocalypse as though the scientists involved in this report were functioning rhetorically as prophets predicting humanity's doom.

Critics of Franzen's article also pointed out that as a wealthy white male, especially a bestselling author, Franzen writes from a position of privilege that limits when he can imagine and prevents him from understanding that for many poorer communities of color, admitting defeat when it comes to climate change is not even an option worth humoring. On this note, critics of Franzen noted that feminist authors and authors of color are frequently marginalized and excluded from climate change discourse, especially in major publications like *The New Yorker*. If nothing else, those who disagreed with Franzen's article were concerned that it presented a new emerging form of climate denialism that may accept the scientific realities of this issue but still advocate for inaction, assuming that people cannot act toward climate change and other societal injustices like income inequality or systemic racism concurrently as though climate withdrawal is the one and only true answer. Or, as Sigal Samuel explains concerning

Franzen, "[h]is apocalyptic rhetoric starts to sound like it's sliding into a breed of denialism" that is skeptical of and rejects any meaningful form of climate action. However, I believe it's important to know that there is nowhere in Franzen's article where he explicitly argues for a withdrawal as radical or extreme as what Kingsnorth advocates for; rather, based on the conclusion quoted above, he posits that this "withdrawal" (though he does not use this term directly) should take the form of local communities developing their own solutions to their local problems within any local ecological networks, knowledges, and capacities contained therein. While I agree that Franzen misinterprets the IPCC "threshold" because of his overtly apocalyptic reading of scientific data without much nuance and writes off major policy reforms like the Green New Deal too quickly, I find it odd that Franzen was so widely criticized for making similar arguments about a possible climate apocalypse to Kingsnorth and Scranton (the latter author receiving widespread acclaim for *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*). At the very least, his emphasis on localized community resilience is warranted and worth discussing and implementing in some variations.

That being said, this emerging strain of climate change defeatism, realism, or nihilism is a privilege of those who benefit the most from socio-economic or climate inequality. Most of these calls for withdrawal have been made by and intended primarily for white, upper-class men, with luxuries and safety nets that non-white, working-class people don't have. Complete withdrawals from human society will not be a possible for millions and millions of people in the Global South, where climate change will be at its worst. In other words, collective action will become a means of survival for so many communities across the globe. At the same time, however, it has become increasingly difficult for people of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds not to give into despair in the face of global catastrophe. We also see within the

texts analyzed in this section diverging paths between more feminist orientations toward natural environments that use apocalyptic rhetoric as a mode of grief and more masculine, even patriarchal orientations focused heavily on investment, risk, and conflict that could repeat the same mistakes that led to the climate change crisis to begin with.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have outlined, reviewed, and expanded upon contemporary rhetorical theories about crisis and apocalypse in environmental discourse. I have used rhetorology to trace and analyze the apocalyptic topoi—"end is nigh," "we need to act," and "the end is inevitable"—within climate change discourse, specifically among feminist authors in environmental studies and white male authors participating in a larger discourse concerning "climate apocalypse." I have found that many climate authors that adhere to the conventions of apocalyptic rhetorical genres often risk not only instilling despair within their audiences (and themselves in turn) but also repeating or recreating the same harmful perspectives and ways of being that are not dissimilar from more conservative fundamentalists and apocalyptists—namely by advocating for complete withdrawals from public affairs, resisting any form of radical climate reform, and hoarding various resources in preparation for disaster. Even if these authors themselves did not intend to forward a survivalist, "hunker" down mentality, arguments for preparing for a climate apocalypse's inevitability may still be read as fatalist, defeatist, and nihilistic in ways that align too closely with climate denialism. If anything, narratives, genres, iconography, and tropes of apocalypse are seductive but potentially toxic how they are taken up or evoked, which environmental advocates should be aware of by avoiding any semblance of "inevitability" in their rhetoric. It's one thing to point out issues that require our attention, but by using terms like

"inevitable" or operating in their underlying logic with no calls to action about what people can do about it, the implication is that there is nothing people can do, and the only real response to this rhetoric of "inevitability" is to spiral into depression and apathy.

Even beyond the realm of environmental studies and rhetorical scholarship, there has been rising interest in what psychologists and climate activists have called "eco-grief," a portmanteau for "ecological grief" that refers to the emotional and psychological turmoil a person experiences in response to discourse surrounding ecological disasters, global climate change, and other related traumas. Different manifestations of the climate crisis "will foster public trauma, depression, violence, alienation, substance abuse, suicide, psychotic episodes, post-traumatic stress orders and many other mental health-related conditions" (Balaban et al., 1). In contrast to most psychological traumas that are a result of some past occurrence, eco-grief usually faces toward the future, in anticipation of disaster. This category of grief consists of feelings of depression, hopelessness, and despair as a result of the knowledge of or direct experience with the severity of the climate crisis and how inadequate societal responses have been to address it; some climatologists have even reported on being harassed or targeted by climate deniers, which only adds to these feelings of despair. Indeed, "growing bodies of research in the relatively new field of psychology of global warming suggest that climate change will take a pretty heavy toll on the human psyche as storms become more destructive and droughts more prolonged" (Thomas). As opposed to mere "burnout" from contending with these issues through education, activism, or governance, this larger psychological phenomenon of eco-grief can become so debilitating that it will create suicidal thoughts in the worst cases. Some experts have warned that one possible future that awaits us is a growing psychological phenomenon known as "climate suicides" among populations left vulnerable to climate change's

devastation or already feeling depressed and anxious about these social crises if they are already susceptible to a myriad of other mental health issues. The implications of these findings are not only concerning but also indicative of the power and danger that apocalyptic rhetoric holds when it enters the discourses of people's day-to-day existence, given how apocalyptic affects can be felt so sharply and profoundly enough in the human body to manifest as despair, debilitation, and even self-harm.

Because climate change is such a "wicked problem" in the sociological sense, calls for action toward solving this issue can appear so daunting that proposed solutions like decarbonization can be divisive instead of unifying. With that in mind, any effective climate responses would need to be conceived, described, and enacted as a multi-pronged, multi-layered coalition across so many different institutions and organizations (from universities to churches) that also addresses the specific needs of different affected regions (from rising sea levels next to coastal cities to droughts in American West). Given all this complexity, one needs an ecological sense of understanding and acting within a problem, which helps illuminate why end times apocalyptic narratives and topoi are harmful because of how they embody simplistic, reductive arcs of inevitable doom that we cannot subvert. Yet if a given crisis cannot be avoided completely, we have, in fact, a myriad of options to act and live together more ethically and responsibly in our environments.

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Chapter 2 – Latter-day Saint Scripture, Prophecies, and History as Apocalyptism

"And this land shall be a land of liberty . . . and I will fortify this land against all other nations. And he that fighteth against Zion shall perish, saith God." —2nd Nephi 10:11-13

"If there is already in place any authentic version of the American Religion then, as Tolstoy surmised, it must be Mormonism, whose future as yet may prove decisive for the nation, and for more than this nation alone." —Harold Bloom

"The people of the rest of the country are our enemies . . . When the government conflicts with heaven, we will be ranged under the banner of heaven and against the Government . . . I defy the United States. I will obey God." —John Taylor, Third Prophet and President of the LDS Church

Introduction

Despite my own conservative Mormon upbringing and the Bundy ranch's relative proximity to my hometown in southern Nevada, I never witnessed—let alone participated in—the Bundys' armed standoffs near Bunkerville in 2014, when the family protested against paying grazing fees on federal public lands and recruited a large enough militia to challenge federal agents. By that same token, very few of my LDS friends, associates, or family members supported the Bundys' efforts to support land rights, citizen sovereignty, and religious nationalism. My own father criticized their actions despite having similar beliefs and dispositions of mistrust toward the federal government, calling their actions too extreme and careless when he heard that the Bundy supporters considered using their wives and children as human shields in the event of a firefight. The explicit instructions that the line of protestors received from the Bundy's before the standoff were: "Let the unarmed people go first" (Temple 136). My father found this strategy abhorrent. "If I were Cliven's bishop," he told me, "I would have told him, 'If anyone dies, their blood will be on your hands.'" The leadership of the LDS church also condemned the Bundys' actions and put out the following statement during their occupation of the Malheur wildlife refuge in 2016:

> While the disagreement occurring in Oregon about the use of federal lands is not a Church matter, Church leaders strongly condemn the armed seizure of the facility and are deeply troubled by the reports that those who have seized the facility suggest that they are doing so based on scriptural principles. This armed occupation can in no way be justified on a scriptural basis. ("Church")

According to John Temple, the Bundy family was disappointed and disheartened when they received the news that their own church had rejected them (237). Yet that hasn't prevented them from conducting further anti-government actions since then, including anti-mask and anti-quarantine protests during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

It's easy to see why the Salt Lake church disavowed the Bundys. As a global religion, the Latter-day Saint branch of Mormonism no longer benefits from a hyper-conservative positionality. They cannot afford to associate with militia movements that espouse a religious and political ideology that argues for an armed overthrow of a sovereign government or the institution of a theocratic Christian nation-state. Though in all the commentary I have heard or read about the Bundy standoff, it seems as though most journalists, critics, scholars, and other commentators—both Mormon and non-Mormon—have argued that the Bundys only represent a small sub-culture of Mormonism that is not representative of the mainstream church or the majority of its membership. But I beg to differ. These arguments that the Bundys are an extreme fringe group coming from both non-Mormons and from believing members themselves are either misinformed or, frankly, disingenuous. Rather than an outlier group that sits outside the logics, beliefs, and practices of mainstream Mormonism, the Bundys actually represent an ideology that is consistent with settler-colonial Brighamite Mormonism in its purest, most consistent form. In fact, I argue that the Bundys' armed protests and hyper-conservative rhetoric was born out of and

are extensions of longstanding Mormon discourses and logics best characterized as antifederalist, nationalist, theocratic, and apocalyptic at their core, which can absolutely be supported by numerous Mormon scriptures or other religious texts (despite what church headquarters might claim). The circulation of a multitude of reactionary, apocalyptic texts—namely a large archive[14] of prophecies, cultural folklore, scriptures, doctrinal interpretations, published sermons, and public statements from church leaders—cultivated a vast public consisting of thousands of ultra-conservative Mormons and a wider culture of apocalyptism that has defined the political outlook of the LDS Church for decades. This brand of "apocalyptism," as defined by Sharon Crowley, has helped create an ideological state apparatus à la Althusser that has influenced almost every public institution in the state of Utah or elsewhere along the Mormon Corridor, especially in terms of land policies and environmental legislation. Many Mormon residents of this region are prominent business owners like cattle ranchers and conservative politicians and lawmakers who have long "fused their rhetoric with the region's longstanding antipathy to the federal government's legal obligations to protect and manage the public domain" (Miller 5). These same fundamentalist rhetorics not only influenced the Mormon ethos of kingdom-building during their colonization of the Great Basin in the mid-nineteenth century but also led to the Bundy standoff in the first place. There was always that potential for armed violence, and the Bundy's armed protests were not the only incidents that resulted in bloodshed made in the name of politicized Mormon ideology—and I honestly don't think they'll be the last. If anything, the Bundy episodes paint a grim picture for the future of the Great Basin and perhaps most of the American Southwest in the Anthropocene epoch, as has been realized with the January 6, 2021 insurrection

[14] Using the more fluid, ecological understanding of "archive" as posited by Jenny Rice, who reads any given archive of texts as a "layered amalgamation of these materials, ideas, narratives, images, and things" that rhetors accrue and draw from when formulating both arguments and evidence for those same claims (21).

of the U.S. Capitol at the end of Donald Trump's presidency. Any federal or government legislation addressing a larger crisis from the coronavirus to climate change will continue to be met with extremist, fundamentalist resistance.

To examine this strain of Mormon apocalyptism and how its rhetorics influenced the Bundy's militia movements in 2014, 2016, and 2020, this chapter will summarize the historical roots of Mormon apocalyptic rhetorics dating back to its founding with Joseph Smith and the composition and uptakes of its core text, the Book of Mormon (which I will analyze as nineteenth-century Americana and an apocalyptic text). I will also analyze and trace the circulation of Mormon apocalyptic folklore—namely the White Horse prophecy—using circulation studies in conjunction with rhetorical genre theory to examine the velocity, reach, influence, uptakes, interpretations, and remixing of these accounts concerning the Second Coming (Mormonism's version of the Rapture) that has influenced the political actions and rhetoric of prominent Mormon leaders such as Ezra Taft Benson, Glenn Beck, Senator Orrin Hatch, and Senator Mitt Romney. The goal here is to historicize "the networks via which discourse circulates . . . for gaining greater insight into the investments, spread, and persistence of given arguments" (Clark 153) that can have intergenerational consequences, namely Mormonism's apocalyptic rhetorics that have fostered a widespread regional culture of anti-federalism, survivalism, and climate skepticism. I will draw on Sharon Crowley's term apocalyptism (as defined below in the first section of this chapter) as an optic for interpretating the aforementioned texts listed above as I continue to use Booth's theory of rhetorology to analyze, trace, and probe the topoi of apocalyptic rhetorics—namely individual liberties as God-given, America as God's chosen land, and government tyranny in America as apocalyptic—this time among conservative Christian fundamentalists who oppose any coordinated federal

responses to issues like the climate crisis or COVID-19 on ideological grounds. The core aim of this chapter is to examine and illustrate how the theory of apocalyptism as a mode of rhetoric translates into the place-based, regional context of Mormonism and the Southwest at large.

Apocalyptism and the Religious Fundamentalist Rhetorics in Political Discourse

In this section, I turn to Sharon Crowley's work on apocalyptism to trace how the rhetoric, logics, and topoi of apocalyptism influence and underscore conservative Christian rhetoric and shape public policy and action in the U.S. The goal of this section, as well as the remainder of this chapter and the next, is to illustrate what Crowley's theory of apocalyptism looks like in more contemporary political contexts, a question certainly worth asking for both contemporary rhetorical scholarship and thoughtful civic engagement, given the resurgence of Christian fundamentalism and apocalyptic rhetorics in American public discourse.

Among the surprisingly limited body of work on American conservatism in rhetorical studies, Sharon Crowley stands out as the premier rhetorical theorist concerning apocalyptic rhetorics among conservative American publics. In her book on the subject, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, she describes a pervasive religious ideology among conservative American Evangelicals that she calls "apocalyptism," which entails "belief in a literal Second Coming of Jesus," "the ascent of those who are saved into heaven" if they adhere to Christian teachings, and "a period of worldwide devastation and suffering" brought about by God's wrath on the unfaithful (7). In many ways, Crowley's contribution to rhetorical theory seeks to bring religion into an otherwise secular academic discipline similarly to Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion* "in the sense that *rhetoric* is the art of *persuasion*, and religious cosmogonies are designed . . . as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion" (emphasis

his) (v). As a religious worldview, apocalyptism is a persuasive and seductive ideology that translates into public (in)action and political (in)activism in troubling ways. With that said, there has certainly been a resurgence in not only apocalyptic discourse but also apocalyptic extremism in the American public sphere within the past several years, which further adds to or complicates Crowley's theory of apocalyptism as theory of rhetorical motive. For this last reason, as a means of intervention, I offer four key and overlapping topoi/logics of apocalyptism that Crowley touches on in her book that I will build upon and unpack briefly below: binary thinking, fatalism, conspiratorial thinking, and God's chosen triumphing over the wicked. These topoi contain complex ideas and narratives that I'll be tracing in various case studies throughout the dissertation, from Mormon political discourse to Ammon Bundy's recent anti-mask protests.

For Crowley, apocalyptism is nominally a belief system that relies entirely on the first topos of binary thinking ("good" vs. "evil), which makes negotiating or communicating across radical difference especially difficult because of how adherents of apocalyptism privilege faithful adherents over non-believers who do not observe their same beliefs about socio-political issues or matters of faith. As she argues, "A cleavage between 'us' and 'them' motivates contemporary conservative rhetoric, a cleavage starkly articulated in Christian fundamentalism as an absolute difference between the saved and the unsaved" (15). In this paradigm, there is consistently a "flavor of dominion theology" in which believers are obligated to "hasten the Second Coming by creating a Christian kingdom here on earth" by either converting others to this same theology or oppose those who may stand against it (7-8). This form of resistance manifests itself in a variety of public actions that the Christian right undertakes from discriminating against members of the gay community or criminalizing abortion. Whether in the Mormon Corridor or elsewhere, the "circulation of socially conservative, morally inflected arguments in the United States is

pervasive despite the broader population's increasing shift toward secularism" as more and more American Christians turn to reactionary ideologies in the face of a rapidly changing, increasingly precarious world (Clark 152).

Another key topos in apocalyptic rhetoric could be defined by its narrative fatalism and the inevitability of doom, failure, and end times that can lead to either apathy or reactionary thinking. As Crowley explains, "Because of its determinism, apocalyptism advocates passive acceptance of all sorts of horrors" (114). As stated before in my introduction, what I find dangerous about American apocalyptism is this same determinism that influences its believers and often translates into fatalism, causing them to become apathetic toward more salient issues that affect all of society like global climate change because of their mindset that the planet will be destroyed anyway during the Second Coming. Or, as Donna Harraway puts it, "Christians avoid the urgency of climate change because it touches too closely on the marrow of one's faith" and challenges the deeply entrenched belief that humans are the stewards of a world of which God is in control (6). In some cases, the science behind climate change disrupts the Christian metanarrative that God is the cause behind any changes in Earth's climate as opposed to humankind. This contradiction that climate change presents is enough to make some American Christians either reject the scientific consensus of climate change's existence or become apathetic toward any meaningful reforms designed to mitigate its harms, since in this religious worldview, the end is already determined and knowable when Christ returns and restores a decimated Earth to an Edenic glory. Perhaps in some ways and for these same reasons, environmentalism and religion often seem incommensurate precisely because of the rhetorical overlap between them, rather than in spite of it. The horrors of a climate apocalypse—or even a global pandemic—are horrors that many fundamentalists are willing to accept, tolerate, or

outright reject to maintain their faith in a God who is in control, even if it means resorting to conspiracy theories as a means to reject scientific fact.

The third topos relies on conspiratorial thinking disconnected from material realities. So much of contemporary apocalyptism relies on conspiracy theories, misinformation, and other counternarratives to scientific narratives, evidence, and research. While Crowley states that apocalyptism is not necessarily the same as conspiracy theory discourse, she points out that "apocalyptist prophecy interpretation can take on the character of conspiracy writing" and logics when apocalyptists attempt to decode Biblical prophecy to identify the insidious, secretive forces behind all the institutions and causes they believe to be antagonistic to Christianity (173). Especially with the advent of new media such as social media sites and discussion boards online, adherents of apocalyptism will use digital resources and networks to construct their own theories about the source of modern precarities and justify their irrational hatred of their political, ideological opponents. These apocalyptist rhetorics can be amplified, aggregated, and circulated across space and time in emergent online publics—even if these theories are unfounded, problematic, or detached from physical realities.

As one example, it is impossible to ignore the amount of political clout that adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theories now have among both average American voters and within congressional halls of power. In summary, QAnon is a catch-all term for a broader network of conspiracy theories brought about by an anonymous, online user who goes by the username "Q" and claims[15] to be an insider in the upper echelons of the U.S. military and the federal government. Allegedly, Q has been leaking confidential information to the general public that exposes many Democratic politicians, liberal Hollywood celebrities, and other coastal elites as

[15] Though some journalists now strongly believe that "Q" is actually Ron Watkins, who was one of the administrators of 8chan that first published Q's posts and discussion boards on the site.

being part of an international sex-trafficking ring that kidnaps and traffics young children for the purpose of molesting them, torturing them, and drinking their blood to harvest a drug called adrenochrome as part of their Satanic rituals. According to Q's baseless claims, this secret cabal of global elites all control and manipulate the world governments, banks, media outlets, and militaries, operating within the U.S. federal government through what QAnon followers and other adherents call the "Deep State." And as many followers believe, this same cabal did not expect Donald Trump to be elected president and that he is aware of what is happening behind the scenes, secretly preparing to expose everyone involved in this vast conspiracy in a day of apocalyptic reckoning called "the Great Awakening." This apocalyptic event would be a day full of mass arrests, public executions, and the ultimate defeat of all of Trump's enemies.

Understandably, this conspiracy theory—or any variations thereof—gained more traction following the arrest and presumed suicide of billionaire financier Jeffrey Epstein after being charged with child molestation, more so as it came to light that high-profile leaders like Prince Andrew, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump himself were deeply involved in these illicit activities (how QAnon believers resolve this last, glaring contradiction varies from person to person). And amid the pandemic with all the affects of fear, uncertainty, and confusion that it entails, more and more people have found a new purpose and sense of community in QAnon. Indeed, the whole movement has created a larger ecology/archive of not just Internet texts but also religious affects and apocalyptic narratives that segue into other conspiracy theory networks. It's a fluid, large network of conspiracies that can be configured or reconfigured to fit their current worldviews and makes them feel justified in hating their perceived enemies, supporting a problematic candidate, or even participating in an armed insurrection that leads to a violent mob storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. The ways in which adherents of this apocalyptic conspiracy

theory resort to different modes of armed militia or mob violence demonstrates how much apocalyptism has unfolded in increasingly prevalent but complicated ways beyond what she might have originally envisioned it, especially considering how many Christian evangelicals and Protestant conservatives (including Mormons, as will be explained later) have used certain conspiracy theories like QAnon as justification for extreme actions.

This fourth topos of the salvation of God's chosen people and destruction of the wicked leads to widespread belief that those who are not chosen are be punished not only with eternal damnation but also doomed to suffer and die in horrific ways during the trials and tribulations preceding Christ's Second Coming. Many Biblical narratives describe the annihilation of entire cities that God, His prophets, or His chosen people deem as wicked or unworthy, from Sodom to Gomorrah to Jericho to Babylon. These societies incur God's wrath by violating God's word, such as by rejecting the prophets, persecuting God's people, worshipping false idols, and committing sexual sins. As believed many Christian fundamentalists, a similar reckoning will occur at a more global scale.

One consequence of drawing from this topos and the apocalyptic discourses, logics, and affects contained therein is not only apathy toward government actions but also blind spots, misinterpretation, or even outright denial of systemic injustices. In other words, rhetors adhering to apocalyptism—Mormon or otherwise—are more likely to see those who suffer and die because of issues like racial capitalism not as victims of injustice but as simply not being part of God's chosen people reserved for salvation during the last days, usually because of individual sins they committed like drug use or sexual transgressions. Rather than thinking critically about the own systems of power that they benefit from, "fundamentalist adherents of ideologies [like apocalyptism] project vices defined by their preferred system of belief onto those who adhere to

other systems," such as members of the Patriot movement labelling "dissenters as traitors to the ideals they value most: nationalism and capitalism" (Crowley 13).

Any progressive, human-rights reforms that believers of Christian apocalyptism view as unforgivably sinful—from legalizing abortion to allowing transgender people access to public restrooms—are seen as signs that modern civilization has become as wicked as Biblical cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. Therefore, through noticeably anti-urban sentiments, Christian fundamentalists anticipate and even look forward to major American cities from New York to Seattle being destroyed like how the cities of God's enemies were destroyed in the Bible, paving the way for God's people to build His kingdom on Earth. As stated before, unlike climate activists trying to prevent an apocalypse, adherents of apocalyptism often desire, fantasize about, and seek to bring about Christ's Second Coming, despite all the suffering and destruction that would bring about. The narratives of their visions of the apocalypse and visions of the destruction of their enemies are what ultimately hold the most sway, as the following section will demonstrate with its analysis of the Book of Mormon as a narrative of early-nineteenth century apocalyptism.

The Book of Mormon as Apocalyptic Rhetoric

The goal of this next section is to trace the topoi of apocalyptism, sketched above, that can be traced back to Mormonism's core religious text, the Book of Mormon, allegedly translated by the religion's founder, Joseph Smith. I will analyze these apocalyptic topoi to establish the foundation for narratives and logics that help explain how the Bundys' public actions and rhetoric emerge from these historically religious discourses. Before tracing the apocalyptic rhetorics in the book itself, I will offer a brief overview of the relevant history of the emergence of this text as well as the historical, physical, material, and even climatological

environment that originally produced it. After all, people seldom think of the religious experience being subject to the whims of our planet's climate or the spread of pathogenic viruses and other microorganisms. Though for the sake of this project, I do believe it is important to consider how religions not only respond to but are products of the climates they arise from—either culturally, politically, epidemiologically, or ecologically. Mormonism as a larger religious movement is certainly no exception.

What may have put Joseph Smith on the path to founding Mormonism was the abnormal changes in the global climate during 1816, the infamous Year Without a Summer. Most likely a result of the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia that spread a cloud of ash across the world, the drop in global temperatures and unusual weather patterns like incessant rain upended entire agricultural sectors and national economies, creating potato famines in Ireland, rice shortages in China, and food riots in Great Britain. This generated an influx in apocalyptic rhetoric throughout Europe, America, and the rest of the Western world, even inspiring Mary Shelley to compose *Frankenstein*. In North America, due to climate abnormalities like snow and frost during the summer months, the national agricultural industry was devastated by the sudden drops in temperature that disrupted entire rural communities. During the ensuing crop failures and food shortages, thousands of poor farmers left rural states like Vermont over the following months and re-settled in the Northwest Territory in search of more hospitable conditions. Among these "climate refugees" were Joseph Smith's family, who was born in Vermont in 1805 and was eleven years old when his family moved to Palmyra in upstate New York. His own mother, Lucy Mack Smith, labeled this unprecedented turn in the climate as an "untimely frost," all while this unusual year went down in "Vermont folklore [as] 'eighteenth-hundred-and-froze-to-death'" (qtd. in Brodie 9). The massive migration of climate refugees from heavily affected states like

Vermont also may have been a leading factor in the formation of the "Burned-over District," a hotbed of religious revivalism and millennialism that led to the creation of other non-conformist, apocalyptic sects like the Shakers and the Millerites. This ecology of competing religious rhetorics, millennialist discourse, local folklore, and frontier lifestyles ultimately inspired the young Joseph Smith to embark on various exploits from treasure digging to claiming to have received heavenly visitations from God Himself to composing the Book of Mormon—all begging the question if it would have existed had there not been abnormal summer in 1816.

In that same vein, it is also worth considering how religious movements are subject to larger epidemiological forces as well. For example, when Joseph Smith was younger and when his family still lived in Vermont, a typhoid outbreak spread across New England between 1811 and 1814, killing thousands of people (Wirthlin). Since they resided near its epicenter, most of the Smith children contracted the disease. Joseph himself suffered from a bone infection caused by an abscess growing in his left leg that was unbearably painful. The Smith family had a couple of doctors from nearby Dartmouth College surgically remove a part of the infected bone from Joseph's leg, an advanced procedure for the time that may have ultimately saved Smith's life. As a direct result of this ordeal, Joseph was bedridden for months and either needed assistance walking about or resorted to using crutches for a few years afterward; toward the end of his life, he continued to walk with a slight limp. The young Joseph Smith would have used these long periods of being bedridden to read and create his own stories inspired by the books available at the time (especially the family Bible) to pass the time. It was during this period in his childhood and early adolescence when Smith began to develop his own world-building exercise of imagining who the inhabitants of the ancient American continent would have been, as his mother Lucy described in her journal: "Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing

recitals that could be imagined: he would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent; their dress, mode of travelling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, and their buildings" (87). These same stories would become the foundation for the Book of Mormon. This trying period in Joseph's life was pivotal in his development as a storyteller and religious figurehead, all a result of a viral outbreak and larger climatological aberrations.

The creation of the Book of Mormon itself is shrouded in mystery, making it one of the most unusual, enigmatic, and controversial acts of composition in modern religious history. Beginning around 1823, Joseph Smith claims that he received visitations from an angel named Moroni, who showed Joseph how to find ancient golden plates buried near his family's new farm in upstate New York, which described how ancient Israelites settled the Americas and were visited by Jesus Christ following his death and resurrection. Over the next several years, Smith allegedly translated these actual plates and published its accounts in a single volume titled *The Book of Mormon* in 1830. From the very beginning, the book was controversial, with many early critics calling it blasphemous or an outright fraud. Yet despite any criticisms thrown against this volume of scripture, the Book of Mormon nonetheless became the basis for Smith founding his own religion that would become known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has printed and distributed more than 150 million physical copies of the Book of Mormon as of 2011 ("Book"). Most literary historians would categorize the book as pseudepigrapha (a scriptural text falsely attributed to more Biblical authors) with Joseph Smith being the primary author, despite possibly collaborating with other writers or scribes during the process. For the case of my project and given my own positionality as a post-Mormon, I will adhere more toward this latter school of thought of Smith being the primary author in the following analysis

concerning its colonialist narrative, theology surrounding America as God's chosen land, and apocalyptic rhetorics.

As an act of rhetoric unto itself, the Book of Mormon also functions as an act of worldmaking that imagines how pre-Columbian civilizations lived and adapts commonplace theories at the time that the Native American people among the Lost Tribes of Israel, migrating from the Middle East following the divisions in the aftermath of the Tower of Babel. The book largely uses this premise to comment on nineteenth-century theological and political questions, anxieties, and debates centering on topics ranging from the origins of Native American people to the American Revolution to Freemason conspiracy theories. The central narrative of the Book of Mormon begins with a group of ancient Israelites who escape the siege of Jerusalem around 600 BCE and the subsequent Babylonian captivity. The main protagonists—namely a prophet named Lehi, his faithful son Nephi, and his wayward brothers Laman and Lemuel—escape into the wilderness and build a boat large enough to cross the Pacific Ocean to the New World, where Lehi's descendants build an entirely new civilization. Not long after their initial settlement, this new colony splits apart when Laman and Lemuel rebel against God's will and form their own tribe called the Lamanites, who are cursed with dark skin similar to the mark of Cain and become "the principal ancestors[16] of the American Indians" as they are described in the book's editorial introduction written by LDS apostle Bruce R. McConkie in 1981 (Stack). These tribes of Lamanites become "the survivors of an ancient race war" (Coviello 2) following a long history of expansion and armed conflicts that end with the complete genocide of Nephi's people.

[16] This phrasing was later changed to "among the ancestors of the American Indians" in 2007, perhaps to acknowledge that there is no reliable archaeological or genetic evidence that Native Americans descended from ancient Israelites as well as to distance the church from accusations of racism by teaching that an entire ethnic group is the product of a Biblical curse (Stack).

From the outset, the American continents (more specifically in the northern hemisphere) are promised to Nephi's descendants as a sacred land for those who obey a set of prescribed Christian principles and beliefs. In a latter section of the book, a prophet named Ether writes, "Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ" (Ether 2:12). It's an unusual verse teaching American exceptionalism in a book allegedly written by ancient Hebrews predating Christ's ministry, yet this emphasis on American's founding values like liberty is a common thread weaved throughout the narrative of the book, consistent with how Smith's contemporaries would have viewed this country's founders. The Book of Mormon even references Christopher Columbus allegedly discovering America under divine guidance when the initial main character Nephi has a vision from God and sees "a man among the gentiles, who . . . went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land" (1 Nephi 13:12). The book gives Columbus an almost mythic status as though his journey to America was a result of divine providence, meaning that God ordained Europeans to conquer the Americas despite the presence of other civilizations already living there. In the rest of this vision, Nephi also witnesses the pilgrims and other European settlers arriving to the Americas, or "many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise; and I beheld the wrath of God, that it was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten" (1 Nephi 13:14). Because of this divine decree, the displacement, genocides, pandemics, and other violences that the Indigenous people suffered were a result of their ancestor's sins, not unlike Biblical divine punishments associated with the mark of Cain. European colonizers, on the other hand, would "prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance" because of their Christian faith.

Yet despite claiming to be scripture that predicted the outcome of future events, the Book of Mormon has little to say concerning climate change, environmental stewardship, or any semblance of any Bible verses that religious environmentalists may reference, akin to the call in the Bible to "consider the lilies of the field" (Matthew 6:28). One similar verse in the Book of Mormon reads, "Behold, the Lord hath created the earth that it should be inhabited; and he hath created his children that they should possess it" (1 Nephi 17:36). Yet most of the book's focus in terms of physical environments resides in the people's ownership of them based on religious inheritance, political control, or military conquest. The divine blessings bestowed on the Nephite or Lamanite people for their devotion to God usually amounts to economic prosperity and material wealth, allowing them to build large cities, pave new roads, and harvest the landscape for resources like gold and silver. The frontier mindset inherent in Manifest Destiny is very much a part of the ancient Nephite's cultural and environmental practices; as the white characters in this mythos, they treat the land and the natural environments of the New World as something to be conquered and tamed. Usually, in the Book of Mormon, the main obstacles for achieving prosperity and generating wealth are articulated as the dark-skinned, accursed, primitive tribes that live out in this wilderness as they continually wage wars against the Nephites. Yet because of what faithful readers call the "pride cycle," different nations or groups become more prosperous than others and eventually forsake their Christian values, allowing their wealth to turn themselves into a sinful, wicked society ripe for God's punishments in the form of both Lamanite conquests and unnatural disasters.

Seeing how God has complete agency, let alone command, of the natural land and its climate, the face of the earth does experience changes in climate or natural disasters—all of which have catastrophic consequences for the land's inhabitants—in one of the book's most

apocalyptic episodes. Immediately after Christ's crucifixion and death around 34 C.E., the New World becomes embroiled in a series of natural disasters that upend the very foundations of the Nephite civilizations. Drawing from the apocalyptic topos of fatalism and inevitability of doom, the narrator of the book describes the widespread destruction comes to engulf every Nephite city as the people are caught up in radical changes to the Earth's composition:

> For behold, the whole face of the land was changed, because of the tempest and the whirlwinds, and the thunderings and the lightnings, and the exceedingly great quaking of the whole earth; and the highways were broken up, and the level roads were spoiled, and many smooth places became rough. And many great and notable cities were sunk, and many were burned, and many were shaken till the buildings thereof had fallen to the earth, and the inhabitants thereof were slain, and the places were left desolate. And there were some cities which remained; but the damage thereof was exceedingly great, and there were many in them who were slain . . . And thus the face of the whole earth became deformed. (3 Nephi 8: 12-17)

These series of disasters, as narrated in the Book of Mormon, are said to have destroyed the entire infrastructure, political governance, and local economies of the Nephites/Lamanites and turned all the survivors into refugees, who must then face three full days of complete darkness when the sun is blacked out. Those who survived are said to have heard the actual voice of Jesus Christ soon after these events and admits that "many great destructions have I caused to come upon this land, and upon this people, because of their wickedness and their abominations" (3 Nephi 9:12). A few days after the Lord destroys Nephite civilization, the darkness lifts and Jesus visits with the remaining survivors, ministers to them, heals their sick or wounded, blesses their

children, and delivers a series of sermons that are identical from those of the New Testament like the Sermon on the Mount.

This whole episode is emblematic of one of the core aspects of Crowley's theory of apocalyptism, in which Christians see themselves as God's chosen people who will be spared during an apocalypse while those who reject God's word are destroyed in a violent fashion, as exemplified by the fourth topos of God's chosen surviving the destruction of the wicked. In the passage above from the Book of Mormon, the cataclysms and their aftermath are envisioned through a modern book of scripture that embodies the cultural and religious values of the nineteenth-century white America. As the climax of the entire volume of scripture that had been prophesied early on, Christ's destruction of and arrival to the Americas may serve as a sort of precursor to how Joseph Smith believed the apocalypse of Revelations would play out. With all of this in mind, as a book of scripture, the Book of Mormon is shockingly violent and bloody in its depiction of an entire Pre-Columbian civilization that self-destructs in a truly apocalyptic fashion. Peter Coviello calls the book "an eschatological epic" given its continual focus on the rise and fall of one civilization after another (2), perhaps as a means for theorizing what happened to the Native American societies that once inhabited the ruins that dot the North American landscape—and what could soon happen to the United States of America.

In terms of how deity oversees these apocalyptic events, the God of the Book of Mormon rules over the book's people with an Old Testament sense of justice and vengeance, even so far as it extends to the book's attitudes concerning nationalism, political governance, and religious observances. And those who deviate from Christian fundamentalism are swiftly punished or destroyed, usually by the hands of God's chosen servants as part of the fourth topos of the salvation of God's chosen people and destruction of the wicked. As one example, when a

populist demagogue named Amalickiah gains enough followers among the Nephite people to try to overthrow the democratic government and establish himself as a monarch (presumably around 73 BCE), a military leader named Captain Moroni[17] responded by gathering his own militia full of advocates for a democratic rule of law that certainly feels out of place in ancient pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. According to the book, Captain Moroni becomes so passionate about his cause that he rips up his coat and writes the following slogan on one of the pieces: "In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children" (Alma 46:12). His make-shift flag comes to be known as the Title of Liberty, which also becomes a rallying cry for his nationalist crusade. From there, those who support the current system of democracy take up arms, force out Amalickiah's followers, and display different copies of the Title of Liberty over their cities. Captain Moroni goes so far as to order anyone who "would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom . . . to be put to death" (Alma 46:35). He continues to carry around his original Title of Liberty throughout the rest of his military career, as a sign of his devotion to his vision of patriotism and democratic ideals, even if his political outlook may at times seem closer to fascism. At one point, after his request to a Nephite political figure for more troops during a war against the Lamanites goes unanswered, Moroni threatens to return to the Nephite capital and overthrow the government, "even if it must be by the sword" (Alma 60:35).

Naturally, when envisioning the Title of Liberty or any of these conflicts over the maintenance of some variation of democracy, it's impossible not to think of the American flag when it became more prominent following the American Revolution. Though partially for that

[17] Not to be confused with the Moroni who appeared before Joseph Smith to tell him where to find the Golden Plates, where the Book of Mormon accounts were first recorded. This same Moroni also appears as a golden statue at the top of the tallest spire on each LDS temple, blowing a golden trumpet to signal the Second Coming.

reason, Captain Moroni has become a mythic figure often evoked, depicted, or referenced in Mormon conservative discourse as a hero that exudes commonplace conservative values surrounding American liberties and religious freedom, given how the Book of Mormon teaches that "if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto [Captain] Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men" (Alma 48:17). Because of scripture verses and narratives like these, many Latter-day Saint men actively seek to emulate him, either through buying merchandise like T-shirts comparing Captain Moroni to Marvel's Captain America or through active participation in political activism.

In relation to the Bundy standoffs, one of the protestors who participated in the armed occupation at Malheur identified himself as "Captain Moroni" to the press, although his real name is Dylan Anderson (Peacher). Originally from Utah, Anderson claimed that he was "willing to die" at Malheur for the cause of liberty, much like his self-given namesake. Although Anderson did not die as a martyr for his cause the same way LaVoy Finicum did, the fact that he cited Captain Moroni as a primary inspiration for invading and occupying a wildlife refuge during an armed standoff is more than noteworthy even beyond its implications for this project. Because there are certainly other examples of conservative LDS men either citing or roleplaying as Captain Moroni to justify political causes that favor nationalist interests, even through armed and violent means.

As recently as the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Senator Mike Lee from Utah spoke at a Trump rally—sponsored by Latter-day Saints for Trump—in the swing-state of Arizona and told the attendees, "To my Mormon friends, my Latter-day Saint friends, think of him [Trump] as Captain Moroni. He seeks not power, but to pull it down. He seeks not the praise of the world

or the ‘fake news,’ but he seeks the well-being and the peace of the American people” (qtd. in Davidson). After Senator Orin Hatch’s retirement and Senator Romney’s public disavowals of Trump during his first impeachment hearings, Senator Lee was one of Trump’s most vocal and prominent LDS politician supporters, championing Trump’s aggressive immigration policies to keep non-white immigrants out of the U.S. and his opening up of natural environments in the American Interior for private interests like drilling for oil. Being an active member of the LDS Church like Hatch and Romney, Senator Lee certainly felt comfortable and confident telling his audience of predominately Mormon conservatives that Trump shared the same, unshakeable characteristics and convictions as Captain Moroni. Yet for other Latter-day Saints across the political spectrum, many found Lee’s comments to be inappropriate and unwarranted, not so much because they believed Trump to be antithetical to Mormonism’s values but because they believed that Lee extolling Trump as a religious figure was all but heretical. The president of Latter-day Saints for Biden-Harris, Rob Taber, publicly accused Lee and other Mormon Trump supporters of “willfully [using] sacred symbols, including the temple multiple times, in their propaganda,” while online users on Twitter argued that it would have been more accurate to compare President Trump to King Noah, another Book of Mormon character who is more infamous for his avarice and corruption (qtd in Davidson). The backlash to Lee’s comments were strong enough that he felt compelled to write an extensive response on his Facebook page, in which he states that he recognizes that his “impromptu comments may not have been the best forum for drawing a novel analogy from scripture,” even if he still believes that Trump “has nonetheless persisted in this effort for pursuit of the ‘freedom and welfare of [his] country’” the same way Captain Moroni did (Lee).

In any even stranger turn of events, one of the participants of the U.S. Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, dressed up as Captain Moroni and carried a recreation of the Title of Liberty among the crowd. This unnamed participant went so far as to reconstruct the Title of Liberty with a wood pole and large cloth flag with the exact quote in English from the Book of Mormon painted on its face. He explained to one reporter that he was dressed up in seemingly Roman armor—with a breastplate, headband, red cape, tunic, leather grieves, and boots—to represent the Book of Mormon character, who he describes as the "William Wallace" of the Book of Mormon (most likely a reference to Mel Gibson's ahistorical film *Braveheart*). In the interview itself, he attempts to summarize the premise of the Book of Mormon and explain who Captain Moroni was to a non-Mormon audience:

> The Native American Indians, they have Jewish DNA . . . I can tell you about, you can Google that, the Algonquin Indians have Native American, have Jewish descent in their DNA. There's evidence of the Book of Mormon, I don't want to get too much into that. I'm here for freedom. ("Stop")

His perpetuations of settler-colonialist ideology and conspiracy unhinged from reality aside, the ways in which he tries to use the Book of Mormon text as evidence for why an armed protest at the U.S. Capitol is justified is endlessly fascinating. Other than his sheer lack of self-awareness of how others who did not grow up Mormon might respond, the man in question still feels strongly enough about his own religious and political convictions to live-action roleplay (LARP) as one of his scripture's characters during an attempted armed overthrow of the federal government, as though he were one of the Lord's chosen to fight against and defeat a tyrannical government that had grown ripe for God's wrath. He actively seeks to emulate a war hero of a larger narrative in which an ancient Israelite man uses military might against non-white

Indigenous people to uphold recognizably traditional American ideals about democracy, even if it means resorting to physical violence. This same vision of Captain Moroni is explicitly how the character is framed and presented in the text itself. Because Moroni sees resisting any semblance of government reform or overreach as the advent of tyranny, faithful adherents of Mormonism will see any deviation from a Christian-dominated form of governance—including the election of Democrat Joe Biden over the more conservative Donald Trump—as a potentially apocalyptic event that could lead to oppression of the faithful. Even then, this unnamed man dressed as Captain Moroni at the Capitol riots was clearly not the only LDS participant at this event, given that a few other members visibly wore BYU (Brigham Young University) hoodies that were displayed over national news outlets like CNN while the protest was being televised to millions of Americans and others across the globe. For so many American Mormons, the possibility of violence is always at the forefront of their minds when it comes to any perceived violation of their individual liberties as dictated by America's Founding Fathers or the Book of Mormon.

More explicitly, these exigences or perceived injustices that conservative Mormons evoke in their anti-government rhetoric often rely on conspiratorial thinking (from climate denialism to QAnon) to justify militant, violent measures, as part of the logics behind the apocalyptic topos of larger conspiracies serving as primary mechanisms for demonic forces. Indeed, the conspiracies that occur in the Book of Mormon are usually demonic in nature, have apocalyptic implications, and are largely rooted in similar anti-Masonic sentiments that were present in Joseph Smith's day. One of the primary reasons why the Nephite civilization ultimately collapses is a secret society that operates within a vast government conspiracy to undermine both the government and the church. Members of this organization calls itself the Gadianton robbers, having originated from a failed overthrow of the Nephite government but the

successful assassination of a chief judge (around 29-23 BCE). The conspirators begin to swear secret oaths with each other to keep their identities a secret, promising each other certain positions of power if their covert operations become successful. After they are exposed, they flee into the wilderness and gather more followers who must "enter into their covenants and their oaths" to maintain secrecy (Helaman 6:21). According to the book, these oaths involve "secret signs" and "secret words" given to its leaders by Satan himself (Helaman 6:23). Over the course of the Nephite's history, the Gadianton robbers infiltrate the Nephite societies, conduct guerilla warfare against the military, commit murder, accumulate wealth, and became an even greater threat to the Nephites than the Lamanites. For the author(s) of the Book of Mormon, the existence and proliferation of these "secret combinations" as these scriptures call them is one of the greatest evils of the civilized world. As the prophet Ether warns: "[W]hatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get power and gain, until they shall spread over the nation, behold, they shall be destroyed" (Ether 8:22).

These secret combinations are, by their very nature, demonic organizations organized and created by the Devil, posing a supernatural threat that many active Mormons to this day take literally and quite seriously to this day. For modern conservative Mormon discourse communities, these secret combinations persist through new iterations of the original Gadianton robbers. Conservative Mormons take readings from the Book of Mormon on the matter as commandments directly from God, especially verses that state how "the Lord commandeth you, when ye shall see these things come among you that ye shall awake to a sense of your awful situation, because of this secret combination which shall be among you; or wo be unto it, because of the blood of them who have been slain" (Ether 8:24). As a result, many Mormon conservatives are more likely to interpret current events through the lens of conspiracy theories

that assume that more progressive causes like climate activism or public health regulations are the mechanizations of a secret society orchestrating a tyrannical takeover of the United States. These same doctrines and narratives taught in the Book of Mormon set a precedence for lay members of the LDS Church to engage with, take up, repeat, and circulate conspiracy theories like QAnon and anti-mask arguments—either online or over the pulpit at church—as a means to perpetuate a wider culture of anti-federalism within Mormon communities across the Intermountain West.

To reiterate, reading Mormonism's sacred texts—namely the Book of Mormon—as American eschatological, colonial myth shows how this form of spiritualized Americana has shaped the church's theology as well as how faithful, practicing members are acculturated into these apocalyptic discourses and ideologies in intimate, embodied, and material ways. Some of these day-to-day, lived-in practices and behaviors include religious rituals; migrations; colonization of other lands; sharing culturally prominent stories or histories; and building an entirely new society in anticipation for the old world's destruction. All these actions and others comprise the history of the Latter-day Saints movement writ large, all largely influenced by Joseph Smith's original, pseudepigraphal novel about how an ancient Israelite civilization in the Americas destroyed itself and how its remnants became the continent's Indigenous people. The book's teachings or proposed morals concerning how God's people should orient themselves in relation to American lands, the natural environment, Indigenous communities, and potentially apocalyptic events have had long-term, generational consequences as the Book of Mormon's philosophies have bled into or become enmeshed with other Mormon texts and discourses, which will be examined in depth in the following sections and subsequent chapter. Though for the sake of my overarching argument, the narrative of Mormonism's core scripture enables public

rhetoric and subsequent action that bring about simply one, pivotal variation of Crowley's theory of apocalyptism—a worldview entirely dependent on the epistemologies and ontologies of exploitative colonial, carbon-capitalism as well as Christian nationalism. After all, the entirety of the Book of Mormon's plot hinges on not just narratives of settler-colonialism against Indigenous peoples but also questions surrounding the nature of democracy in relation to Christian ideology since the threat of tyranny and barbarism lingers on the periphery until they come to the fore at pivotal moments in the book's narrative.

Latter-day Prophecies in Circulation and as Rhetorical Worldmaking

Building off from Crowley's theory of apocalyptism and the previous analysis of Mormon scripture as apocalyptic texts that continue to influence LDS public rhetoric, I now turn to scholarship on circulation studies and will discuss circulation as a methodology to trace and analyze key Mormon apocrypha that shapes fundamentalist discourse within the Intermountain West region to this day. To better understand how and why apocryphal texts like the White Horse prophecy have become such a powerful topos that conservative Mormon figureheads continue to draw from, I will also analyze the genre conventions, logics, and other rhetorical moves that these texts adhere to, the claims they make, the larger ecologies that helped create them, and how they have circulated across Mormon history leading up to more recent events tied to the Bundys' militia movements. Briefly, for now, these topoi pick up on the apocalyptic rhetorics Crowley points to and that I outlined above, namely binary thinking, fatalism concerning the end times, conspiratorial thinking, and anticipation for the destruction of the wicked. I turn to these apocryphal texts in the Mormon tradition to illuminate the underlying ideological and spiritual beliefs that influenced the Bundys' militia movements that violate their

own church's directives and place themselves in opposition to federal mandates concerning the environment and public health. And tracing how these texts, affects, and discourse circulates within religious publics requires not only ecological orientations but also theories and methods of circulation as a means to employ a more comprehensive framework when analyzing the breadth and reach of apocalyptic discourse.

Theories involving circulation (or how texts and discourses move through time and space) warrant far greater attention in rhetorical and composition studies insofar as they attempt to account for rhetoric's unpredictable nature once a text is delivered, received, or embodied (Ridolfo, Gries, Hawk, Dobrin, and Rice). Circulation, as Rickert argues, is "more than just the flow of communication, affect, and material" since it also "takes on a dynamism marked by forms of transformation" as texts experience continual renewal or recreation across different bodies that interact with them (301). And if we are to accept a particular notion of publics as dynamic, emergent, and fluid entities that come about from the circulation of key texts,[18] then capturing or tracing the movement and effects of these texts that create them is as important as it is difficult in the vast array of networks to which rhetors and audiences may have access. For more religious and/or conservative rhetorics, the scholarly value in tracing the affective, spatio-temporal flows of fundamentalist discourse, lies in, as Clark argues, "gaining a deeper understanding of the development of familiar, influential arguments circulating all around us—how they emerged, how they were leveraged, how they normalized, and how they have become so deeply and persistently embedded in our culture" (166). Finally, some texts that continue to circulate years or even decades later can have intergenerational effects, resonating with different

[18] As well as any ideologies, discourses, arguments, values, inequities, harm, violences, and other ways of knowing and being embedded within these ecologies/enmeshments.

audiences in exponentially varied ways depending on their historical, cultural, and religious circumstances, even when it comes to apocryphal texts like prophecies.

Prophecies are certainly no exception in how they invite interpretation, analysis, and other uptakes among religious publics. As part of a larger restorationist tradition of early nineteenth-century millennialism, the prophecies that Joseph Smith made about the future of the United States and the rest of humankind are numerous and varied. By functioning as the role of an alleged prophet, Smith oriented himself toward the future when speaking or writing prophetically, with the purpose of warning his audience of future calamities. Barry Brummett labels this final means of persuasion as a "prophetic call to action" in that the grander divine course of events as they unfold can "be altered by human action," so long as audiences know what to expect and do the right things, whether that be making themselves pure before God or building sanctuaries in preparation for future calamities (Brummett 93). Because, as has already been established, apocalyptic rhetorics are mostly directed toward the future and attempt to persuade others to prepare for a coming apocalypse by any means necessary. These same rhetorics are largely based in "revered sacred texts as the grounding for making political and social pronouncements," usually geared "toward both understanding and preparing for history's determined course" (95).

The distinction here for Mormonism resides in how apocalyptists in this same faith tradition reference the Book of Mormon accounts described earlier as evidence for inevitable catastrophes while still believing in and circulating prophecies about the future from leaders like Smith intended to give the faithful the opportunity to help reshape history. For the early Saints, a large part of their mission was preparing for an inevitable future by bringing the kingdom of Heaven to Earth under the guidance of their prophets, largely by colonizing the Great Basin

under the leadership of Brigham Young (believed by many Salt Lake Mormons to be Smith's rightful successor after Smith's death). Furthermore, most of the language in Smith's prophecies are more metaphorical and vaguer in terms of style and in accordance with the usual conventions of prophecies as a genre in the larger Christian tradition. This ambiguity allows for different interpretations and uptakes throughout history, all of which vary slightly or greatly from one discourse community to the next. Smith certainly exhibited a certain "rhetorical incongruity" throughout his ministry and created a "rhetorical world in which the Lord God and weak and faltering people work together" through the interweaving of material, everyday existence (Bushman). Smith's religious and rhetorical genius lay in prophecy, "the on-the-fly unfolding of heavenly mysteries of such compounding intricacy that the structures built to house them could seem always to be lagging behind the protean reach of his vision" (Coviello 117).

Perhaps Smith's most quoted, controversial, and consequential prophecies is the White Horse prophecy, given how much it is referenced by both everyday members of the church and its own representatives in the U.S. government. Though it's important to note upfront the White Horse prophecy is apocryphal, despite its wide range, longevity, and influence on conservative Mormons across the Intermountain West. The LDS Church has labelled the account as non-canonical and folkloric, yet it is a text that has still become so pervasive in Mormon political discourse that it continually influences faithful members' public actions, statements, orientations, and worldviews. In one instance in late 2009, a gubernational candidate in Idaho named Rex Rammell—who infamously joked about looking for hunting tags to hunt and presumably shoot then President Barack Obama ("Idaho")—called for public meetings held exclusively by "faithful priesthood-holders of the LDS Church" to discuss the White Horse prophecy and what he perceived as the Obama administration's violations of the Constitution (Sunderland). The

most quoted section of the prophecy is a line that alludes to a time in America's future when the Constitution would "hang by a thread" until the elders of the church would come forward and save it from dissolution, thereby saving the entire country in the process and providing for the church's ascendancy as the most dominant power structure in America and abroad.

By repeating this same line, Rammell must have seen himself as among those elders who would help save the country from the rise of tyranny in the form of a progressive president antithetical to Rammell's conservative values. But in response to his statements, the LDS Church released a public statement not only reasserting its stance on political neutrality but also disavowing these meetings, saying: "The so-called 'White Horse Prophecy' is based on accounts that have not been substantiated by historical research and is not embraced as Church doctrine" ("Church"). The phrase "so-called" is certainly dismissive in tone here because it may read simply as "allegedly" in other contexts, but within the discourse of Mormon leadership, it is a frequent descriptor of any group, philosophy, or idea that church leaders have historically criticized, such as "so-called intellectuals" (Kimball) or "so-called 'same-sex marriage'" (Oaks). Yet despite the church's best efforts, the White Horse prophecy persists as a dynamic, vibrant artifact that has taken on a life of its own as it is circulated and repurposed for new contexts by politically motivated and often powerful public figures in Mormonism ranging from Senator Mitt Romney to Glenn Beck to Ammon Bundy. The phrase about the Constitution "hanging by a thread" has become a meme of sorts that has been repeated and perpetuated ad nauseum among conservative circles within the faith, as though the prophecy carries enormous theological weight, as will be explored later in this section.

The actual account that gave rise to the White Horse prophecy was allegedly delivered by Joseph Smith to two other elders in the church, Edwin Rushton and Theodore Turley in Nauvoo,

Illinois, as early as 1843. There are two written accounts of the prophecy, the original written in Rushton's hand in his later years (presumably dated around the end of the nineteenth century before Rushton's death in 1904) and the other being a revision of the original, possibly transcribed by an acquaintance named A. G. Giauque. Rushton gave a copy to a church patriarch, John Smith, who presumably had the prophecy transcribed, printed, and distributed to local members in the Salt Lake Valley in the early 1900s. While Rushton claims that the prophecy was spoken to him and Turley during Joseph Smith's ministry, there are several clues within the text that suggest that Rushton had written this account and embellished whatever Smith might have told them many years later as though to aggrandize his own encounters with the Prophet (Penrod 76). For example, the often-quoted line about the Constitution "hanging by a thread" has more basis in an address given by Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, when he used a variation of these same words during a Fourth of July event at Salt Lake in 1854, "Will the Constitution be destroyed? No . . . as Joseph Smith said, 'The time will come when the destiny of the nation will hang upon a single thread. At that critical juncture, this people will step forth and save it'" (15). While there's no textual evidence that Joseph Smith said these exact same words, he did share the exact same sentiments and made similar predictions about the Constitution being "on the brink of ruin before the Mormon people will 'bear the Constitution away from the very verge of destruction'" (Smith). These same ideas were even transcribed in the early Saints' newest book of scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants, as dictated by Smith as early as 1833:

> According to the laws and constitution of the people, which I have suffered to be established, and should be maintained for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles; that every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to

> futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment . . . And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood. (D&C 101: 77-80)

Since the early days of the church, Mormonism's founders, leaders, and followers have long equated the Constitution with religious scripture and the Founding Fathers[19] as quasi-religious figures who laid the groundwork for the founding of Mormonism. Yet these points are moot to an extent, considering that authorial intent has little to no bearing on how a text is taken up, remixed, or re-applied by new audiences in different contexts. Though, for the sake of the following analysis, I will use the revised account from Rushton because it is the most legible and the most frequently cited.

In summary, the White Horse prophecy describes how the early Saints will venture out into the American West, where they "will see a great and mighty people established," represented symbolically in the text as the titular White Horse (Penrod 122). Though even after they settle the Great Basin and build their own kingdom there, their enemies would pursue them and "make obnoxious laws against [them] in Congress," reminiscent of the episode when Joseph Smith unsuccessfully petitioned President Martin Van Buren in 1839 to act on the Saints' behalf during the Mormon-Missouri War (122). Ever since then, the Mormon people have felt rejected

[19] As one example, Wilford Woodruff—the fourth president and prophet of the Church who ultimately decided to end the church's practice of plural marriage in 1890 to help the Utah territory gain statehood—wrote in his journal how he and some of the other church leaders at the time "spent the evening in preparing a list of the noted men of the 17 century [sic] and 18th, including the signers of the Declaration of Independence and presidents of the United States, for baptism on Tuesday the 21 Aug 1877." Each of the most beloved Founding Fathers and other notable historical figures—from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln—appeared before then Elder Woodruff personally in the St. George Temple on that same date. According to Woodruff's journal, Washington's spirit said to him: "You have had the use of the Endowment House for a number of years, and yet nothing has ever been done for us. We laid the foundation of the government you now enjoy, and we never apostatized from it, but we remained true to it and were faithful to God." From there, Washington and the other Founders commanded Woodruff to perform the saving ordinances in the House of the Lord on their behalf, which he did straightaway.

by and alienated from the federal government following this incident, further exacerbated by events like their expulsion from their settlements in Missouri and then Illinois along with the preceding Utah War from 1857 to 1858 (which consisted of a prolonged armed standoff between Utah settlers and the armed forces of the U.S. federal government).[20] In addition to eventually having to renounce the practice of plural marriage in 1890 due to mounting pressures from Congress—a decision that caused the church to fracture into various offshoots that continue polygamous lifestyles to this day—the relationship between the Mormon church and the federal government during the nineteenth century was so fraught that these anti-federalist sentiments continued well into the twentieth- and even twenty-first centuries, and they would have certainly been prevalent during Rushton's composition of the prophecy itself.

As Rushton claims, it was Joseph Smith who first prophesied that the Constitution will almost be "destroyed" and "will hang by a thread, as it were, and that thread as fine as the finest silk fibre" (122). As an apocalyptic topos in and of itself, the phrase "hang by a thread" is powerful and salient in how it evokes an impending sense of doom like Damocles' sword, signifying and embodying the anticipation and anxieties of waiting for an eventual apocalypse; it overlaps clearly with the second aforementioned topos of fatalism/inevitability, which encapsulates Crowley's apocalyptism so perfectly in one phrase because of how it evokes a sensation of impending doom and the threatened status of such a revered political document. The Prophet mourns this loss of freedom and constitutional rule, allegedly telling Rushton and Turley, "I love the constitution, it was made by the inspiration of God and it will be preserved

[20] One of the pivotal events being the Mountain Meadow Massacre, when Mormon militiamen disguised as Paiutes slaughtered up to 140 people in a non-Mormon wagon party travelling through the Utah territory on their way to California. Whether or not Brigham Young, the church president at the time, gave the order is up for debate. Though, coincidentally, one of the Bundy's Mormon ancestors, Nephi Johnson, was one of the participants in the massacre itself.

and saved by the efforts of the White Horse and the Red Horse who will combine in its defense" (122). The Red Horse in this case are the Native American people; the early Saints would often proselytize, convert, and marry local Indigenous people because of their belief that Native American tribes were once a part of the ancient civilizations described in the Book of Mormon. Other prophetic or apocalyptic texts in the Mormon tradition like White Horse have gone so far as to claim that these Lamanite people would "blossom like a rose," come to accept the Gospel in droves, and regain their former glory—though only by adapting a white religious culture or literally becoming white themselves, as described in earlier editions of the Book of Mormon (122). After converting the Native American tribes en masse, the church would equally be blessed both spiritually and materially for their faithfulness, in which they would "find the mountains full of minerals, and . . . become very rich" (122).

In the same vein of common Mormon folklore involving Golden Plates and treasure digging during Joseph Smith's early days, Rushton's account of the White Horse prophecy describes carts full "silver piled up on the street" and "gold shoveled up like sand" as God's kingdom becomes prosperous[21] while the rest of the outside world suffers during a series of devastating cataclysms, as illustrated by the topos of God's chosen versus the wicked. These accounts are heavily predicated on an "us" (morally pure, destined, upright people) vs. "them" (amoral, less than, fated to be destroyed or left destitute) frameworks. These moves function as

[21] A similar prophecy detailing hidden treasures discovered before the end times comes from John Hyrum Koyle in the 1890s, in which he received a vision of an angel showing him the way to an ancient Nephite mine in the Wasatch Mountains. Within its hidden caverns, there would be an abundance of gold veins, other rich minerals, and lost Nephite treasures, including Mormon sacred artifacts like the Sword of Laban, the Urim and Thumim, and the Golden Plates themselves. Koyle gathered enough funds, equipment, and manpower to begin excavating the mountainside in search of these Nephite treasures that he envisioned, believing that this whole endeavor would be financially successful enough to rescue and fund the whole church through a series of economic collapses preceding the Second Coming. While Koyle's mining operation (which came to be known as the "Dream Mine" and then the "Relief Mine") became moderately self-sustainable and is still in operation, yet no such lost treasures of an ancient pre-Columbian civilization have been discovered in the Utah mountains.

logics connected to belief, practices, and everyday life while faithful rhetors adhere to interpretations of this text to justify motive and inspire action. Yet this "us vs. them" dichotomy offers little room for determining a new path or collaboration across difference whenever an adherent of a text as apocalyptic as the White Horse prophecy encounters anyone they have been taught is an enemy that seeks their absolute destruction.

Indeed, the prophecy's descriptions of an unfolding apocalypse are Biblical in the sense that the suffering of God's enemies are graphic and violent, reminiscent in some ways of Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*. According to Rushton,

> A terrible revolution will take place in the land of America, such as has never been seen before, for the land will be left without a supreme government, and every species of wickedness will run rampant, [sic] it will be so terrible that father will be against son, and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother; the most terrible scenes of murder and bloodshed and rape that was have ever looked upon will take place.

Similar descriptions of or allusions to such graphic violence appear in other apocalyptic folklore in the Mormon tradition, such as when another LDS prophet named John Taylor had visions of a future in which famines ravished the United States to the point where he witnessed "mothers cutting the throats of their own children for their blood . . . to quench their own thirst and then lie down and die" (Woodruff). The only sovereign nation to survive all this chaos, famine, and warfare would be the kingdom of Zion that would arise in the Rocky Mountain and spread to Jackson County, Missouri, which and other nations would visit to "submit to the kingdom of God" when they finally receive the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps drawing from the aesthetics of nineteenth-century American violence on the frontier, the explicit nature of these descriptions assumes a complete degradation and collapse of all civilized hierarchies and social norms to the point where absolute anarchy reigns, causing the inhabitants of the American continent resort to barbaric measures to survive. This narrative (currently driving politics to this day at local, state, and federal levels) helps perpetuate the topoi of the inevitability of collapse and doom, paired with the salvation of God's chosen people and destruction of the wicked as Crowley has explored in depth. This civil unrest that would arise from a great famine and other calamities would be further exacerbated by a series of armed conflicts that would escalate into a global war, in which the American mainland would be "invaded by the heathen Chinese" (126). This part of the prophecy appeared to have more resonance among Mormon audiences during the Cold War and the rise of communism in Russia and China, and it's part of the reason why the White Horse prophecy continues to have traction among conservative circles up and down the Mormon Corridor with the rise of China as a global superpower and economic, political competitor against the United States.

Like any good prophecy, the White Horse account is vague, abstract, symbolic, and ambiguous. The transportability of this text through print media or word of mouth helps it become a powerful component in a larger mythos through which everything is interpreted through an apocalyptic lens as people overlay it at will. In other words, it invites interpretation and further analysis, including some believers who will seek to carry out and fulfill this prophecy because of personal beliefs or realizations that they are the ones designated to bring God's word to pass. Though given the historical context of when the White Horse prophecy began to circulate with increasing velocity during the early twentieth century during the First World War, Spanish flu pandemic, and the Great Depression, it becomes clear as to why it often became so

popular among Mormon circles. As more and more copies of the White Horse prophecy were distributed to church members, and as more and more members became persuaded by its supposed legitimacy, church leadership soon caught wind of it and eventually came to denounce it entirely. In October 1918, President Joseph F. Smith (nephew of Joseph Smith) used the platform and occasion of General Conference[22] to publicly denounce the White Horse prophecy:

> I have discovered that people have copies of a purported vision by the Prophet Joseph Smith given in Nauvoo, and some people are circulating this supposed vision, or revelation, or conversation which the prophet is reported to have held with a number of individuals in the city of Nauvoo. I want to say to you, my brethren and sisters, that if you understand the Church articles and covenants, if you will read the scriptures and become familiar with those things which are recorded in the revelations from the Lord, it will not be necessary for you to ask any questions in regard to the authenticity or otherwise of any purported revelation, vision, or manifestation that proceeds out of darkness, concocted in some corner, surreptitiously presented, and not coming through the proper channels of the Church.

This statement is not unlike the one the church published in response to the Bundys in 2016, namely in how they sought to contain or eliminate the spread of apocryphal teachings that are not official, canonized doctrine. Furthermore, these statements are rare occasions in which the church discourages spiritual belief without material or academic evidence, perhaps in response to how church members draw from the topos of conspiracy unhinged from material reality. Because often, when one is asked to acquire a religious belief without any grounding or without questioning, this opens a lot of space for abuse of power in how prophecy is wielded or enacted,

[22] In which the church's apostles, the prophet, and other members of the leadership hierarchy give a series of sermons to the entire church body twice a year.

as evidenced by the Bundy standoffs and the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol. Yet for an entire century, church leadership has denounced White Horse whenever it regained enough circulation to warrant public attention, usually during a crisis period or pivotal election cycle. Eventually, during the Cold War, earlier public rejections of the prophecy from LDS leadership were forgotten as prominent elders of the church quoted from this text over the pulpit when teaching their audience about the divine nature of the Constitution and America's founding principles.

As one example, during a September 1986 speech given at BYU, church president Ezra Taft Benson declared, "I have faith that the Constitution will be saved as prophesied by Joseph Smith. But it will not be saved in Washington. It will be saved by the citizens of this nation who love and cherish freedom. It will be saved by enlightened members of this Church." Benson himself was notorious among some LDS circles for conflating his leadership responsibilities and religious teachings with political rhetoric that was fiercely anti-communist[23] and anti-socialist, given his open support for the ultra-conservative John Bircher Society. Like other leaders and everyday members of the church, Benson sincerely believed that "God had founded the United States of America as a democratic Christian republic and had inspired the development of a self-regulating economy based on private ownership, individual responsibility, and hard work" (Bergera 56). Though by Benson's lifetime, the White Horse prophecy had been circulated long and widely enough that church leaders and spokesmen had already begun to present it as religious doctrine. And given that Latter-day Saints believe their prophets to be divinely inspired and chosen by God to speak on his behalf, Benson's talk in which he references the White Horse

[23] Perhaps most infamously, Benson taught a church-wide audience during a General Conference address in 1967 that Black activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. were communist agents sowing discord and civil unrest to weaken the United States from within. This same talk was later published as a pamphlet titled "Civil Rights: Tool of Communist Deception" and distributed through a church-owned publishing firm called Deseret Book (Harris 137).

prophecy almost directly would have legitimized this apocryphal account as evidence that any perceived violations of the Constitution are signals of coming apocalyptic events. Therein, Mormon conservatives will readily operate within Crowley's paradigm of apocalyptism and feel ideologically obligated to resist any progressive movements from government-mandated quarantines to climate change legislation as though progressive advocates were God's enemies in opposition toward God's chosen people and his most sacred principles.

As one example, during President Obama's administration, conservative Nevadan publics took ire with his environmental policies, platform toward public lands, and more liberal interpretations of the Constitution. The Bundy standoff of 2012 in Bunkerville was simply this resistance's boiling point once it became a rallying cry for local anti-federalist militia and other Christian fundamentalists. And when asked about what parts of LDS scripture convinced the Bundys to organize an armed standoff, Ryan Bundy stated that Joseph Smith prophesied that "the Constitution would hang, as it were, by a thread . . . unto destruction" (Sottile). When Leah Sottile from Oregon Public Broadcasting pushed back by stating that the LDS Church does not consider the White Horse prophecy to be doctrine, Ryan answered that there had been "several prophets reiterating" prophecy as though it were scripture. As he put it, "That's what I've read, that's what I've heard, that's what I believe" (Sottile). He claims that other church leaders had quoted the prophecy as though it were scripture before, such as the aforementioned speech from Benson in which he uses the White Horse prophecy as one source of evidence for his argument that "one of Lucifer's primary strategies has been to restrict our agency through the power of earthly governments." Though despite how much the church has denounced the White Horse prophecy, events as recent as the Bundy standoffs show how much staying power White Horse has and how much influence it has held over Mormon political rhetorics surrounding land use

and environmental policies in the Mormon Corridor. Furthermore, as stated earlier, Ryan Bundy is not wrong in believing that there is some precedence in accepting the White Horse prophecy as doctrine given how many prophets or other church leaders like Benson have quoted White Horse or merely the line about the Constitution "hanging by a thread."

Even outside of the auspices of the church, other political commentators like Glenn Beck have drawn from this same topos of the Constitution as divinely mandated and the repeated the meme of "hanging by the thread" to non-Mormon audiences, especially millions of conservative members would become Tea Party Republicans, self-avowed Patriots, Trump supporters, QAnon proponents, and Capitol insurrectionists. Glenn Beck, although not born LDS, joined the faith in 1999. Years later, he became a prominent conservative talk radio host alongside Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, and Sean Hannity. He eventually hosted his own television show on Fox News, which only ran for a few years but garnered millions of viewers and widespread controversy given outlandish, apocalyptic statements he made about President Obama using FEMA to build concentration camps to former vice president Al Gore using his global warming agenda to bring about a Nazi-like takeover of the United States through globalization. Beck used his platform to not only spout hateful statements and conspiracy theories about members of the Democratic party but also to promote his Mormon beliefs concerning the nature of governance and the sacred status of the Constitution, which included numerous references back to the White Horse prophecy. Earlier on November 14, 2008, days after President Obama's election victory over Republican Senator John McCain, Beck told Fox News alumnus Bill O'Reilly, "I feel the Constitution is hanging in the balance right now, hanging by a thread unless the good Americans wake up" (qtd. in Milbank). Similarly, during a September 2010 interview on his own show with then Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, Beck remarked that after hearing an address from President

Barack Obama about the U.S. Constitution, he thought: "[W]e are at the point or we are very near the point where our Constitution is hanging by a thread" (qtd. in Rees 15). Senator Hatch agreed wholeheartedly: "Well, let me tell you something. I believe the Constitution is hanging by a thread." Both Beck and Hatch remain active Mormons to this day, and the way that both of them repeated the phrase "hanging by a thread" demonstrates how much they have been influenced by generations of Mormon conservative, apocalyptic discourse. As Robert Rees argues, "Judging from his rhetoric, Beck seems to believe he's on a divinely appointed mission to fulfill modern-day prophecy . . . [and] bolsters his vision of the apocalypse with scripture, end-of-times mythology, and guests who support his point of view" (15-16). His popularity and role in helping shape the Tea Party movement—which helped pave the way for Trump's ascendancy and QAnon coming to prominence among conservative Christian fundamentalists—only further amplified the White Horse prophecy, Mormon-bred rhetoric about the Constitution being a quasi-religious document akin to scripture, and Christian fundamentalists believing that American Christianity should be the primary basis for deciding matters of public policy.

Perhaps what drives the White Horse prophecy forward across so many media, rhetors, bodies, networks, and ecologies throughout space and time is its core mystery of how its prophesied events will play out or who will bring about its fulfillment, all of which helps imbue this apocryphal text with an almost mythic status that continues to intrigue even non-believers. For example, Judith Freeman of the *Los Angeles Times* wondered if Senator Mitt Romney of Utah—another faithful, practicing member of the LDS Church—would draw from this same topos of the Constitution being sacred or at least be motivated by the White Horse prophecy to vote in favor of Donald Trump's impeachment during the first trial in late 2019. As she puts it, "This could be his moment to step forward . . . to answer that question of whether we are going

to proceed on the basis of the Constitution" (Freeman). Senator Romney was the only Republican senator to vote to impeach Trump for calling on a foreign leader to interfere in a U.S. presidential election; however, I still find how Freeman and other journalists claimed that Romney could bring the White Horse prophecy to pass by resisting Trump to be laughably naïve, mostly because they present a fundamental misunderstanding of both the prophecy itself and why it motivates so many people to vote a certain way (as demonstrated by how many Mormons voted for Trump in both 2016 and 2020 in overwhelming numbers and reprimanded Romney as a Judas to the cause of liberty, such as when he was publicly booed and called a traitor on multiple occasions after his impeachment vote). An essential aspect of the genre of prophecy is imbuing a faithful, believing listener with a feeling of possibility that they can become a participant in or embodiment of the prophecy's fulfillment, causing the most avid adherents to feel as though they are a central part to a continuously unfolding narrative in which they are the protagonist or the hero. Believers who feel that they are enacting a larger metanarrative of apocalypse and God's chosen few defeating the wicked is so closely tethered to the topos of God's righteous people in perpetual conflict with outsiders that it causes those who perpetuate violence to justify these harms through religious logics and rhetorics. Those who attended the January 2, 2021 Capitol riot—Mormon or otherwise—felt the pull toward a larger, cosmological fate and exigency of America on the verge of apocalypse.

For these reasons listed above, the White Horse prophecy has continued to resurface and be remixed, recirculated, and reinterpreted within and without of Mormon conservative discourse during historical periods of large societal crises that bear the weight of apocalyptic anxieties, especially during the Cold War and the post-9/11 era. So far as it follows the established conventions of prophecy discussed earlier, the uptakes that this text provide for include physical,

public actions that have widespread, material consequences outside of the discourses within a select number of sub-publics that exist and operate at the margins of the democratic processes within the Intermountain West region. These uptakes consist of political activism in a variety of avenues whether that is political campaigns for public office or even armed protests. The apocalyptism that underlies the prophecy itself creates a sense of urgency and immediacy within the recipient, intense enough that they feel the need to re-orient themselves, behave, think, and act in accordance with the exigency that the text constructs. In this case, the White Horse prophecy has the capacity to persuade its audiences to believe that they are living within a transitory period in history, on the verge of massive, widespread cataclysms that only a select, prepared few could ever hope to survive. In many ways, the White Horse account provides a more immediate, relatable, and accessible recomposition of the Book of Revelations so far as it fulfills the cultural norms and expectations of a specific subset of American Christians ready to believe that the United States is approaching a spiritual and apocalyptic reckoning of such magnitude that the initiated are unprepared to comprehend its scope.

The circulation of this text and other folk doctrines or apocryphal texts in the Mormon faith tradition matter because of how much they inform and influence hyper-conservative actions such as climate denialism and armed insurrections that are born out of and reinforce settler-colonialism and carbon capitalism; after all, according to Laura Gries and Collin Gifford Brooke, "If we want to understand how neoliberalism is driven and maintained in late capitalism, then, we have to account for how affective energies travel and come to submit rationale responses, individual interests, and governing ideologies in favor of economic interests" ("Introduction" 13). And the political rhetorics conservative Mormonism is simply one salient example for how

religious belief—particularly Christian apocalyptism and fundamentalism—fuels these affective energies and condition hostile responses.

Conclusion

Thus far in my dissertation, I have outlined the theories of apocalyptic rhetorics and have sought to advance new theories on these rhetorics as being embodied or enacted through the everyday discourse, religious/spiritual affects, and larger ecologies and enmeshments of both human and non-human agents. Within this chapter, I have outlined how apocalyptic rhetorics from Christian fundamentalist discourse have reshaped the American political process in harmful, toxic, and potentially dangerous ways as demonstrated by current events; I have also used circulation studies to analyze how these apocalyptic rhetorics have shaped Latter-day Saint belief religiously, culturally, and politically by tracking how pivotal texts like the White Horse prophecy have circulated across multiple publics and rhetorical contexts across multiple generations. If we are to understand topoi as energy storehouses of ideas, texts, arguments, and affects, then the topoi of Mormon apocalyptic rhetorics have deep and vast storehouses that give Mormon rhetors seemingly endless material to draw from when composing arguments about the precarious state of the world. And given Mormonism's longstanding cultures of anti-federalism and striving to create their own independent, sovereign kingdom in the American West, Mormon leaders, lay members, apologists, and other rhetors have been shaped by a long history of religious fundamentalism and apocalyptism leading up to current events fraught with crisis, anxiety, and uncertainty. Given the vibrancy and energetic properties of rhetoric in circulation—more so with religious and apocalyptic rhetorics—some texts will continue to resonate with audiences more profoundly the more times passes.

And as rhetorical genres, prophecies and scripture within apocalyptic traditions condition more passionate and deliberate uptakes within these LDS discourse communities than public laws, policies, legislation, or any form of regulation, given that faithful readers view the words of prophets passed down from God as being far superior and more "true" than whatever the federal government dictates. As the next chapter will show, rhetors like the Bundys are motivated largely by these religious texts and their own quasi-religious interpretations of Founding documents like the Constitution. This Burkean terministic screen or lens of interpretation also applies to how they respond to each new federal or state regulation addressing subsequent but disparate crisis from endangered species to the coronavirus. Understanding these topoi of individual freedom as divinely mandated, American land as designated to white settlers, America itself as a Christian nation, and government tyranny as a precursor to apocalyptic events requires us to trace these logics and rhetorics back to their origins rooted in Mormon scripture and prophecies that preceded them. Again, understanding the history and discourses of Mormon apocalyptism is essential to better understand the Bundys' own rhetorics and action moving forward. These prophecies—apocryphal or otherwise—gain new vitality and vibrancy during periods of crisis because affects of anxiety related to societal instability can reinvigorate the distribution, circulation, and discourse surrounding these apocalyptic texts. And because the genre of prophecy encourages new interpretations, new generations can find new meanings in accounts like the White Horse prophecy as its presented ideas, claims, and topoi continue to move across—and transcend—both time and space.

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Chapter 3 – The Fundamentalist Rhetorics of Protest and Apocalypse During the Coronavirus Pandemic

"And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory." —Revelation 16:9

"The evil in the world comes almost always from ignorance, and goodwill can cause as much damage as ill-will if it is not enlightened. People are more often good than bad, though in fact that is not the question. But they are more or less ignorant and this is what one calls vice or virtue, the most appalling vice being the ignorance that thinks it knows everything and which consequently authorizes itself to kill." —Albert Camus

"Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." —Voltaire

Introduction

On December 9, 2020—several months into the COVID-19 pandemic—the Central District Health's Board of Health in Idaho held a meeting over Zoom that was soon disrupted when a large group of anti-mask protestors gathered outside of a county commissioner's private residence. The commissioner, Diana Lachiondo, left the virtual meeting in tears, saying, "My 12-year-old son is home by himself right now, and there are protesters banging outside the door" (Shepherd). Hundreds of these protesters had also congregated outside of the Central District Health office and outside another board member's house, all to protest a new public health order that would have restricted social gatherings to less than ten people and require face masks to be worn at all times. Some protestors banged pots outside of public officials' homes, blared air horns, bombarded their email accounts with hateful messages, accused them of stealing their liberties, and called them agents of darkness. The potential for overt violence lurked in the periphery as several militiamen came to these protests visibly armed. Furthermore, Ammon Bundy, who was a key organizer of these protests, informed the press ominously, "They should completely expect us to go to their homes and . . . we'll do much more than that if they continue to infringe upon us" (qtd. in Knowles, Gowen, and Hamburger). He clarified that these further actions could entail what he called "people's grand juries" to try government employees for their

violations of the people's civil liberties as dictated by the Constitution. What the penalties or punishments these juries would enact would depend "on what the grand jury decided" (qtd. in Knowles, Gowen, and Hamburger).

Months beforehand, Bundy founded this larger network, the People's Rights, whose reach has extended far beyond Idaho and into other nearby states like Washington, Oregon, Montana, Utah, and Nevada. On their website, People's Rights claims that they are "currently more than 37,000 strong" with a total "average of 340 people [joining] every day" ("Homepage"). Its mission, as they put it, is to help others "unite" with their neighbors or members of their respective communities to help them prepare "for WHEN those that believe they have the right to take control of your property, your children, even your body, come to force their will upon you [emphasis theirs]." Based on this philosophy, members of People's Rights and other interested parties often coalesce together, thereby forming a larger "network based on aggressive, belligerent non-compliance with the COVID-19 health directives" ("Ammon's"). Many People's Rights protests have indeed focused on disruption through outright defiance of public health directives, despite the risks of spreading the virus and infecting more people.

While Ammon Bundy's anti-mask and anti-quarantine rhetoric is not exclusive to People's Rights itself, what makes the entire People's Rights network unique is how it is steeped in apocalyptic rhetorics drawn from conservative Mormon epistemologies, ontologies, logics, arguments, and other texts. More particularly, as an active Mormon, Ammon himself draws from his religion's genres and conventions of prophecy—such as LDS sermons, testimonies, martyr narratives, and evocations of Christ's Second Coming—in predicting an upcoming American apocalypse not through the form of a pandemic but a more subtle ruse on the part of the federal government to strip Americans of their God-given rights. Or as he told *The New Yorker*, "The

government has no right to tell a person what they can put over their mouth . . . The government has no right to tell a person they have to stay in their home. That's called freedom. That belongs to the individual" (qtd. in Ames).

As I have argued previously, militia violence stemming from American Protestant fundamentalism is one of the most likely and dangerous side-effects of late-stage America capitalism in the Anthropocene, which has become further complicated in the wake of a devastating global pandemic. If anything, the Idaho protestors harassing a government employee at her private residence served as a precursor for the events leading up to the U.S. Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, when a collective of right-wing militiamen, proponents of QAnon, Trump supporters, and other apocalyptists stormed the Capitol building with the intention of harming senators voting on the approval of Joe Biden's 2020 presidential victory. Much of the rhetoric, discourse, arguments, alleged evidence, modes, and other texts present at the protest were religiously motivated, rooted in Christian fundamentalist, and apocalyptic in its purpose, as the following chapter will reveal. Ammon Bundy, though not physically present at the Capitol, encouraged members of People's Rights to attend the long-scheduled protest following the Save America event in Washington D.C. that same day. He went so far as to appear in a video widely circulated across the People's Rights network to advertise this event and told his followers attending the rally: "God bless you, drive safe, fly safe, don't wear a mask and stand for freedom" (qtd. in Siegler). His directive to not wear masks was clear and deliberate; however, for Ammon and his followers, there was more to their movement than not wearing masks, as is the case for almost anyone openly protesting measures addressing the COVID-19 outbreak.

All these aforementioned events help illustrate how vast the ideological divide is between networks like People's Rights and public health organizations responding to the coronavirus

through government mandates, meaning that the challenge is no longer about communication across difference but communication across "radical" difference. As I describe it, radical difference consists of larger rhetorical contexts between at least two discourse communities that are so ideologically divided from each other that at least one side will refuse any attempts at dialogue or deliberation with the other, to the point where they may resort to physical violence. This conception of radical difference is starkly prevalent with government standoffs demanding the privatization of federal public lands, protests against COVID-19 restrictions, and violent encounters with apocalyptic militias attempting to overthrow places of government.

Thus far in this dissertation, I have analyzed and theorized apocalyptic/crisis rhetorics within scientific circles, religious communities, and militia groups within the Intermountain West, so far as they relate to issues surrounding climate change, land use, and conservative political and religious ideologies. While the transition in this next chapter from environmental rhetorics and religious apocalyptism toward the global pandemic of 2020 may seem abrupt, I will nonetheless demonstrate how the Bundys' apocalyptism builds off of all the material that I have covered thus far and what the implications of these anti-mask/anti-quarantine protests are for other crises like climate change within this region of the country. Even so far as climate change is concerned, the future of the Anthropocene and human-driven climate change includes the ever-increasing possibility of future pandemics as well. Epidemiological researchers have found disease-carrying microbes preserved in the permafrost in Arctic regions that have begun to thaw, including "fragments of the Spanish flu virus, smallpox, and bubonic plague buried in Siberia and Alaska" (McKibben 34). In other words, the future of climate change also includes a future of viral outbreaks and other epidemics, which will further complicate and disrupt already precarious socio-economic circumstances made vulnerable by global warming. And as has

already been demonstrated, the threats of militia violence and hostile resistance to any public health or welfare initiatives (as part of larger, coordinated efforts between government agencies, professional scientists, public scholars, and other advocates) are both impossible to ignore and salient for studying rhetoric across radical difference amid public crises.

Therefore, moving forward, I will address this exigency by first briefly summarizing the theories of public rhetorics—as theorized by Michael Warner, Nancy Fraser, Jenny Rice, and others—before putting them in conversation with more recent theories on affective and parasitic publics as theorized by Kyle R. Larson, George F. McHendry, Jr., and Zizi Papacharissi. The goal here for defining parasitic and affective publics is to lay a foundation for my analysis of the case study to follow and reconceptualize theories of public rhetoric given the precarity and instability of public discourse in this moment. I will then identify and analyze the Mormon apocalyptic underpinnings of Ammon's public statements during the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, using Wayne C. Booth's rhetorology as my framework to trace the topoi of individual rights as divinely mandated, anti-federalism, and this perception that "the end is nigh." From there, I will determine how Ammon used the platform of Facebook and all of its affordances to craft his public messages calling for radical action against government-mandated quarantine, relying on texts such as his recorded videos, Facebook posts, and comment threads that I have archived. I conducted this part of my research by using digital ethnography as a methodology, mostly as a tool that "enables an understanding of where digital media and technology are embedded in the routines and habits of our everyday lives" (*Digital* 58). The goal of this chapter is to advocate for greater mindfulness of the rhetorical capacities of right-wing, apocalyptic discourse communities, namely their abilities to disrupt the work of scientists, public health officials, and other experts coordinating and responding to public crises. Ultimately, I

argue that apocalyptism has come to define (or at least become a mainstay of) American conservative discourse, more so after the coronavirus outbreak because of the precarity of a global pandemic that has enabled more uptakes of apocalyptic rhetoric; as a result, apocalyptism will continue to grow within and shape conservative discourse in the years to come, meaning we will need to anticipate how these apocalyptic rhetorics will impede progressive causes in the face of other crises like global climate change even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

Rhetorics of Online Publics, Counter-publics, and Parasitic Publics

In this first section, I review theories of public rhetoric to serve as the basis for my analysis of the Bundys' apocalyptic rhetoric during the pandemic moving froward. First I will summarize theories of publics/counterpublics as understood by various scholars from Michael Warner to Nancy Fraser before laying out more recent theories about digital affective publics as understood by Zizi Papacharissi and parasitic publics as understood by Kyle R. Larson and George F. McHendry, Jr. I am interested in exploring the intersections between the subfields of digital/visual cultures and public theory because of the significant influence digital rhetorics and technology have on how publics communicate and interact in the twenty-first century, and I will use these contemporary recent theories of public rhetorics to theorize how and why more apocalyptic publics congregate, circulate their messages, and create meaning during recent crises like the COVI-19 pandemic (either online or in more physical spaces).

The term "public" itself—largely in reference to a shared coexistence between various bodies—is complex and contentious. Often, when people refer to something that is public, they invoke connotations of the public being of a similar mind (i.e., "public opinion") as well as being open and accessible to a variety of different participants. Jurgen Habermas famously theorized

"the public sphere" as "society engaged in critical public debate" (52). This "sphere" is conceived not only as a network of individuals sharing ideas about a shared interest or mutual problem but also the very foundation of the democratic process and civic practice. Ideally, according to Habermas, the public sphere should function as a site where all participants involved have equal access to this arena of discourse and behave rationally when communicating with others they may disagree with, all out of the mindset that each member of that public is working toward a common good that benefits everyone. Obviously, this is rarely—if ever—the case. As many public scholars or critics of Habermas have noted (Hauser, Fraser, Rai, etc.), those with a more privileged status usually have enough socio-economic, cultural, and political capabilities to influence and shape the outcome of these deliberations and determine who is able to participate in them to begin with. Finally, other larger modern phenomena like globalization and multinationalism complicate this understanding of "the public" as a single homogenous entity as nation-states become exponentially diverse and discussions over topics of shared interest increasingly and across radically diverse and highly localized contexts rather than being limited to traditional democratic settings like centers of government.

So rather than viewing the public sphere as a singular unit, Gerard Hauser suggests that "we should expect a developed society to be populated by a montage of *publics*" (35); for this reason, we can best understand "*a public as the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse* [emphasis his]" (32). To converse about a communal problem and come up with a solution, "membership in a public requires rhetorical competence, or a capacity to participate in rhetorical experiences" when attempting to persuade others or move them toward action. Therefore, as Jenny Rice argues, it would be more accurate to conceive of publics not simply as

a conglomeration of individuals but more as "active exchanges of discourse . . . happening in ordinary spaces of encounter" unbound by geographical locations or singular moments (*Distant* 19). With that said, a single public can contain a multitude of discourses, texts, genres, and arguments flowing through them at any given moment in time, as my previous chapter on Mormon political publics has hopefully illustrated. How these different elements unfold is what creates a public and then subsequently other publics to begin with.

This framework must also include the materialization of counter-publics, in which participants, Nancy Fraser argues, "invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" against that of a given hegemony or other system of power that has historically excluded them from positions of power (123). Therefore, most rhetorical scholars now agree that publics and counterpublics are innately numerous, fluid, emergent, and dynamic, constantly evolving and exhibiting unpredictable lifespans, movements, and impacts; however, exploring and embracing this complexity is paramount for scholars hoping to trace these competing rhetorics and their influences on society (Coogan, Biesecker, Lucaites, Rai, Edbauer, etc). And I would argue that studying deliberations over topics of public concern between various groups with conflicting ideologies and differing statuses of power can be an ideal site of inquiry for public rhetoricians and other engaged scholars studying how members of a diverse array of publics/counterpublics navigate these complexities across (radical) difference.

Indeed, in this political moment, we witness increasing hostility between different publics, which can result in further oppression of historically marginalized communities like the queer community, people of color, and indigenous populations. According to Arabella Lyon, this hostility happens frequently in democratic systems that rely on deliberation and consensus but

"[find] difference disruptive rather than productively diverse" (11). Even then, a Burkean reading of rhetoric demonstrates how much persuasion relies more on "identification," or building one's ethos with a selected audience that shares the rhetor's values and beliefs, therein subsuming difference altogether and creating further divisions as opposed to bridging them. What is equally troubling is the all-too-common occurrence of rhetors in a public exchange refusing to listen or consider another's ideas and preemptively assuming that their position is inherently superior, leading to dialogues in which the rhetor's only goal in composing their arguments is to win[24] a debate even if it means arguing in bad faith, spreading false information, or causing actual harm. These concerns all beg the question of whether rhetoric is inherently as violent in nature as it is restorative, vacillating along the edge of "violence or vitality" as Cynthia Haynes puts it (2).

Regarding public discourse in connection to democratic processes, public scholars and rhetoricians have sought to question the role that the Internet, visual culture, and the proliferation of new media plays in public rhetorics. These trends have led to an increased interest in scholarship and research in digital rhetoric, which Aaron Hess defines as "the study of meaning-making, persuasion, or identification as expressed through language, bodies, machines, and texts that are created, circulated, or experienced through or regarding digital technologies" (6). Since public rhetoric is now frequently "represented or recorded through digital technology and disseminated via electronic distributed networks," either from institutions like government agencies or in online forums like the comment sections of a blog post, understanding how these texts are created or circulate across emergent publics is critical (Eyman 37). In many ways,

[24] Cheryl Glenn, Krista Ratcliffe, Amber Davisson, and Angela C. Leone also argue that how arguments are taught and made leaves little to no room for consideration of another's viewpoints and often casts the listeners or receivers of an argument as "opponents" to be defeated, all of which contains an underlying sense of militarism beneath these rhetorical practices. Similarly, Edward Corbett notes that even the word *strategies* in "rhetorical strategies" contains various "military associations" and "has its roots in the Greek word for army," revealing how much militarism and violence is embedded within the foundations of classical Western rhetorics (2).

digital spaces like social media sites and comment forums have become their own public spheres or networks that have become inextricably enmeshed in our politics, cultures, economic hierarchies, entertainment, education, and everyday lives.

Viewing digital spaces as their own publics requires new theories on how certain affects[25] and ideologies are created or perpetuated through digital networks and how they concurrently influence rhetorical activity in those networks. Because often the digital spaces or environments that rhetors participate in "are saturated with rhetorical activity that contributes to the generation of affects and their transfer between participants in the service of any one of a host of rhetorical aims" (Brower 48). Often, (counter)publics will converge and mobilize because of affects that circulate online, such as affects of grief or outrage in the wake of a collective societal trauma. As Zizi Papacharissi states in her book, "Affect evolves concurrently with the flow of events technologies facilitate, adding to the ongoing movement of forces that intensify or subtract from co-occurring and interacting bodies, events, and ideas" (15). This can either result in generative deliberation between opposing groups and greater representation of historically marginalized peoples or increased opposition and debilitating affects of hostility, a phenomenon that always warrants further study.

Naturally, Ammon Bundy's larger network of conspiracy theorists, right-wing militia, Christian fundamentalists, and other apocalyptists certainly follow or draw from similar logics, discourses, and topoi as other anti-mask protestors that have made similar efforts such as taking up arms and storming the Michigan capitol. These participants within conservative, anti-mask discourse communities share similar anxieties and concerns about businesses, schools, and other public institutions shutting down across the country in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

[25] Or the bodily, neurological reactions to stimuli that organisms experience instinctually prior to cognition, emotion, or action.

when it began to take hold across the United States in early 2020. These same fears, driven by a sense of the inevitability of an apocalyptic event, can then lead to a collective to panic, "hunker down," and hoard resources like food, toiletries, and even weapons given that survivalist mentalities may be shared many Americans, especially within rural conservative communities. From there, concerns about a current situation's precarity and instability can give way to the spread of false information and conspiracy theories through different media, aggregated through online publics and fueled by the Internet.

As Papacharissi has also argued, "networked digital structures of expression and connection are overwhelmingly characterized by affect," given how online spaces aggregate and build senses of connection that can then spill into the offline world and translate into public action when members of this online public take to the street (8). Often, these same "publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity" surrounding their largely emotional reactions to social crises and precarity, allowing "connective affordances of social media [to] help activate the in-between bond of publics . . . [and] enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations" (9). As is the case for Ammon Bundy's People's Rights network, members of this anti-mask organization went so far as to organize, recruit followers, and congregate in physical places to voice their concerns and opposition against exigencies such as coronavirus restrictions, which has often come from a place of skepticism toward the science behind the pandemic and a deeply rooted fear of the U.S. government overstepping its bounds. During the midst of the 2020 coronavirus outbreak and the intensification of the Black Lives Matter protests that led to looting in many major cities, the affect of fear circulated widely among conservative publics, centered around anxieties over private, individual property such as their business shutting down or facing the potential of

looting. After all, the materiality of these publics' ideology and everyday existence shapes their motives and their rhetoric, determining how they identify themselves with other publics.

Finally, more recent scholarship on public theory have created new conceptions of publics who disrupt an already fraught, precarious public sphere in American politics and use oppressive language and tactics in ways that can cause lasting harm. For the sake of my case study and analysis below, I draw on Kyle R. Larson and George F. McHendry, Jr.'s conception of "parasitic publics" as a framework for analyzing the public rhetorics of Ammon Bundy and People's Rights because of how they seek to upend democratic norms while also drawing from existing power structures they already have the privilege of benefiting from. As Larson and McHendry explain, any parasitic public "holds a privileged symbiotic relationship with dominant power structures . . . [and] articulates with and feeds off of the power structure's oppressive norms through demagogic rhetoric intended to limit discursive space for others and strengthen its own circulatory, material power" (519). In other words, what distinguishes parasitic publics from counterpublics mostly resides in the fact that counterpublics usually consist of and are defined by marginalized groups such as the queer community or people of color that are excluded from the public sphere and hegemonic systems of power, whereas parasitic publics still exist and operate within predominant discursive spaces but perceive their privileged status as being threatened. The "dominant powers structures" that parasitic publics may benefit from but still rail against may include any variation of carbon capitalism and white supremacy; because, as opposed to Warner and Fraser's theories of counterpublics being discursive spaces for historically marginalized communities, framing more toxic, fundamentalist, or xenophobic discourse communities as parasitic publics may "more fully account for power, privilege, and oppression in the public sphere" as evidenced by white nationalist rhetors that became more active and

prominent during Trump's presidency (519). Yet parasitic publics, as Larson and McHendry argue, will often "claim to experience oppression based on perceived status threat and their distance from the center of the structure affording them that power and privilege" either paradoxically or without a full awareness of the privileges they already possess within white supremacist, neoliberal power structures (521).

I would argue that the People's Rights is, by its very nature, a parasitic public because of how they align themselves closely with hegemonic discourses of American nationalism, whiteness, and Christianity, yet they still cry foul on new government regulations such as mask wearing and social distancing because of perceived violations of their individual liberties. The significance here resides in how they seek to carve out their own discursive spaces to proclaim their martyrdom and commit acts of civil disobedience. Ammon Bundy's anti-mask network (People's Rights) illustrates how certain conservative publics may operate outside of legal bounds by breaking quarantine, refusing to wear masks, and harassing public officials yet may still not be held fully accountable for illegal actions because of their close proximity to existing power structures that help support Christian white nationalism—even if members of a parasitic public still claim that they are being marginalized and oppressed.

These calls of self-proclaimed oppression were certainly displayed during the widespread protests against quarantines, mask wearing, and shutting down businesses during the pandemic, and many of these anti-mask protestors that took public action through public demonstrations breaking quarantine were predominately white in terms of ethnicity and overwhelmingly conservative or fundamentalist in terms of ideology. As is more often the case, "affective contours of whiteness are essential to the racial formation of parasitic publics" (523). Given that Larson and McHendry offer parasitic publics as an alternate theory to Warner's counterpublics to

account for more privileged spaces of counter-discourses, then by this same logic, members of parasitic publics are more than likely to be not only white themselves but are also more likely to adhere to white supremacist logics, orientations, and cultural practices in terms of how they garner support and advance their goals rhetorically.

Therefore, this framework of "parasitic" publics will function as my primary means of analysis for the following case study, since Ammon Bundy's protests against COVID-19 restrictions drew from topoi and prior discourses of conservative, orthodox Mormonism that align with settler colonialism and white supremacy[26] historically (as described in my previous chapter). Each of the Bundys' largest public actions garnered vocal and physical, material support from white supremacist groups, milia movements, and other hate groups like the Three Percenters. And despite the economic and cultural privileges inherent in being white men in America, these Christian nationalists at the Bunkerville, Malheur, and Idaho standoffs still framed themselves rhetorically as martyrs suffering from injustice, from their businesses closing to their status in society being imperiled and invalidated.

The Bundys' Public Rhetoric and Apocalyptism During the 2020 Pandemic

Building off of my review on the scholarship of publics, counterpublics, affective publics, and parasitic publics, I will analyze in the following section the public rhetorics of Ammon Bundy's political activism during the 2020 pandemic and identify how his initial statements intersect with Mormon apocalyptic and political discourses. I will then trace how this

[26] Not to mention the infamous moment when Cliven Bundy, Ammon's father, told a group of reporters on April 19, 2014, concerning impoverished African American residents of North Las Vegas: "They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never learned how to pick cotton" (qtd. in Capeheart). This statement is a clear echo of one teaching from hyper-conservative LDS author Cleon Skousen, when he wrote in *The Making of America* that slave owners were the real victims under the slave trade and that Black slaves were joyful about their impoverished conditions, even grateful for the opportunity to work and better themselves. Understandably, Cliven lost a lot of supporters (including media sponsors from Fox News) after he made these racist claims.

rhetoric circulated through online networks and garnered active support as the pandemic continued to unfold. The texts I will analyze in this section include Ammon Bundy's Facebook videos, video recordings of his public gatherings, reporting on these events, and other related digital content.

Like much of the rest of the world, the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 affected the mainstream Mormon church and its people directly, either in terms of personal health, institutional finances, or communal disruptions. Given that most active, tithe-paying members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are middle-aged or older, church leaders knew that many Latter-day Saints are in a vulnerable demographic. At least initially, this must have been the determining factor for the church to first shut down regular church services and then all temple services back in March 2020, once the rest of the country began to quarantine. On March 12, 2020, church leaders decided to move forward with "canceling all Sunday services and midweek activities for more than 30,000 congregations across the globe" (Stack). Soon after, on March 25, the First Presidency sent out a letter to each of its members, in which they stated: "After careful and prayerful consideration, and with a desire to be responsible global citizens, we have decided to suspend all temple activity Churchwide" ("First Presidency").

Soon church leaders brought missionaries home from certain areas considered vulnerable to the viral outbreak like Hong Kong, shut down the missionary training centers, and advised members to follow public health guidelines from the CDC. Though unlike other church denominations, the LDS Church offered no churchwide Zoom services aside from moving their semi-annual General Conference in April and October. Weekly Sunday services were not conducted online unless local ward leaders made the effort to provide them over Zoom. More

often than not, it was up to individual members to conduct their own Sunday services at home. Perhaps as a result, not every member followed the church's guidance, even from men they considered to be prophets, seers, and revelators, believing that there was a larger conspiracy occurring. The most prominent of these Mormon individuals who resisted the church's publicized guidelines concerning public health and safety was Ammon Bundy, who was already a vocal advocate for resisting government regulations in favor of individual liberties. Following both of these previous standoffs and long before the pandemic, Ammon claimed back in 2018 that the LDS Church "has been infiltrated by socialists, globalists and environmentalists" and had begun to re-shape church policies according to their own agendas (Dolan). While Ammon has never criticized the church's efforts and statements responding to the coronavirus directly, the Bundys' strain of fundamentalism emphasizes individual agency and personal revelation above the theological authority of a religious institution and its leaders.

After a brief absence from social media and day-to-day commitments to the Patriot movement, Ammon Bundy emerged from semi-retirement in March 2020 once the federal and state governments began shutting down all businesses and public gatherings deemed unessential. When Governor Brad Little of Idaho issued a statewide stay-at-home order on March 25 that required all "Idaho residents to stay and work from home as much as possible" along the same patterns as other state governors across the country, the Idaho state government met some unexpected resistance from the Bundy family and their followers (qtd. in "March 26"). The following day, on March 26, Ammon Bundy released a video on Facebook, calling for a public gathering to discuss possible actions against the governor's self-isolation order. Dressed in a white button-up shirt, black suit jacket, and a Stetson cowboy hat, Ammon begins the video by inviting "all the people of Idaho and eastern Oregon" and elsewhere to attend what he calls a

"people's meeting" in Emmett, Idaho. After asking his audience to "keep an open mind," he reads through sections of the governor's order, signed by Dave Jeppeson, the director of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. With a print-out version of the document, he summarizes the document before citing and critiquing specific quotes from the order, namely the directive that reads, "Violation of or failure to comply with this Order constitute a misdemeanor punishable by fine, imprisonment, or both" (qtd. in "March 26"). He rebuts this clause by arguing, "The last time it was illegal to meet together as a people on this land was before the Revolutionary War. Since we won our independence, it has never been illegal to assemble as a people." Here, he accuses Governor Little of violating his constituent's constitutional rights to assemble publicly as though it were a cardinal offense against America's founding principles.

To emphasize his point further, Ammon then reads through the First Amendment as proof to his argument that the federal or any state government cannot restrict the American people's "right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (qtd. in March 26). From there, he cites the Supreme Court case, the De Jonge v. Oregon ruling[27] of 1937, dictating that state governments cannot restrict any state resident's right to hold public assemblies. These are all democratic tropes that are evoked flexibly; here, unstable (or capacious) understandings of the public good like American society's collective health for all are being pitted against notions of individual rights discourses (namely individual rights *to* freedom). In his eyes, the government does not, and should not, have any legal precedent to make public assembly a crime under any circumstances, regardless of "whether what is most safe or [not], what is good or not." From there, Ammon claims that these inalienable rights are also "natural" rights that precede the Constitution, referring to the LDS conception of agency being

[27] Though Ammon seems to either ignore or miss the fact that this Supreme Court case ruled in favor of members of the Communist Party meeting together publicly.

ordained by God as the core function of his divine plans (as was explained in the previous chapter). The underlying assumption with this previous statement presumes that these are God-given, sacred rights that align theologically with Mormon doctrine and discourse, informing Ammon's stated fear that the government is now restricting his personal rights to attend church or family gatherings. More importantly, Ammon assumes that Idaho's stay-at-home order violates and contradicts his own religious convictions concerning free agency and freedom of worship. Though, rather tellingly, Ammon does not address or cite any of the LDS Church's mandates that members should follow health official's guidelines and worship from home to help contain the virus.

It's worth teasing out the ambiguity and contradictions here between individual rights to freedom or from government intervention versus protecting community health interests as a public good, with Ammon pushing for individual rights and the Mormon church advocating for communal response. This is a core and fundamental paradox within liberal democracies (as explored by Chantal Mouffe, Jurgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, and Candice Rai) that stress individual freedom/rights (liberalism) and equality (democracy). These differing ideologies have certainly come to a head during the pandemic and will inevitably clash in the context of global climate change, since the only way we will be able to address climate change is through government mandates and coordination that must, frankly speaking, restrict some individual freedoms for the good of all. Though rather than going through all the literature from scholarly experts about these topics or contending with their inherent complexities to understand why collective action is required to act on them effectively, fundamentalists and other skeptics will often resort to fallacies and reductive, simplistic analogies or arguments justifying why potentially breaking the law and threatening government officials is necessary. For example,

toward the end this first video, Ammon draws an analogy by comparing the stay-at-home order to someone stealing his personal backpack if he were sitting on a park bench, minding his own business. In this analogy, his reaction to resist the robbery and "establish [his] claim" over this possession or any items inside (one he lists being a family Bible) would be perfectly natural and justified, even if it extends to physical violence out of self-defense or calling out to others for help. This extensive comparison serves as his final stated reason for holding a public meeting to oppose Idaho's stay-at-home mandates. As he puts it, "We're calling on you to come and help protect your very own backpack and the very precious stuff you have in it."

The comparison between resisting quarantine and fending off an armed robber may seem unsophisticated at first glance, but they pull from a common topos within conservative, anti-intellectual discourse that favors homebrewed "common sense" over extensive, rigorous but esoteric academic research. (There is certainly a scalar shift at play here, where large-scale, systemic conditions are reduced to examples that operate only at the individual level. The idea that entire populations, large numbers, and scientific research work differently—and bring different dynamics into play—is thus rendered unthinkable.) Especially among Tea Party Republicans and Patriot militiamen, fundamentalist rhetors will sometimes reference directly or indirectly *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine,[28] in which Paine uses Enlightenment philosophies concerning the nature of society to argue that "government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one." Paine's contemporaries and future generations who revere the Founding Fathers have also drawn from the same logics derived from liberalism via the Enlightenment that privileges the individual and their own capacities to

[28] Which Glenn Beck used for his own title in his *New York Times* bestseller *Glenn Beck's Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of-Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine*.

determine truth on everything from academic research to religious experiences. At the same time, within the American Protestantism, believers will conceive of metaphysical truths about God, the universe, and worldly governments as being simple enough to understand and accessible to everyone; therefore, religious texts like the Bible should be clear and direct in terms of their meaning, and interpretations of these texts need to adhere to divinely inspired "correctness" according to what a religious public believes the text intended to say. And referencing back to what the second chapter established, many conservative Americans read the Constitution and other Founding documents as quasi-religious documents on par with the Bible. Furthermore, according to Crowley's theory of apocalyptism, many conservative fundamentalists such as Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints eagerly await a coming apocalyptic event in which the government becomes so wicked in the Biblical sense that it will be destroyed and make way for a kingdom of God to be established on Earth. This last tenant of Christian fundamentalist belief causes men like the Bundys or other militias to anticipate a second Revolution in America not unlike the first, mostly through armed overthrow and a resurgence in American nationalist iconography and discourses. Though in his final point, Ammon is more careful over his word choices and emphasizes that it's not his intention to be "rebellious" or even "civilly disobedient" (likely a reference to Henry David Thoreau), since the meeting he is hosting are merely a space for concerned citizens to discuss their grievances over the state-wide mandate (qtd. in March 26). For him, this first meeting is more about beginning discussions about how to build a larger movement, hence why he posted this announcement on Facebook to as many people as possible.

This first Facebook video that Ammon posted had a more subdued and calmer tone than his later videos, yet it still garnered more than 14,000 views and 845 comments. One commenter stated, "I have followed and supported you and your family for several years now. I cannot,

however, support what you are inciting right now because this is just temporary TO SAVE LIVES [capitalization theirs].” Ammon, who had become more active on Facebook by responding directly to his followers on the site, asked this commenter to “study and understand history and right.” Though another commenter told Ammon, “There is a time and place, now is not the time. Give it a rest right now. Jesus!” Another went so far as to accuse the Bundys of fraud: “Ammon Bundy is a bottom feeder and professional Grifter just like his daddy!” As per usual with Internet humor and trolling, some users utilized the GIF feature on comments to react to Ammon’s messages and arguments with GIFs featuring eye rolls and other insults. One commenter even posted a meme featuring a picture of Charles Darwin with captions that read, “Shhhhhh…just let it happen…” in reference to protestors placing themselves in mortal danger by congregating and potentially spreading a lethal virus to each other. Finally, other users mocked Bundy and other militia groups by sharing pictures of militia members holding photoshopped dildos in place of their rifles, one in which the Bundys at Malheur hold a pair of large photoshopped penises. Despite the mockery and juvenile humor, the motives behind these online statements illustrate a widespread concern and anxieties over a pandemic that could be made worse by careless or even hostile members of the public. By appealing to a larger public good—namely everyone’s health and wellbeing during a global pandemic—these online users put themselves at direct odds with Ammon, who is far more concerned about the infringement on his rights and other ways that the government seemingly oversteps its bounds. Both approaches are compatible within democratic frameworks of civic engagement in that they draw from separate but core American values concerning civic duty and individualism, even though these two separate topoi cause different rhetors to come into conflict; this inherent tension between

these two disparate positionalities lies at the heart of democratic discourse in ways that make conflict inevitable.

Even with all the pushback, Ammon still held this first People's Rights meeting on April 2, 2020, in a warehouse near the Emmett's city park. Heath Druzi from Oregon Public Broadcasting described the meeting as "something from a pandemic safety nightmare. Dozens of people sit elbow to elbow, greeting each other with hugs, even posing for pictures with an arm around Bundy's waist. The small rally is also illegal." Even other Patriot militia groups criticized Ammon's efforts. Eric Parker, president of The Real 3%ers[29] of Idaho, stated that these public gatherings protesting the quarantine were reckless: "We understand this is a health crisis . . . We would expect everyone to act accordingly" (qtd. in Druzi). Granted, the initial phase of this crisis remained open to multiple reactions, which began coalescing over time once right-wing militias united in staging armed protests against quarantine measures. And of course, Ammon is no stranger to controversy, given the previous events described in the previous chapter; though over the following days, he appeared to take this backlash rather personally.

On April 8, he released another Facebook video that was almost an hour long, once again talking alone toward his computer camera and microphone, which resulted in mediocre video and sound quality. Despite the length and low quality of the video, this video encapsulates Bundy's motives almost perfectly based on how he identifies himself with other fundamentalist and extremist users online and how he positions himself rhetorically and ontologically as a messenger on behalf of God, warning the American people of a coming apocalypse from a government using a pandemic as a guise for stripping Americans of their liberty. Like much of his rhetoric, Ammon draws from Mormon discourse, public memories, and archives, following

[29] This is the actual spelling of their organization's name.

the same genre conventions described in Chapter 2. As one example, he describes the events leading up to the Bunkerville standoff of 2012 as a "trial," a common term in Mormonism to categorize hardship that an individual faces, often sent by God to test the member's faith and resolve. As another example, Ammon claims that he felt "compelled" or inspired by the Spirit of God to help his father fight to preserve his ranch ("April 2"). After seeing how federal agents were descending upon his family's ranch, he describes how he prayed that night and then received a vision of what would transpire over the next few days, in that the Lord would protect his family and that people would come to the Bundy family's aid. Because of this higher form of inspiration guiding their actions, Ammon labels the Nevada standoff against the BLM as an overwhelming success.

His same attunement with some divine source also supposedly compelled him to drive up to Oregon and arrange the occupation of the Malheur refuge in 2016 on behalf of the Hammond family (whom he saw as also being persecuted by the government). In Ammon's words, after a long night of researching the Hammond case, the Lord spoke to Ammon late at night and commanded: "Go into the refuge . . . If you do not do what I say, then you will not find peace in this life or in the next." Ammon went without any hesitation. Though by the end of the standoff, it must have been impossible for him not to feel defeated by its outcome. As he puts it, "Because of fear, the community rejected us," referring to the people of Burns, Oregon, who protested the militia's very presence. Ammon then reached his lowest point after his arrest on January 26, 2016, and during his subsequent incarceration, where he was placed in solitary confinement for long periods of time. At one point, he found himself praying, "Why Lord? Why am I here? Why am I separated from my family? Why am I experiencing so much pain?" ("April 2"). Not unlike Joseph Smith's experience being incarcerated in Liberty Jail during the Missouri Mormon War

of 1838, in which he famously prayed and uttered an iconic line in the church's account of these events, "O God, where art thou?" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1). The connections that Ammon makes between his experience in prison and Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith are explicit, as though to bolster the credibility of Ammon's self-described martyrdom and as a chosen vessel of God. And as Barry Brummett has argued before, "[c]ontemporary apocalyptic, as rhetoric, uses revered sacred texts as the grounding for making political and social pronouncements," (95) as is certainly the case here and in other statements that the Bundys have made. After some time in isolation, Ammon believes that the Lord answered his prayer, and in his words, showed him a vision of the immediate future (most of which he did not elaborate on), namely that his "enemies" were seeking to destroy his family, but the Lord would protect his family and would show others how and why he was protected ("April 2"). Therefore, in his eyes, Ammon's answer was validated after a long court case when he was eventually acquitted and released, being found not guilty on all charges as though it were both divine intervention and evidence for how just his cause is, although other commentators have argued before that his acquittal was based more on court technicalities, the jury's bias in favor of the Bundys' case, and the prosecution's weak performance in court.

In each of these described cases of the days leading up to both standoffs and when he was placed in solitary confinement, Ammon's discourse taps into an essential component of any apocalyptic rhetoric. For example, he frames himself as the archetypal watchman on the tower, warning the people of disasters yet to come that they can adequately prepare for if they heed his words. As any rhetor within an apocalyptic discourse would do, Ammon takes it upon himself to interpret certain "signs of the impending apocalypse . . . for the benefit of a particular group, a group that will be particularly favored in the impending change" (Brummett 77). In a more

Mormon context, Ammon functions within the role of a chosen prophet, with the correct priesthood authority and the right attunement to God's spirit to not only understand what God requires from his people but also foresee what cataclysms are forthcoming that many people are not prepared for. Though paradoxically, Ammon's idea of public good is through maximizing individual freedom, and any limitations on these freedoms coming from the government can only lead to disaster. As he puts it in this same Facebook April 2, 2020 video: "Our country is headed toward a massive cliff . . . I have seen what is going to happen." He tries to assure his audience that "the battle for freedom is almost over, [yet] most of you don't even know it has begun . . . and that saddens me." For him, the apocalypse yet to come is not necessarily a global pandemic but America's complete and total economic collapse and the rise of a tyrannical government in America as prophesied by previous Mormon prophecies like White Horse.[30] In Ammon's eyes, this inevitable outcome as dictated by a divine creator is what ultimately compels or inspires him to organize large groups of people to protest federally mandated quarantines in the state of Idaho, across the Intermountain West, and elsewhere.

Impassioned by these same fears, Ammon raises his voice to the level of a "fire and brimstone" sermon by stating that "the battle for liberty before . . . this Earth was created and will extend into eternities" and how the ways that his audience stands "for liberty in this life will have eternal consequences in the life to come." Here he explicitly outlines the LDS doctrine about the plan of salvation and its fundamental basis on the concept of agency (understood as

[30] How he squares this argument with the fact that a conservative like Donald Trump was president in 2020 is unclear, though it may conform with the QAnon conspiracy theory concerning the "deep state" of government officials who secretly control government policy and legislation behind the scenes. Granted, Ammon and the rest of the Bundy family are sometimes hard to pin down politically because their actions may seem to align evenly with other hyper-conservative movements such as with white supremacist militias like the Proud Boys; however, Ammon and his father Cliven have been critical of President Trump on other occasions and have taken supposedly more "liberal" positions on other issues such as defending Central American migrant caravans entering the U.S. or the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of police forces.

free will). According to this interpretation of what the church now calls "the eternal plan of happiness" (formerly known as "the plan of salvation"), God cannot have a society that won't fight for agency. Therefore, he warns his audience "your eternal consequence will be to not be in the kingdom of God for not standing for liberty; it is just that simple. It is that simple." His belief in both the simplicity and the truthfulness of his message leaves little room for nuance, which is part of the reason why he does not provide many counterarguments as to why quarantining is necessary as a larger collective effort to contain the coronavirus; rather, he states to those who think all the actions over the past few weeks from world governments is all because of a virus: "[Y]ou are naïve to the wickedness of men . . . [which seeks] to destroy the agency of men." The topos of "God destroying the wicked" is ever present here, as is the topos of an "us vs. them" worldview (outlined in the previous chapter), since Ammon clearly operates under the logic that those who seek to disrupt God's work by shutting down churches or violating American's God-given rights such as gathering together communally must be somehow operating under demonic influence as though they are not exercising their own free will and agency.

The genre of this video that Ammon posted on Facebook could be described as something between a call to arms and a religious diatribe. The way Ammon structures and stylizes his video certainly follows the same conventions as a Mormon testimonial that lay members share with each other during the first Sunday of every month in a session called "fast and testimony meeting." In particular, the way he ends the video by what's known as bearing one's testimony with a series of "I believe" or "I know" statements about his religious convictions, specifically in his case: "I know that God lives. I know Christ brings justice to all things. He will make all things right. He will restore all things." These declarations of belief are usually personal but meant to be shared with the community at large as a form of affirmation that

the individual members still hold the communal values sacred; Ammon even goes so far as to start crying during this sermon, another expected act of humility and piety—whether sincere or performative—even for men in the church who break traditional standards of masculinity by crying in front of an entire congregation. Even the way he concludes the sermon is the same as in other testimonies that Mormons share with each other, in that he starts crying and ends with the line, "And I say these things in His [Christ's] name," but without saying "Amen" as is usually expected during a traditional LDS sermon.

For many audiences, Ammon would certainly come across as narcissistic, authoritarian, and even demagogic. Somehow, despite the appeals to "the people" and individual freedom, Ammon's claims exhibit similar conventions of demagogic rhetoric that relies on a leader's mistrust of other sources of authority and appeal more toward a larger audience's ignorance and prejudices as opposed to rational discourse (as other rhetoricians like Joshua Gunn, Jennifer Mercieca, and Patricia Roberts-Miller have studied before). Often, these parasitic publics will seek to create "reactionary discursive spaces formed residually and institutionalized affectively through the invention, circulation, and uptake of demagogic rhetorics," as has often been the case during the Trump presidency (Larson and McHendry 533). These same demagogic rhetorics correlate with Crowley's theory of apocalyptism in how precarity and exigencies of crisis shape and circulate affects of apocalypse within fundamentalist communities. Because of his self-proclaimed visions of the future, Ammon feels compelled to "warn the people" about how the "country is headed toward a massive cliff" in the form of the rise of autocratic tyranny in a once democratic nation, similar to the fear and paranoia concerning socialism and communism among the Latter-day Saints during the Cold War that I mentioned in the previous chapter—and as will be studied in the following case study moving forward.

Religious Rhetorics of Protest During the Pandemic

For this next session, I will more directly engage with Sharon Crowley's theory of apocalpytism, other theories of religious rhetorics, and rhetorics of place to examine how Ammon Bundy established the People's Rights network based on American fundamentalist theology. Based on all the prior statements about the spiritual motives behind his rhetoric thus far, one of the first actions that Ammon Bundy organized outside of the regular People's Rights meetings was to host a religious meeting that was openly public and deliberately a statement against COVID-19 restrictions.

Like other conservative church groups that year, Ammon and some of his other allies decided to host an ecumenical, trans-denominational Easter Sunday service as a deliberate form of protest against restrictions of large-group gatherings. Ammon provided the venue at the same warehouse in Emmett, where he had already been hosting his people's meetings to discuss strategies for protesting COVID-19 restrictions of social gatherings like family reunions and church meetings. While not originally built as a space for religious observance, Ammon reserved the building for an Easter service, as though to convert it into a sacred space for this occasion. A handmade sign that read "Defy Martial Law" was placed in front of the wood pulpit placed in front of rows upon rows of metal chairs serving as pews for an audience of around two hundred people. Ammon later admitted he did not like the placement of the "Defy Martial Law" sign because he wanted the focus of the meeting to be on the more spiritual meaning behind the holiday. Yet this space still became a site of protest under the guise of a religious observance based on its participants, rhetorics, and other texts present. As Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook have argued, "Place in protest builds from the notion that place is rhetorical to

specifically show how the rhetorical performances of place in protest are a rich intersection of bodies, material aspects, past meanings, present performances, and future possibilities" (261). The rhetorics of place found within the People's Rights Easter service was certainly full of these rhetorical performances and intersections of prior discourses of American conservatism, all made possible by the dozens of bodies present and violating government regulations.

The service itself—which was also recorded with a cellphone and livestreamed over Facebook—was hosted on April 12, 2020, by pastor Diego Rodriguez, minister at Freedom Tabernacle Church in Idaho. He began the meeting with a prayer and played a few upbeat recorded Gospel songs displayed on a projector slide, while encouraging audience members to clap, dance, and sing along to the music. Rodriguez, clearly mindful of the true purpose of the meeting, then told the crowd, "[D]o yourself a favor and introduce yourself to someone you do not know . . . make yourself friendly" ("April 12"). While it is often expected among some Christian denominations to begin a service with greeting other parishioners around them by shaking hands and telling them something akin to "Peace be with you," this part of the meeting established early on that the main theme of the day's services was to defy government regulations directed toward the pandemic such as avoiding social distancing or shutting down church services to prevent large groups from gathering. "Believe it or not," Rodriguez said at one point, "there was a time in America when it wasn't a news story to hold church." Ammon, who also attended but only as a guest speaker, agreed with Rodriguez during his own brief sermon that gathering together is "part of our rights to shake hands" and "share love." He then testified, to put it in his words derived from his Mormon background, "[W]hen your liberty has been taken from you, then you begin to understand how important it is that we stand up for it." He ends his brief sermon with a common refrain across some of his other recordings and public statements,

"Where there is Christ, there is liberty." Ammon's statement here represents a key intersection between Mormon doctrine and political rhetoric in that Mormon audience members would have certainly recognized this familiar teaching within their faith about human agency being understood as personal liberty and being divinely inspired by God, especially as they apply to America's Founding values.

The rest of this Easter service consisted of other speeches or sermons from guests before Rodriguez delivered the final, primary sermon of the day, which he began by reciting the Bible story about Adam and Eve being presented with the choice over whether to eat from Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. During this summary, Rodriguez jokes that the Devil tempting Adam and Eve was "the first liberal Democrat, because that's how it always starts: challenging the plainly written words that have been established for generations." The joke was met with laughter from the audience members, as was another joke directed at former president Barack Obama when Rodriguez stated that "there have been bad community organizers . . . some of them become president." He then criticized more progressive religious figures and other "long-haired hippies" who have allegedly made Jesus into a free-loving preacher who only taught platitudes like "be nice" and "don't judge" without realizing that Jesus had come to conquer sin and bring liberty to this world, not just the U.S. More than anything, he becomes enraged at the thought that any politician would try "to restrict your freedom because they think if you go outside and breathe some air, you're going to die." He tells his listeners that they must be willing to "suffer for the cause of freedom" before referencing the Patrick Henry quote from the American Revolution: "Give me liberty or give me death." On this note, Rodriguez gets the crowd riled up and cheering for the thought of martyrdom or suffering violence in the name of protesting government overreach, especially when he asks the audience near the top of his voice,

"Who's willing to fight for their freedoms here today?" The crowd's reaction was enthusiastic, filled with cheering, clapping, and standing ovations. The repeated allusions to death, violence, and fighting or battling for one's freedoms were certainly intentional on Rodriguez's part, although his sermon melded fundamentalist Christian rhetoric with Tea Party conservatism and apocalyptic fervor.

For Ammon and other participants of public events like this above Easter Sunday service organized out of protest, it's impossible to untether their orthodox religious or even fundamentalist views about the Bible and Protestant Christianity from their political discourse, as has been the case in the Intermountain West among Mormon publics for decades. They evoke some variation of "the apocalypse not only as a genre of literature or as a historical text, but as an imaginary—a way of making sense of our world" (McQueen 52). In the case of Ammon and People's Rights, anti-mask protestors participate in ongoing invention or crafting arguments on why imposing quarantines is both unconstitutional and sinful as a means to make sense out of a chaotic, precarious crisis. For the parishioners of this Easter service in Emmett, Idaho, each of those worshippers living in rural areas have felt the precarity of current socioeconomic situations in rural America keenly enough that they want to overcome the isolation and uncertainties of modernity and find identity with a community that shares their values. And if they feel that those same values that they hold sacred are under assault, they may feel a religious or spiritual imperative to react strongly and with violence, namely by drawing from what they see as religious authority—whether that be self-selected interpretations of scripture or a persuasive sermon. For these reasons, scientific, academic, and political advocates for action on public health, climate change, and the necessity for scientific literacy "are right to be wary of

apocalypticism" because depictions of, allusions to, and affects surrounding beliefs of the "end times can be highly motivating" (McQueen 14).

The Circulation, Formation, and Worldmaking of People's Rights as an Apocalyptic Public

For this final section, I will expand on my analysis of Ammon Bundy's anti-government network, People's Rights, as a parasitic public that has become one vehicle for apocalyptism in American political discourse, mainly by transitioning my focus toward how this public grew garnered more support online through various digital tools. First, I will use theories of digital rhetorics, circulation, digital archives, and online evidence to analyze in more detail how Ammon as a rhetor uses online resources and conspiracy theories to craft an apocalyptic narrative about federal and state governments using the virus to bring about a completely different kind of apocalypse. Then, I will trace and identify how the People's Rights network used online surveys, phone lists, text messaging, social media, and other online resources to circulate messages, organize public actions, and recruit new followers, all of which were used to harass public health officials, storm the Idaho statehouse, and send some of their followers to the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol earlier this year.

With all of this said, an essential component of these most recent manifestations of Sharon Crowley's apocalyptism is not just how participants adhere to conspiracy theories that seemingly validate their worldviews but also how they gather, accumulate, and employ these theories in direct competition with official channels and as their own forms of evidence given the affordances of online sharing through social media, namely Facebook (as has been the case with Ammon Bundy). Amber Davisson and Angela C. Leone define the affordances of online publics as "environmental factors that dictate and determine the behaviors that are possible within a

given space," meaning that these affordances in digital spaces "may appear natural but are designed by site creators to specifically direct the user to navigate the technology in a particular way" (87). Sharing, supporting, and arguing with misinformation within online publics can shape how apocalyptic militia members interpret current events, create their own narrative spin on them, and engage in worldmaking by translating deliberations about these topics into physical action—all of which stems from how they "read" the world apocalyptically. For these reasons, participants in this larger discourse operate within an "apocalyptic imaginary [that] is hostile to established political order" as well as "makes the crises of the day intelligible" by imposing "a narrative coherence" to them, even if that narrative is simplistic, reductive, or inaccurate (McQueen193). This hostility to political order and the evocation of narratives of oppression and martyrdom are certainly the case for how Ammon Bundy and his followers construed the pandemic as a violation of their most sacred values of freedom, individual liberty, and Christian observances. This has also been the case with how Ammon has used his social media platform and other online tools to provide his audience with alleged pieces of evidence or other textual artifacts to support his claims and coordinate with his followers in their larger efforts to protest quarantine and mask wearing.

Within Ammon's rhetoric, we can see plenty of the scientific data coming from government agencies like the CDC, demonstrating how other "apocalyptists are on the lookout for skepticism, and they furiously police the borders of their belief system against invasion by it" (Crowley 166). Decoding or responding to this fundamentalist skepticism is challenging given that "[t]here is no rational or empirical way to prove an apocalyptist wrong, because her major premises derive from an ineffable source whose wishes are clear only to believers" (Crowley 170). Ammon certainly uses misinterpretations of the data or these self-selected proofs for his

arguments as what Jenny Rice would call "a process of figuration, where we assign a fixed form to buzzing and unruly sensations" (Rice 135). Within this constant flux of the invention process in which he constructs his arguments, Ammon clearly uses "evidence as an *act* rather than a *thing*" (Rice 12), as is the case for any conspiracy theorist or adherent of apocalyptism.

Ammon illustrates this larger phenomenon of crafting evidence out of conspiratorial thinking to forward his apocalyptic arguments when he posted a new video on Wednesday, May 13, 2020. In this Facebook video, he responded to a press conference held by Governor Jay Inslee of Washington state, in which Inslee lays out the state's plans for transitioning to Phase 2 of their COVID-19 responses. In Ammon's video, however, he refuses to call the COVID-19 crisis a "pandemic," opting instead to call it an "episode" as though it were inconveniently temporary and a "scare." Regardless of the wording, Ammon insists that his audience should "keep an eye on Inslee" given his recent statements and the fact that other states have followed and continue to adapt Washington state's public health initiatives to contain the virus ("May 13"). Ammon's ultimate point here is that Inslee's latest measures lay the groundwork for the sort of tyranny or dystopian future that conservative Mormons like the Bundy ultimately fear.

To prove this point, Ammon takes the time to analyze and show clips from Inslee's press conference through a split screen, with Ammon on the left and Inslee on the right. He first responds to Inslee's comments about contact tracing and its role in centralized governmental surveillance of private individuals, which involves placing a patient in quarantine at the first sign of symptoms, testing widely, isolating quickly, identifying people that the patient came into contact with, and then placing those contacts in quarantine. Yet Ammon takes issue with how citizens of Washington can report their own neighbors to public officials about potential sick victims or how these contact tracers are largely conducted through the Washington National

Guard. Furthermore, Ammon points out how Washington state officials are working with the University of Washington, in conjunction with hardware provided by Google and Apple, to develop an app[31] that can identity patients who contracted the virus and are in close proximity to others. For Ammon, this ability for state governments to be able to track the movements of its citizens and mark them as potential threats is akin to an Orwellian nightmare because of its invasion of people's privacy. Finally, his fear of any possibility that the government would separate a child[32] from their parents taps into a long-running fear among the religious right for both the sanctity and purity of the traditional nuclear family. As Naomi Clark puts it, the religious right's "key messages came to be centered on family—emphasizing its structure, role, and how to protect it" during the Cold War, which persists to this day to "simplify the religious right's message" and frame it "in nostalgic terms that corresponded with themes of patriotism, self-reliance, and tradition" (164). For these same reasons, Ammon draws his audience's attention to Inslee's own focus on families in the state and the possibility for stricter isolation and quarantine measures, namely the need for those who test positive for COVID-19 to isolate for two weeks along with everyone else in the same household. As Ammon describes these public health measures, "if a person cannot do that, there will be other isolation facilities for them away from the household" by isolating family members away from the household if a relative they live with has been infected and recently tested positive. As Ammon makes explicit in his concluding arguments toward the end of the video, his personal fears about Governor Inslee's announcements stem not just from the possibility of forced quarantines but from what that would do to the children in these scenarios, which he finds unthinkable.

[31] The CovidSafe app.
[32] Whether or not Ammon is aware of the ongoing crisis at the US-Mexican border in which migrant children continue to be separated from their families is unclear. Regardless, there is a clear disconnect and underlying xenophobia and racism in overlooking border detainment on his part.

In the process of invention and constructing evidence for his claims, Ammon tells his audience that an associate of his sent him a job announcement from governmentjobs.com, made by the Washington State Department of Children's Youth and Family (DCYF). Ammon displayed it on his Facebook feed and read it as follows: "DCYF is seeking current DCYF employees to King, Snohomish, and Benton counties to volunteer to supervise and support children and youth in Emergency Quarantine Centers . . . who are either COVID-19 positive, or who may have been exposed to COVID-19." The responsibilities for this position include direct patient care, adult supervision, responding to meet children's needs, and engaging "in various social and educational activities with residents." After reading this job description, a dumbfounded Ammon wishes out loud that he was making all of this up, breathing heavily with pent up frustration and anger while glaring at his screen. Ammon frames these jobs and government centers as irredeemably evil by evoking images of concentration camps from historical genocides like Holocaust, comparing these government facilities to make-shift prisons meant to separate and isolate citizens deemed a risk or threat to the well-being of the state. Within conservative political discourse, this is a common rhetorical strategy used to criticize government overreach and violations of people's individual rights. This strategy usually comes in the form of arguments that further government limitations to personal liberties would lead to totalitarian rule akin to that of Nazi Germany. As mentioned before in Chapter 2, Glenn Beck has made similar comparisons to FEMA facilities being built in rural areas during the Obama administration, though Beck went so far as to argue or at least perpetuate the conspiracy theory that these were future "death camps" where President Obama would detain and perhaps torture or execute his political prisoners. No matter how outlandish or offensive these theories might be to a more liberal audience, the mere thought that the government could imprison its own citizens

for disagreeing with the state's policies is a powerful motivation for conservative, anti-government activism, and Ammon has a vast archive and prior discourses to draw from.

This would not be the only time that Ammon would make the comparisons between government-mandated orders addressing the coronavirus and the ethnic genocides committed by the Nazi Party in World War II. On August 10, after being turned away from shopping at Costco for refusing to wear a facemask, Bundy posted a new Facebook video in which he compared anti-maskers to Holocaust victims: "You can't even go to the store without feeling like a 1933 Jew . . . I mean I really can sympathize with them a little bit" ("August 10") Even when the number of infections began to explode in Idaho during the summer of 2020, he still openly wonders in a July 2 video how many of these cases are legitimate and notes that there was only a "0.003% chance of death." He argues that the only power that the coronavirus has is eroding people's liberties once government begins to enforce public health measures by law on a whim, such as how it had become by that time a misdemeanor in Idaho to not wear a mask in public. "They have an agenda," he argues, fearing for his children's future as though their lives and liberties were "hanging by a thread." And once again, he argues that the primary justification for the Nazis in 1930s to isolate, euthanize, and kill millions of Jews, Romani, people of color, and members of the gay community was because of a manufactured health crisis, namely by citing these groups' inferior "genetics" ("July 2"). The comparisons between having to wear a face mask while shopping and being forced into concentration camps where ethnic minorities were killed by the millions is certainly a false equivalence, and statements like the ones that Ammon made have been criticized by Jewish spokespeople for being ahistorical, insensitive, and anti-Semitic. Though for Ammon, he genuinely believes these comparisons are warranted based on the evidence he constructs and presents to his audience. A conspiracy theory like Ammon's

likening of COVID-19 health protocols to the rise of a new Holocaust in America is, as Jenny Rice has argued, a "pretender to true evidentiary processes, a sham passing off narrative as true evidence," given that the emphasis is not on scientific, academic data but on the apocalyptic narrative that Ammon tells his followers and himself (5). Thereby, this "act of evidence-building creates and reinforces orientations to the world" in ways that are unhinged from material realities. Rather, they are used by anti-government militiamen like Ammon to position themselves within these narratives of persecution and martyrdom, further advancing and solidifying their apocalyptic rhetorics in an already fraught American public sphere (61).

In the same video where he criticizes Governor Inslee, Ammon responds to a frequent counterargument that he and other quarantine protestors frequently, namely that they are "missing the point" since these drastic government actions are public necessity to limit the spread of a deadly virus already killing thousands of Americans ("May 13"). He dismisses this logic and displays some text on the screen that reads: "0.012% Chance of Dying from Covid-19 [sic] in the State of Washington." Elaborating further, Ammon claims that even though about a thousand people have died in Washington because of COVID-19, he believes that the reported number has been "skewed" since health officials must also count the flu, pneumonia, and other related illnesses. Though secondly, and most importantly of all, Ammon points out that around 7.6 million people live in Washington state; from there, he does the math himself and shows that given these contrasting numbers, Washington citizens have only a 0.012% chance of dying from the virus again. Granted, this is fallacious logic used to justify risking other people's lives to reopen the economy, an insidious form of necropower in deciding who should live and who should die. Again, Ammon's focus seems to be devoted more toward other, likeminded American citizens within his own social circles rather than considering how the virus will affect

more vulnerable populations (i.e. the elderly, individuals who are immunodeficient, and communities of color); actual systemic injustices are a glaring blind spot on his end, since he is more focused on constructing arguments and pieces of evidence that only make sense if one already believes the apocalyptic narratives of nascent American tyranny.

Yet for Ammon and his ilk, that seemingly small percentage in terms of risk only demonstrates how the federal and state governments' reach has grown too far, not only in terms of violating people's privacy and denying them their rights but also in terms of enforcing these restrictions through coordinated efforts through both police and military forces. To prove this point, Ammon returns to Governor Inslee's press conference, in which Inslee states that these state government initiatives to contain the spread of COVID-19 would create a $7 billion deficit for the next three years, a devastating setback even for a region as economically prosperous as the larger Seattle area. For Ammon, this bleak economic forecast speaks to another apocalyptic fear of the world economy tanking, another sign prophesied by Mormon leaders that the end times would follow. All these fears are enough to make Ammon state that this is "the line in the sand" and that he has spoken to members of other militia members who also feel that the government has crossed a line, forcing them to prepare "for the day that we hope never comes" ("May 13").

For many rural, blue collar workers, like the Bundys, the coronavirus pandemic had forced them to shut down their businesses, which took a devastating toll on their economic stability. Economic precarity, on a national scale, has always been a preoccupation among survivalist communities. For many conservative fundamentalist Americans, the worldwide recession that followed the coronavirus outbreak already had apocalyptic implications that felt more palpable to already vulnerable communities in rural America. As a result, conspiracy

theories like QAnon (and others claiming that the coronavirus is a hoax or engineered by the federal government) have been widely circulated and taken up by rural publics across the United States as members of more conservative publics have sought narratives, evidences, and arguments that resonated more with their own worldviews derived from Christian fundamentalist discourses and hegemonies. In other words, what may seem like an overreaction on the part of parasitic publics, like People's Rights, are deeply rooted in affects of anxiety and fear about members' own day-to-day existence threatened by economic precarity and government restrictions, revealing how much "apocalyptic logics of action surface in relation to history and bureaucracy, community, and everyday life" (Hall 121). These same apocalyptic logics, or epistemologies, and ontologies among adherents of apocalyptism helped condition the primary motives for moving and animating bodies toward hostile actions like storming a local statehouses and the U.S. Capitol. Because when established "norms begin to erode and/or experience strong counterdiscursive challenge, publics benefitting from hegemonic discourses can feel as if they too are in the process of demise" (Larson and McHendry 523).

As I would argue, this erosion of discursive norms causes apocalyptists to interpret and address larger societal crises through reactionary measures to solidify their seemingly threatened identity as white, Christian Americans and attain some semblance of agency in a fraught, complicated world. On a separate video from April 25, 2020, Ammons embodies and advances these same fears by arguing that the government responses to COVID-19 were "designed" to "socialize" us and "consolidate" people's freedoms, rights, and privileges into one small body where only a select few control everything, as part of a cosmological struggle over the agency of man that has been ongoing since "the dawn of time." This last phrase is yet another reference to Mormonism's version of the War in Heaven, in which Lucifer defied God before the creation of

the Earth and was cast out of Heaven. Like many of the statements made by his own father during the 2014 Nevada standoff, Ammon tends to repeat the same points or phrases such as "people's rights" and "coming together as neighbors" in almost every video, speech, or other public statement that he makes, drawing from the discourses and archives that comprise his entire ontological framework through which he orients himself in relation to his likeminded audience. For most of 2020, he continued to share related videos and numerous other articles on Facebook arguing against government restrictions over COVID-19 and repeating his directive for followers to "text RIGHTS to 80123" to stay updated on upcoming events, gatherings, and other actions. Benefiting from the then lax policies on Facebook concerning the spread of disinformation about the pandemic, Ammon used this social media site as his main platform to promote and circulate content related to People's Rights, gathering more and more followers in Idaho, across the Intermountain West, and elsewhere.

As part of my research using digital ethnographic methods[33] and to satiate my own curiosity, I texted this same number, which automatically sent me a link to a Google form survey, titled "People's Rights" at the top. Upfront, it asked me to fill out several pages of questions asking for my personal information. The first page of the survey merely asked for my contact information, namely my own name, phone number, email address, and which state I lived in. After that, it took me to this following screen that displayed a map of Washington state demarcated along county lines and number different zones according to a number. In the

[33] This sort of qualitative work has become all the more complicated but richly layered as digital technology continues to change the assemblages, ecologies, and rhetorical practices of modern existence (*Digital* 23). Yet digital ethnography with an eye toward everyday practice "enables an understanding of where digital media and technology are embedded in the routines and habits of our everyday lives" while simultaneously recognizing "the processes through which digital media technologies are both central to our existence but increasingly taken for granted and invisible" (58). Digital spaces have certainly become valid sites for ethnographic fieldwork, in which observation of a given public now entails participating in these online groups and studying how participants use various technologies (like computers and webcams) to accomplish their goals.

background of this Washington map, the user can plainly see a semi-transparent insignia of the Three Percenters militia, with an ancient Greek military helmet standing between two crisscrossed machine guns, the Roman numeral III at the bottom, and a circle of American flag stars surrounding the image. Frequently, right-wing militia groups in the United States use similar iconography that glorifies and overromanticizes militaristic societies from the Greco-Roman period such as Spartan warriors, as though they see themselves as defenders of traditional Western values. Finally, on the last page, the final required question asked me, "Are you willing to unite with people in your area to protect rights?" with Yes/No options. I picked "yes" to advance through each question. The very last question asked me to list any special skillsets or training I have that members of this cause might find helpful in defending others individual rights. The examples included "Ham Radio, Welding, Marketing, CDL Driver, Editor, [and] Accounting." From there, participants are given regular text alerts about People's Rights meetings and public events and protest. A senior member of the organization would then call the participant, interview them, and get them to volunteer their services. While I never participated in any People's Rights events or directly communicated with any member of the organization for safety and privacy concerns, I did receive different text alerts about gatherings in my area, from meetups at local hospitals to protest individuals who refused to receive medical attention when contracting the virus or rallies for businesses who refused to close due to quarantine restrictions. Other text messages I received included links to Ammon's videos and alerts about People's Rights web pages like Ammon's Facebook account being deactivated.

As part of People's Rights hierarchy, there are more than a hundred and fifty area assistants in sixteen different states, who communicate with other People's Rights leaders and then send messages through email contact lists and text message alerts ("Ammon's"). These

messages over email, texts, or on Facebook often feature information about where and when to attend public meetings with other People's Rights members, either to discuss strategy for organizing future actions, such as protests, efforts to support fellow members facing legal repercussions because of their anti-government activism, and more social, recreational events. Most meetings consist of educational presentations about the issues that the group finds the most salient, such as where and when to protest local businesses closing for not complying to public health measures. These presentations and discussions are usually tied to local concerns about new state laws being passed to address COVID-19 that members interpret as unjust and individual testimonials from members describing their experiences and feelings, not unlike in Christian church meetings. Furthermore, more than twenty Facebook pages with thousands of followers were created by 2020, where other anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers could congregate, share posts, comment on posts, and invite participants to real-life events. Though area assistants will use various tools at their disposal to activate members of this parasitic public, calling on them to gather and help "defend" members' rights and liberties being threatened under COVID-19. Research and data gathered by the Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights has shown that area assistants and other coordinators and moderators on People's Rights social media pages are also members of other anti-government, extremist, survivalist and conspiracist groups that call for the reopening of private businesses in specific states and ending facemask mandates. More disturbingly, key leaders of the People's Rights movement have current or prior involvement with other extremist, white supremacist militias like the Proud Boys and Three Percenters.

As a result of these affordances from these digital genres—namely their "shareability" across members of these anti-government digital publics—and the rhetoric from both its leaders

and lay members, People's Rights itself has become a platform and vast, interconnected network that provides for the circulation of conspiracy theories, hate speech, anti-Semitism, and other forms of racism entangled and enmeshed within or alongside their rhetoric geared toward the pandemic. Whether in response to Bundy's content or other texts presented by other members, participants of People's Rights will use their online networks and public meetings to deliberate, interpret, and argue about selected exigencies as they theorize about the underlying crises that beset them—namely through sharing articles or disinformation about the coronavirus being engineered by the U.S. federal government, China, or Jewish elites like George Soros and the Bilderberg group. Overtime, People's Rights has evolved into a larger ecology for the circulation of conspiracy theories from anti-vaxxers, QAnon supporters, or believers in the New World Order. Much like Ammon presenting "evidence" during the process of online invention by piecing together government texts about the pandemic and his decontextualized interpretations of them that suit his narrative, online users participating in People's Rights discourse will find identity and constantly engage in the circulation and uptakes of various texts made available through these networks, like Ammon with his Facebook videos. The affective component of this circulation sustains and enables mechanisms of apocalyptism that influence and motivate the public actions of anti-government protestors found within People's Rights, in which they will use public deliberations to reinforce and justify their most extreme, even illegal actions. Through these acts of worldmaking, members of People's Rights see themselves as building spaces—digital, physical, or discursive—that almost serve as enclaves for other persecuted "righteous" people that require protection from the "wicked," namely anti-fascists activists, Black Lives Matter protestors, academics, scientists, and other progressive groups.

The level of sophistication of this network explains why Ammon was able to recruit enough followers to stage protests outside of public officials' private residences. Though in the April 23, 2020 video posted on Facebook, Ammon stated that efforts like protesting outside of a public official's home are what he calls "preemptive measures" so that we "don't have to use physical force." He emphasizes that using physical force should be an absolute last resort, but he "prays" that it doesn't come to that. Yet, despite his accusations that government officials coronavirus are reacting to the coronavirus mostly out of unwarranted fear, a similar adjacent fear about America's economic future appears to be one of his primary motives. The inherent anxieties of climate change, economic recessions, and a global pandemic largely stem from the affects surrounding a loss or degradation of individual agency as a human subject is either denied or entirely incapable of determining their own fates in the face of overwhelmingly powerful external forces or simply not knowing what the outcomes of these crises will be. In other words, "[H]opes about the end of the world carry utopian or idealist commitments to disturbing extremes. Frustrated with the limited gains of incremental progress toward a utopia or an ideal, apocalyptic enthusiasts anticipate a cataclysmic end of the known world and a violent purging of its attendant evils" (McQueen 194).

Finally, on August 25, 2020, the People's Rights initiative came to a head when they gathered at the Idaho statehouse and staged a riot, trying to force themselves into the building while state senators were voting on a new bill that would have enacted further guidelines on how the people of Idaho should practice social distancing. Protestors tried to force themselves into the meeting, going so far as to break a window and shouting down government representatives who tried to explain themselves. In the assembly hall, when Ammon refused to leave at the request of law enforcement, he was placed under arrest. By then, he had ziptied himself to the chair, so

police officers decided to wheel him out of the statehouse while he sat in that same chair. The image of Ammon being wheeled out by police in his cowboy hat quickly become a meme of sorts in online circles. Others pointed out that this same image is the embodiment of white privilege given that Ammon was able to sit and be escorted off the premises in a cushy swivel chair while the Minneapolis officers arrested George Floyd by kneeling on his neck until he died. Much like the commentaries on race concerning the Oregon standoff in 2016, many noted that there was no armed suppression of the Peoples Rights protest because the participants were predominately white. It's impossible not to read this Idaho protest as an ill omen for what would eventually occur on January 6 at the U.S. Capitol and how many of the insurrectionists ultimately got away with breaking the law.

Perhaps what is most terrifying about these events is simply that these apocalyptic ideologies have become so pervasive as they have moved into mainstream political discourse, far beyond the rhetorical capacities of one man posting videos of himself on Facebook or using Google forms and other digital tools to distribute his harmful message. Although Ammon's Facebook and YouTube accounts were eventually suspended for spreading misinformation, his People's Rights website is still running and the organization's text alerts are ongoing. All these groups have to do is adapt if their digital communications are ever censored by larger tech companies, as was the case when more of them began to congregate on Parler, an ultra-conservative alternative to Facebook because of Facebook's 2020 and 2021 efforts to stamp down on false news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech on its platform. And although Ammon is currently awaiting trial in the state of Idaho because of his refusal to leave the Idaho state courthouse unless it was under police custody, the man is still at large and promoting his agenda of resisting federal and state governments at almost every turn. Ignoring any culpability he

shares for organizing this larger Patriot movement that has spread across the American West, it is important to remember that "agency does not evaporate, but is distributed across a fragile and complex dance among multiple and ontologically disparate actors" (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel 107), ranging from thousands of audience members already susceptible to right-wing apocalyptic mindsets to the widely accessible online/digital tools needed to gather such a hostile public together to Latter-day Saint leaders still refusing to hold Ammon responsible for his actions.

Leading up to Ammon's courtroom date, members of People's Rights identified the judge overseeing his trial (Magistrate Judge David Manweiler), published his private address online, and organized a protest at Manweiler's house in Boise on April 3 to demand for Ammon's acquittal. Much like how People's Rights harassed public health officials at their private residencies in late 2020, protestors at this latest event also demonstrated outside of a judge's house and a Boise courthouse to disrupt the legal proceedings as well as make public denouncements against mask wearing or receiving the vaccine. One protester told reporters that she joined People's Rights last year because of Ammon's Easter service, where patrons and pastors refused to wear masks or practice social distancing; though despite her commitments to People's Rights, she admitted at one point, "I got fired in August because God told me not to wear a mask" (qtd. in Weill). With all of this said, members of People's Rights have not halted or relented on their public actions, made possible through coordination on digital platforms like websites, text message alerts, and social media. The circulation of apocalyptic affects, conspiracy theories, and affects and narratives of martyrdom/persecution (as misplaced as they may be) have helped create and foster a wider "parasitic" public in how "they exploit historical and contemporary discursive, material, affective conditions of institutionalized, systemic oppression"

(535) during a worldwide pandemic. Coupled with Crowley's theories of apocalyptism as a dominant, hegemonic worldview among Christian fundamentalists participating in American political discourse, this case study analyzing the rhetorics of Ammon Bundy's latest anti-government, anti-mask activism has hopefully explained the discursive practices, ideological structures, and religious or spiritual enactments that made public demonstrations like the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, possible to begin with.

Conclusion

As I've tried to show in this chapter, Ammon Bundy's efforts with the Nevada standoff, the occupation of Malheur, and protests against the coronavirus public health measures are certainly not disparate from each. With each of these events, Ammon's rhetoric and efforts in organizing the People's Rights movement have been consistently anti-federalist and largely influenced by Mormon political theology with each of the apocalyptic topoi, logics, and other discursive elements found therein. This ideological framework has informed his sense of place and relationality with government agencies, institutions, and other forces seemingly opposing what he views as his natural, divine rights. Furthermore, his efforts in each of these separate events are firmly rooted with his theological and political conceptions of place, namely with his arguments that land belongs to those who "work" it by settling on it, conquering it, functioning as its self-appointed stewards, continuing this lifestyle across multiple generations, and otherwise holding the most dominant economic or civic power in its immediate environs. He rejects any notion that an outside entity as far removed from its daily existence—such as federal agencies from Washington, D.C.—can somehow dictate what his family can and cannot do in places as remote and rural as Bunkerville, Nevada, or Emmett, Idaho.

Yet, as this chapter and the previous have also shown, Ammon, his father, and his brothers have all exhibited variations of the same tropes, positionalities, orientations, and other characteristics consistent with apocalyptic rhetorics, specifically within the Brighamite Mormon faith, in how they claim spiritual authority and insight into what the future of this country holds, thereby feeling compelled to warn the people of the imminent dangers of some nascent tyranny. The rhetorics of parasitic publics that I have outlined have all conformed to the logics that the Bundys adhere to when resisting any government actions or regulations meant to maintain a larger public good—even if it means recruiting, organizing, and preparing armed militias for violence. In essence, the Bundys' employ their apocalyptic rhetorics—based on their own interpretations of both Mormon scripture and the U.S. Constitution—to reclaim or create some semblance of agency in response to the complexities and struggles of globalization, late-stage capitalism, and anthropocentric-driven climate change in the early onset of the Anthropocene. Their conception and theories about agency as both political and religious capacities are at the heart of all their public actions, so far as they are rooted in their faith in Mormonism, a religious tradition born out of decades of colonization across the Intermountain West that largely believes that rugged individualism and laissez-faire capitalism is God's way.

Yet the United States government's largely failed response to the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak—resulting in almost 600,000 deaths as of May 2021—can be partially understood by probing and dissecting the deepest motives and manifestations of this individualistic Protestant work ethic, as well as its consequences when it comes to political governance and policy. Authors like Tom Brokaw have labelled the World War II generation as "the greatest generation" because of their ability to act collectively, support a common cause, and create a unified front in the face of a global crisis. Yet this sense of communal purpose at a national level

was simply not present during the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic because of so many social and cultural divisions—largely motivated by individuals' desires to defy authority, hoard resources, ignore systemic injustices, and hunker down in the face of this new crisis. If anything, a pessimistic reading of many government, communal, and religious responses to the coronavirus paint a grim future concerning for the United States and the ongoing climate crisis, namely that organized responses will be slow, insufficient, and pathologized to the point where armed protests could ensue over governmental sustainability measures. Now it has become imperative that advocates for action on climate change—whether in government, activism, or education—not only expect but actively plan for hostile resistance from right-wing militia communities.

This resistance will entail sophisticated coordination through various technologies like phone networks, websites, and social media pages all aimed toward recruiting and organizing members as well as gathering potentially armed individuals in significant quantities. More importantly, activists, administrators, and scholars would need to understand not just the ideologies of these hostile publics but also the affect and energy of their rhetorics that motivates their actions strongly enough to cause large bodies of people to march in the streets with the intention of intimidating, threatening, and harming their opponents. Too often, environmental, social justice, and public health advocates underestimate how passionately members of armed, radical militias portray and view progressives as being so evil that they must be destroyed, as though any action to prevent climate change or contain a deadly virus is a threat to their lifestyles and most sacred beliefs. For those who subscribe to this new form of American apocalyptism, they take up arms and talk of kidnapping elected officials because they believe they are saving their world from irredeemably evil forces.

Finally, the rise of parasitic publics, white supremacists, extremist groups, fundamentalist Christians, and adherents of apocalyptism throughout the U.S. have not only complicated how we should theorize the public sphere in rhetorical studies but also demonstrate how fraught political discourse in America has become. Public spaces such as college campuses, government centers, and even rural places in the public commons (such as federal public lands in the American West) have become sites for violent rhetorics through staging armed standoffs, storming government property, releasing private information online, organizing protests at private residences, and threatening or harassing public officials. Apocalyptic discourses, narratives, genres, texts, motives, ideologies, epistemologies, and ontologies have motivated so many of these movements and their public actions in response to seemingly apocalyptic exigences like a worldwide pandemic and economic recession. Furthermore, how these worldviews and theories circulate online and how current digital platforms like Facebook or Google enable these aforementioned groups to organize and mobilize en masse so quickly also warrants far greater attention in both academic and activistic causes moving forward. As I've said before, theories of crisis and apocalyptic will (by necessity) become a mainstay and one of the primary foci of both rhetorical scholarship and composition studies not only because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of Trump presidency but also because of the challenges that climate change presents. Therefore, future research on public rhetorics need to factor in the multitude of entangled, overlapping crises of our current moment and the increasingly fractured and fraught nature of public discourse in the United States given how much democratic norms, structures, and protections have been strained to their breaking points.

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Conclusion

"Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule."
—J. R. R. Tolkien

"Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."
—Martin Luther

My dissertation has sought to engage with and contribute to larger academic discourses centered on the rhetorics of crisis and apocalypse, so far as they pertain to conversations surrounding climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic within the American Intermountain West. This entire project sought to contribute to theories of apocalyptic and fundamentalist rhetorics in the political sphere—namely Sharon Crowley's *apocalyptism* and Kyle R. Larson, George F. McHendry, Jr.'s *parasitic publics*—by studying how these same rhetorics originate, circulate, are taken up, employed, and embodied in ways that can inhibit or disrupt collective action in addressing public crises from climate change to the coronavirus pandemic. To conduct this entire study, I employed Wayne C. Booth's rhetorology (the ecumenical probing of topoi as commonplaces that different groups share during a dispute) to examine how rhetors among scientific and religious publics evoked or drew from different conceptions of apocalypse in the face of larger societal crises. In my first chapter, I reviewed the intersections between environmental rhetorics and apocalyptic discourse by analyzing the works Bill McKibben, Roy Scranton, Paul Kingsnorth, and Jonathan Franzen that engage with the exigence of a potential "climate apocalypse." In my second chapter, I unpacked Sharon Crowley's theories on apocalyptism in American political discourse and applied this same theory as a framework to analyze the history of Mormon apocalyptic rhetorics leading up to the Bundy's militia movements. In my third chapter, I examined Ammon Bundy's most recent protests against

federally mandated COVID-19 measures such as shutting down businesses, contact tracing, and mask wearing, in which he drew from Mormon apocalyptism much like during his previous armed standoffs in 2014 and 2016. Overall, my project sought to better understand contemporary apocalyptic rhetorics in American public discourse, and I argue that the use of apocalyptic rhetoric in addressing larger societal crises like climate change and the coronavirus pandemic too often becomes problematic and even harmful to vary degrees when this mode of rhetoric resorts to the logics of inevitability, individualist survivalism, reactionary politics, and religious fundamentalism.

What I have found from my study of each of my case studies—the genre of "climate apocalypse" non-fiction, Mormon apocalyptic discourse, and Ammon Bundy's anti-COVID protests—is that apocalyptic rhetorics are not only becoming more pervasive and influential in contemporary public discourse but have also been taken up and employed in toxic and pernicious ways, regardless of the positionality or political, ideological affinities of the rhetors in play. Probing, tracing, and dissecting the topoi of apocalyptic rhetorics ("the end is nigh," "the end is inevitable," "God will save the righteous and destroy the wicked," "God-given rights hanging by a thread," and "prepare for a disaster by hoarding resources") helps reveal the underlying logics and ways of being that can manifest as dangerous forms of either apathy and hostility toward any calls for stricter regulations or measures that mitigate a crisis' harm within the commons (illustrated vividly by both the debate over federal environmental regulations over public lands in the American West and mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic). These vast storehouses of rhetorical energies can serve as commonplaces of mutually shared fears, anxieties, and concerns about precarity and instability in the modern world, but they can also house archives of texts, histories, narratives, artifacts, iconographies, and affects that condition certain

beliefs and behaviors conducive for reactionary violence. There are certainly other topoi oriented toward collective, unified action ("we must act now") that rhetors can certainly draw from during periods of crisis, as evidenced by climate change activists demanding for radical energy reforms from world governments; yet, inversely, calls for collective action in the face of a seemingly world-ending crisis can also be used to organize and coordinate militia movements that can not only disrupt coordinated action but threaten the lives of climate, public health, and scientific advocates as well as democratically elected public officials.

I have also noticed throughout this study how seemingly paradoxical and self-contradictory apocalyptic rhetorics can be, perhaps at their very core, such as with Bensonite Mormons refusing to even consider the possibility that climate change or a pandemic is the vehicle that will bring about their own forms of apocalypse. These contradictions, however, do not necessarily exist within the mind of an apocalyptist; rather these paradoxes reveal how much apocalyptic rhetoric occurs within the invention process, *in situ*, as apocalyptists construct a narrative out of varying pieces of (mis)information that resonate or register with their most deeply held convictions the most. With that in mind, much like other crises that have been heavily politicized, apocalyptic rhetorics have also fallen within noticeable partisan lines, as has been the case for most issues within our vastly polarized political sphere here in the US and demonstrated both climate denialism and anti-vax/anti-mask movements. More importantly, as a mode of discourse, any form of apocalyptic rhetoric that draws from the topoi of the "end is inevitable" and any variation of "us vs. them" has the potential of becoming a form of violence in terms of public action; put more bluntly, apocalyptic rhetoric can be trauma-inducing, a consideration for any rhetor, researcher, and educator engaging with topics as emotionally charged as a climate apocalypse (as evidenced by the growing trend of "climate grief").

Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of research in rhetorical studies of apocalypse for how much physical, material, external, and day-to-day exigencies influence, shape, and resonate with the ways in which human beings communicate about crises and apocalypses. Any future scholars and researchers of rhetoric can certainly learn more from more contemporary studies about the rhetorics of precarity while also applying existing ecological, affective, and materialist frameworks to future studies about historical and contemporary apocalyptic rhetorics. More specifically, some variations of "new" materialist intersections with academic discourses about crisis rhetorics are one productive, salient direction for future research if there is ever to be an "apocalyptic" turn in rhetorical studies. More generally, professors, instructors, and other educators in writing and rhetoric in any form should develop a keener awareness of the material, everyday, and affective realities of our students during periods of crisis in which the word "apocalypse" begins to resonate with everyday discourses, which has become a necessity during the 2020-2021 global pandemic with many students facing daily hardships with illnesses, job losses, racial discrimination, and deaths in the family that can inhibit their learning.

In all, if there is to be an "apocalyptic turn" in rhetorical studies, then future researchers studying this topic will also need more careful consideration of how apocalyptic rhetoric and genres manifest in everyday, lived-in contexts in how it moves and animates bodies, manifesting as affect, energy, or rhetorical force. There is also plenty of possibilities in studying how new media (namely the Internet) helps circulate apocalyptic rhetoric even more widely and exponentially, given the popularity and real-world impacts of apocalyptic narratives and conspiracy theories like QAnon. Though, just as importantly, researchers would do well to examine class and wealth disparities of apocalyptic rhetorics, attitudes, beliefs, and practices between average citizens and the obscenely wealthy (i.e. billionaires in the tech industry like Jeff

Bezos and Elon Musk investing an inordinate amount of money into colonizing other celestial bodies like Mars, and whether or not these are efforts for wealthy billionaires to abandon a doomed Earth). One final important line of inquiry is to trace and examine in greater detail how much apocalyptic rhetorics have become a side effect of the precarity inherent within late-stage "disaster" capitalism and other more secular phenomena as opposed to strictly religious belief.

On that note—as one final, extensive argument that I will lay out below—I would like to return to Amitav Ghosh's argument that I referenced in the Introduction. Ghosh claims that, when it comes to climate change action, "religious affiliations possess the ability to mobilize people in far greater numbers" than national governments or international treaties because religions "are not subject to the limitations that have made climate change such a challenge for our existing institutions of governance" (161). Ghosh's statement is certainly compelling in many ways, because of how he considers the political power of religious institutions that and challenges the idea that climate change is a purely secular issue. Yet, as my case studies demonstrate, major religious institutions like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also present a major challenge to this proposition because of how much political, economic, and cultural influence fundamentalist, conservative religions like the LDS Church have over environmental policies and attitudes toward environmentalism in the U.S. And because of the place-based, region specific form of Sharon Crowley's apocalyptism and wider culture of anti-federalism that has circulated throughout Mormon discourse communities across the Intermountain West, lay members of the LDS Church are more than likely to take up anti-science and climate denial arguments and translate that rhetoric into public actions from sharing misinformation online to supporting initiatives to open public lands to private interests to staging an armed resistance against environmental regulations. My case study analyzing the historical

apocalyptic rhetorics that helped shape the Bundy family's protests in 2014, 2016, and 2020 demonstrate how much many members of the LDS Church are already committed to apocalyptic narratives that already conform with these reactionary political convictions. Even with government policy changes and passing or enforcing environmental law, there is now always the potential for more violent resistance, a possibility that has not gone away even with the advent of a new crisis in the form of a global pandemic.

So, the question remains: What can we do about this influx of politicized, reactionary, conspiratorial, extremist apocalyptic rhetoric within American public discourse, either at local or national levels? Unfortunately, as so much contemporary rhetorical scholarship has revealed, the factors that determine what people are persuaded by are numerous and endlessly complex because of the wider ecologies, materialities, affects, histories, epistemologies, and other ways of being in the world that shape not only what people believe but what arguments and evidence they are persuaded by. And apocalyptists operate within completely different affective registers than most academics, progressive political activists, and scientific advocates, so much so that attempting to disprove an apocalyptic narrative or related conspiracy theory is all but futile without a deeper understanding of how conspiracy theorists or apocalyptists communicate, identify themselves, form connections with other like-minded people, and orient themselves within a larger metanarrative that validates their entire worldview. As Jenny Rice puts it more bluntly, "While I reject the idea that there is only one way to effectively respond to awful evidence, I want to definitively answer the question *How do you debate conspiracy theorists?* My answer here is pretty simple. *You don't* [emphasis hers]" (173). By this same token, Bruno Latour shares this same pessimism when it comes to arguing with climate deniers: "It is thus completely useless to speak to them in apocalyptic terms announcing to them the end of their

world!" (195). Because when people become persuaded by conspiracy theories or apocalyptic narratives that not only align with their deeply entrenched political and spiritual ideologies but also embolden them, they have already made up their minds and accrued enough stories, evidence, and other texts—constituting their own vast archive or ecology of intertwining rhetorics—that help solidify their position even further. And when it comes to apocalyptism and any religious-political ideology that adheres to a combative "us vs. them" framework, any counterarguments against their worldviews or individual beliefs about scientific, material realities like the existence of climate change or the need to wear facemasks during a pandemic are seen as attacks against their most sacred convictions, an affront to how they identify themselves with their community and to the rest of the world.

In a worst-case scenario, conspiracy theories, religious extremists, and other apocalyptists will view and cast any person making a counterclaim against their firmly held beliefs as an agent of darkness being manipulated by demonic forces. Because for them, public debate and the political process is no longer separate from a larger, cosmological battle between God and his antithesis, the Devil. And as my case study on Mormon political rhetorics and analysis of the QAnon conspiracy theory as a new form of apocalyptism has shown, this "worst case" scenario of apocalyptists seeing those they disagree with as an evil that must be destroyed has become all too common in American public discourse. Now the arguments, genres, narratives, and other texts that enable this line of thinking have circulated so widely (online, over the pulpit, in the pews, and elsewhere) and become so deeply embedded in the everyday, daily lives of apocalyptists everywhere that the damage that has been done is mostly irreversible. Disproving and uprooting these harmful, toxic, and dangerous rhetorics has become an insurmountable task with so many climate deniers, anti-vaxxers, and other anti-government extremists wrapping their

whole identities in these apocalyptic ideologies and surrounding themselves with related discourses and physical, material artifacts—from books to merchandise to survivalist supplies to food storage to stockpiles of toilet paper and gasoline—that cause them to believe more vehemently in an inevitable end that will bring about their vindication and the destruction of anyone who labels them as wrong or, worse yet, crazy.

All this is not to say that means of persuasion, intervention, and creating generative dialogue are not entirely impossible. When I say "generative dialogue," I am referring to an emergent, interdisciplinary concept and am drawing from the scholarship of Wayne C. Booth, Cheryl Glenn, Krista, Radcliffe, Koralia Petta, and others to describe any deliberation in which all participants act in good faith, share a common goal toward addressing a salient issue, and orienting themselves toward action. Yet the challenges of communication across difference have only been exacerbated further in this current moment due to a multitude of different factors from the socio-economic precarities and inequities of late-stage racial, carbon capitalism to the fraying public discourse of American politics with the circulation of misinformation and conspiracy theories online. Now the challenge is communication across "radical" difference, meaning that those who engage in dialogue with members of parasitic, reactionary, conspiratorial, and apocalyptic publics must now navigate vast ideological divides that are fraught with hatred of those who contradict their most firmly held beliefs. Even public democratic spaces from college campuses to state and federal government buildings—and even private residences—are no longer safe from a new form of mob violence as apocalyptists have begun to gather collectively and threaten the safety of those they not only disagree with but hate with such violent passions that they are willing to risk their lives in destroying them. Herein lies a severe limitation to methods and theories for generative dialogue such as Booth's rhetorology, which I have

described previously and used extensively as a method for analysis: namely, finding common ground among two opposing sides in a public debate will not be remotely feasible if one side has guns and is looking for any opportunity to pull the trigger.

After all, not much can be done to persuade armed militiamen or rioting conspiracy theorists against resorting to such violence, other than regulating against and prosecuting any forms of rhetoric that seek physical harm to others, though other rhetorical scholars have offered new ways of conceptualizing how arguments are formed and creating alternate discursive spaces in which finding common ground will become far more likely. Other than de-platforming dangerously racist and discriminatory rhetorics from social media sites and other public spaces, Jenny Rice recommends that "our (counter-)responses are actually stronger and more effective when they look to the *acts* of evidence, rather than the contents alone" (173). Identifying, tracing, deconstructing, and disrupting the means by which harmful, toxic conspiracy theories and apocalyptic narratives are created will certainly look different from one context to the next, but using new ways of seeing the affective contours of how apocalyptic, conspiratorial rhetoric is formed can better inform us on how, when, and where to proceed. As one example, presumably after enough reporting, Facebook did end up taking down Ammon Bundy's social media accounts in late 2020 on the grounds that he was spreading false information and that his followers were engaging in hate speech. Granted, this move did not come soon enough, but thankfully Facebook and other social media sites have since included more capabilities for identifying and reporting harmful content, especially now that it has come to light that many right-wing militias would congregate and organize via Facebook. While many of these parasitic, apocalyptic publics have since migrated to alternate digital spaces like the hyper-conservative app Parler, more aggressive tactics for limiting and banning hate speech online and in other

public spaces need to be taken on and fought for. In other words, monitoring and reporting hate speech online will be one necessary strategy moving forward.

Whenever engaging in an argument with apocalyptists and conspiracy theorists directly is necessary, there are methods for "debating" with them that may help provide for more generative dialogue yet may not necessarily involve providing evidences or counter-evidences that members of this right-wing publics will not be persuaded by. If anything, as rhetoricians and educators in the field of English studies, we need to rethink how we teach arguments and conceive of what arguments should look like, namely by moving past discursive frameworks that employ arguments combatively in which the only goal is to "win" or defeat an opponent by any means necessary. Persuasion need not always be framed and articulated as overt attempts to convert someone to the rhetor's positionality; rather, narratives can more effectively illustrate the consequences of a larger exigence and register with an audience member more emotionally in ways that academic arguments or scientific data can't. As Crowley puts it, "we overlook how often all of us use stories as means of persuasion," despite how much stories have proven time and time again to be more persuasive than simply providing facts or data (198). So perhaps rather than thinking of our responses to any immediate manifestation of apocalyptism, fundamentalism, and extremism as "counter-arguments," we should instead rethink and reframe these responses as "counter-narratives." These counter-narratives can come about by providing and sharing stories about the harms of a given crisis or ideology from communities threatened directly by climate change to individual lives devasted or destroyed from a lethal virus spread by others' carelessness. Herein lies the power of more narrative-based methods of research and activism such as autoethnography. Yet another option in terms of engaging in dialogue with apocalyptists "to demonstrate the superiority of alternative values," which may be challenging

"when values are imbricated with densely articulated and resonant ideology" (Crowley 200). Though one means of finding common ground is by identifying and discussing the values that the two sides do share, such as by using the Socratic method to get to the heart of these topoi in which both sides can agree on what is freedom, what is ethical, what is sustainable, and what is equitable.

Bear in mind, these select difficulties and strategies listed above only apply to individuals, not necessarily to entire organizations—religious, political, or both. If an entire institution is based upon apocalyptic beliefs and practices as part of their founding principles, then changing these same beliefs and practices can take a long time to change given that reforming larger hegemonic systems of power can be a glacially slow process that can take years, even decades. Let's take the Mormon (LDS) church as one example, at least when it comes to climate change reform. As I've said before in Chapter 2, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, at its very foundations, an apocalyptic Christian sect—as evidenced by the final part of its official title, "Latter-day" along with its eschatological scriptures like the Book of Mormon and culturally significant but apocryphal, folkloric doctrines like the White Horse prophecy. Because the church's theology embraces and forwards spiritual conceptions of American exceptionalism, settler-colonialism, the Prosperity Gospel, and even white supremacy, a vast majority of church members over the past several decades have publicly supported and voted for hyper-conservative causes, public platforms, policies, legislation, and political candidates in the U.S. since the outset of the Cold War and leading up to the modern day. Because of how much Mormons encounter, engage, inter- and intra-act with apocalyptic rhetorics through widely circulated texts like the White Horse prophecy and Book of Mormon scriptures, they are more

likely to support causes that align with their values and give them enough free reign to build God's kingdom here on Earth however they see fit with little to no interference.

In this regard, it should be no surprise that a vast majority of Mormon political publics have been swept up in the right-wing populism that has defined our political moment. According to AP VoteCast Survey, more than 70% of all Latter-day Saints voted for Donald Trump in the presidential election of 2020, more so than any other Christian denomination in the US ("Understanding"); this was a noticeable increase from the 61% of Mormon voters surveyed who supported Trump back in 2016, according to the Pew Research Center (Martínez and Smith). For so many Latter-day Saints, the Trump presidency represented a turning point in social conservatism and religious freedoms, which helped many members overlook his actions and statements that did not conform to their values, such as with all his profanity, promiscuity, boasts about committing sexual assault, mockery of disabled people, anti-immigration sentiments, questionable business practices, political corruption in the White House, disregard for the democratic processes, and support of an armed insurrection at the U.S. Capitol when the 2020 election was not in his favor. None of these misdeeds mattered so long as he was in power and passing legislation that the Mormon voting bloc could benefit from (i.e. pro-business policies, cuts in federal spending, rolling back government regulations in the private sector, swearing in conservative federal judges, etc.). More tellingly, unlike with the church's response to the Bundy 2016 standoff at Malheur, church leadership was slow to put out a statement after the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, even with some church members visibly and vocally in attendance. It took more than a week for church headquarters to finally release a statement: "We condemn violence and lawless behavior, including the recent violence in Washington, D.C. and any suggestion of further violence" (qtd. in McCombs). Yet by then, it was too late; their week

of silence spoke volumes. In the weeks that followed, despite encouragement from church leaders to receive the vaccines against COVID-19, a study by from Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that about fifty percent of all Mormons surveyed admitted that they were "vaccine hesitant" or "vaccine refusers." How much Ammon Bundy and the People's Rights network had influenced everyday Mormons to reject the vaccine or any government initiatives addressing the pandemic may be impossible to determine; yet findings like the study from PPRI and election surveys from AP all indicate that anti-federal, anti-government, conspiratorial rhetorics have spread like wildfire across Mormon pews, with or without the Bundy's efforts. From what I've heard firsthand, entire congregations across the Intermountain West are pulling themselves apart and dividing into opposing camps as many active Mormons refuse to wear facemasks at church, openly deny any scientific findings about the virus itself, share conspiracy theories with other members, and alienate other members more critical of Trump. Everyday Mormon religious rhetorics have become part and parcel with Trumpian nationalism, QAnon conspiracy theories, and apocalyptism. And as my dissertation has shown, this flashpoint in the church's history has been building for years. The Bundy standoffs are merely one symptom of this illness that has infected the church and spread throughout its entire body.

Put it more simply, meaningful climate change reform within Mormonism may not be possible anytime soon. Even outside of everyday LDS congregations and families, church leadership has been largely silent on the issue. Yet as I've stated before, the church holds enormous sway and has more than enough power, influence, and resources to help bring about some necessary interventions in addressing climate change across the Intermountain West, a region that I have established as being particularly vulnerable to this crisis due to water shortages, megadroughts, rising annual temperatures, fraying ecosystems, and wildfires.

However, church leadership has been reticent on making any meaningful investments or donations toward addressing this crisis—from decarbonization to expanding renewable energy resources—because, as an institution, the LDS Church is more focused on accumulating and holding wealth as opposed to distributing it, even for apocalyptic reasons (as I'll explain below).

In late 2019, a former portfolio manager at one of the LDS Church's investment divisions (called Ensign Peak) filed a complaint to the IRS concerning the church's questionable business practices. According to the whistleblower, later revealed to be a practicing member named David A. Nielsen, accused the church of misleading its members about the use of its finances and violating U.S. tax law by amassing a massive investment fund worth more than $100 billion—entirely tax free—originally intended for charity (Swaine, MacMillan, and Boorstein). In comparison, the LDS Church's investment fund is worth more than the Harvard University endowment (about $40 billion) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation endowment (about $46 billion) *combined*. For decades, the church stockpiled tithing payments (a tenth of each members' annual income they are commanded to give the church) or other surplus donations it had received from its members, violating IRS regulations for tax-exempt statuses for non-profit organizations like religions. Rather than redirecting those funds toward religious, educational, or charitable causes, the church held onto these funds or used them to make other business investments, following a long-standing pattern of the church making large investments in ventures like real estate such as owning the largest cattle-ranching operation in the U.S. at Deseret Ranches in the state of Florida. Initially, church headquarters defended this practice of accumulating an unthinkable amount of money by claiming that they had always "[complied] with all applicable law governing our donations, investments, taxes, and reserves" (Swaine, MacMillan, and Boorstein). What's important to note is that Ensign Peak is just one company

working for the church, which has multiple holding companies in media, agriculture, energy, retail, and other economic sectors—meaning that the church itself is worth far more than the reported $100 billion. If so, the LDS Church is as wealthy as some of the largest and most powerful mega-corporations in operation today, including Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Disney.

Yet the real linchpin of this whole story, and the aspect most relevant to this project, is the church's ultimate justification for amassing such a large nest egg. Many journalists, media outlets, and online users wondered why the church doesn't give away a portion of this fund to altruistic causes such as aiding the homeless community or investing in climate change relief. The church's response to these inquires, at least at first, was that they are holding onto this large investment fund in preparation for the Second Coming (Lovett and Levy). Because of apocalyptic teachings, prophecies, and rhetorics circulating across Mormonism's publics and histories, the LDS Church acknowledged that the sole, primary purpose of acquiring this staggering amount of wealth is to help it survive any conceivable end-times scenario. When asked why I'm studying Mormon apocalyptic rhetorics, I have started to answer that it's because these apocalyptic rhetorics are worth more than $100 billion.

There are a number of problems with the logic behind the Mormon church's argument for saving this incomprehensibly large fortune for the apocalypse. As Chapter 2 has shown, many of the accounts of the Second Coming that circulate within orthodox, conservative Mormon publics that motivate militant action as evidenced by the Bundy family and their ilk are so apocalyptic and graphic in tone—featuring outright societal collapse, starvation, human cannibalism, authoritarian dictatorships in America, nuclear war, and Armageddon—that it's impossible to imagine that the U.S. economy will continue to function as normal, in its current state, during

this absurdly dark vision of the future. Bear in mind that most of the LDS Church's $100 billion investment fund is based more in economic worth through bonds, stocks, and other capital as opposed to liquidated cash. Somehow church leaders assume that, despite all of the worldwide devastation mentioned previously, the Stock Market, national banks, and other financial institutions will still be in operation during the decline and fall of human civilization, which many Mormon leaders assume will be a literal, material eventuality. Put it another way, the church could very well be making an enormous financial gamble on the possibility of capitalism still existing and functioning in everyday life in a post-apocalyptic landscape. Remember that the $100 billion is based more in the investment portfolio's worth as opposed to it being a mountain of actual money or gold locked away in some bank vault. On its face, this entire argument of saving this fortune for the Second Coming or any related apocalypse is a mind-bendingly poor justification for accruing an obscene amount of wealth and doing little to nothing with it.

In many ways, the leaders of the church simply don't know what to do with this massive fortune other than to keep making more large investments in economic sectors like real estate. In fact, as the whistleblower claims and as other commentators have corroborated, many leaders of the church within the body of General Authorities were unaware of how much money LDS, Inc. held. Very few leaders among the highest echelons of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and within Church Headquarters would have known about it. Even then, this fortune is so massive that it has become, quite literally in some sense, immovable in that no single shareholder, stock owner, financial manager, executive officer, and church leader or any small group of them could actually "cash out of it"; any size bank would not have the mechanisms needed to generate or hold that much material currency. As said before, the only possible way to actually spend that amount of money is to either invest it in large quantities in sectors like the real-estate market or

simply hold onto it. Granted, with enough backing power, the church could liquidate a portion of that account's worth into solid cash if they truly wanted to or make large denotations simply by redirecting some of those funds into other investments, such as how Jeff Bezos announced that he would donate $10 billion toward climate change relief through a variety of different venues. And as these business practices continue, these investments will only grow in value exponentially due to compound interest, meaning that the LDS Church is set to become more and more wealthy as the future plays itself out.

This, to me, is the most frightening and offensive aspect of the Mormon church as it stands today. The amount of wealth they have extracted from its own lay membership on top of the natural resources, generational wealth, and land that it owns from its colonialist period has become so monumental in scope that it's perverse. So, if nothing else, my project and this recent news story about the church's finances shows that Mormonism's apocalyptic rhetorics have amounted to or are worth a massive fortune that rivals that of most Fortune 500 companies. What the LDS Church—the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful religious, cultural, and geo-political institution in the Intermountain West, a region that is exceptionally vulnerable to global climate change—decides to do with its $100 billion investment fund in the near future absolutely matters for climate activism and religious rhetorics moving forward. There certainly have been those junctures in church history where Mormonism could have gone a different route and promoted more progressive values and causes given key theological/scriptural precedence (either with Indigenous rights, anti-colonialism or racial justice), but ultimately, the latter-day Pharisees have taken over and decided to make Salt Lake Mormonism all about American exceptionalism, the Prosperity Gospel, and racial, carbon capitalism writ large, an ideological and economic

superstructure that has defined the faith for generations and will continue to shape public policy in the Intermountain West for generations to come.

Much like how a majority of America's wealth is a result of stolen land and stolen labor, the Mormon church acquired its massive amount of wealth through unethical means, namely by extracting natural resources through ecologically harmful means, displacing Indigenous communities, and forcing its members to give a tenth of their annual income to its headquarters. Personally, I believe this is one of the more troubling factors about this whole story: The church has the capacity and funds to help solve some of the most important problems facing our nation (like homelessness, poverty, the pandemic, and of course, climate change) but insists on sitting on this almost literal pile of money, largely because of this apocalyptic mindset that the church still can't leave behind—even though, ironically, these attitudes might actually be warranted given the seriousness of the climate crisis, which they're choosing to largely ignore. Even though, as explained in Chapter 2, Mormonism may not have existed in the first place if Joseph Smith's family had not become climate refugees during the Year Without a Summer.

And therein lies the fundamental problem as to why American religions like the LDS Church simply *can't* suddenly shift its rhetoric toward sustainability, moderation, and living with less in relation to land use or environmental stewardship because it runs counter to more than two-hundred years of apocalyptic rhetoric, a kingdom-building theology, and institutionalized corporate structures that are designed to accrue as much wealth as possible. Even then, what the church and its leadership promise in exchange for the members' obedience and a tenth of their income is nothing short of infinity—infinite children or progeny, infinite wealth with mansions in heaven and streets paved with gold, infinite worlds without number, infinite power in the form of a godly priesthood, and infinite, eternal life in the hereafter. At the heart of Mormonism is not

only American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny but also the very ethos of capitalism and the prosperity Gospel at an eternal, cosmological scale, in which only a select, chosen few are granted a seemingly endless supply of wealth, resources, and power while the rest are either caught somewhere in the middle or left to suffer. This hierarchy is so deeply encoded into the Mormons' vision of the afterlife (divided between the Celestial, Telestial, and Terrestrial Kingdom with "outer darkness" awaiting those most deserving of eternal damnation like apostates) that it's the guiding force and motivation for their thoughts, actions, behaviors, and attitudes here in this life. For all these reasons and many others, it becomes clear why church leadership would be hesitant to suddenly ask their members to limit those aspirations or live as though God wasn't rewarding them materially here on Earth for their faithfulness. They would risk alienating life-long members who have been taught otherwise, and it would force them to lose much of their own financial holdings and social standings by modeling more sustainable practices themselves. Their financial, material, political, and ideological investments in the prosperity Gospel run too deep and are too intricately embedded and entangled in their culture, religious observances, and day-to-day, lived-in existence.

In contrast, a multitude of other more institutional challenges also present themselves in rather quick succession, all still difficult or seemingly impossible to solve. For example, to truly decarbonize, the church would have to withdraw the entire missionary force from all the countries of the world in which they're placed or reorient their mission program to make it more humanitarian focused as opposed to proselytizing. The church would not be able to grow or increase its membership otherwise, meaning that it would risk stagnation or negative growth as a result. And by cutting back air travel, the global membership of the church would also inevitably suffer from negligence without their leaders making tours outside of the U.S. to other nations as

a means to minister to non-American members as it retreats back to being mainly a Utah-based religion. Furthermore, the church would need to abandon most of its business interests and investments in real estate, cattle ranching, farmlands, shopping malls, and elsewhere. It would need to decommission its entire fleet of cars for its General Authorities and other employees. It would also need to enforce a more literalist view of its Word of Wisdom by telling its members that the consumption of meat is to be "used sparingly" and only in "times of famine and excess hunger" (Doctrine and Covenants 89: 13-15). It would need to shut down most of its temples not only to cut back in their energy bills and ask their own members to reduce their time going to the temple if it means cutting back on transportation costs (since some active members attend temple services on a weekly basis). It would also need to command its own members to drive as little as possible and cut back on their own energy costs. Finally, it would need to reconfigure large sections of its theology by displacing humans, the children of God, from the center of the universe or all existence on this planet to have its members reconceptualize their relationship with nature and other non-human agents in their immediate environments, namely by moving away from any and all theological underpinnings that encourage the accumulation of unlimited amounts of wealth in this world or the world to come.

In all, in order for the church to act on climate change ethically and effectively or mitigate its most apocalyptic consequences, the entire organization would have to completely reform itself at multiple levels. It would need to deemphasize and distance itself from the Book of Mormon; apologize and atone for its settler-colonial history; make reparations for Indigenous communities that it has displace and harmed; forsake its doctrines and cultural practices entangled with the Prosperity Gospel; decarbonize and divest from various carbon economies; alter its current business practices and internal corporate culture; give up and redistribute large

quantities of its own wealth, stock value, and cash reserves; rethink the entirety of its governance structures that rely on traditional but harmful notions of patriarchy, hyper-masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness; revert back to localized, frontier communal lifestyles when Mormon settlers tried to institute the Law of Consecration, in which all material resources were shared communally; reprimand and teach against ultra-conservative, militant publics within its American membership such as by punishing or even ousting bad faith actors like the Bundys; engage more directly in local land agencies and other systems of governance to help create sustainable, environmental policies that could never be interpreted as "neutral"; and reverse hundreds of years of anti-federal and anti-science discourses that have defined so many cultural aspects of its core membership. Such reforms would inevitably be met with resistance even from faithful members and risk a number of schisms within the faith that would ultimately deny central leadership of so much power over its own people and forever change the innerworkings and very foundations of the entire religion.

As you can imagine, and as my specific case studies have demonstrated, these changes may not happen anytime soon, or at least not soon enough. All these actions listed above are risks that church leaders are unable and unwilling to take at this juncture. Therefore, any and all productive dialogues and actions would need to occur at grassroots levels within the church's membership and its local communities, beginning with practicing, believing Mormons themselves. Eventually, a climate march would need to occur in the streets of Salt Lake City, directly asking or demanding the Church to take more direct actions on climate change to "force the issue," so to speak. The Post-Mormon[34] and progressive Mormon communities are in a unique position to help bring about these changes by pursuing their own avenues of climate

[34] Former Mormons who have left the church for various reasons.

activism, namely by demanding that the church clarify or revise its stance on climate change, divest more from fossil fuel industries, and more radical actions that go beyond merely advocating for responsible environmental stewardship. There have been similar protests akin to a climate march organized by former and progressive Mormons, such as the "Protect LDS Children" initiative organized by former bishop Sam Young and Mormon podcaster John Dehlin to end the practice of church leaders asking minors sexually explicit questions behind closed doors (either during confessions or as a part of recurring interviews to gauge a member's "worthiness" to receive in the church's saving ordinances like the sacrament). This became a multi-faceted campaign that entailed a protest march in Salt Lake City to deliver a hard copy of a petition to the church headquarters on Temple Square, publicly calling for church leaders to end this policy. Yet this movement was not without its risks. Much like John Dehlin, Kate Kelly, Jeremy Runnells, and other heretical Mormons before him, Sam Young was excommunicated (or ousted) from the church for his actions. The LDS Church does not tolerate dissent, let along direct challenges to the prophet's or the apostles' divine authority. The irony of this, however, is that Ammon Bundy, to this day, has not faced any form of church discipline for openly breaking the law, contradicting the church's teachings about exercising caution during the COVID-19 pandemic, and supporting an armed overthrow of the US government.

Regardless of the risks and how much the church is willing to tolerate people like the Bundys encouraging armed violence, the only way possible to save the Mormon church from itself is to dismantle it from the inside-out. In other words, the church needs more heretics willing to risk excommunication for the sake of church reform. Furthermore, a radical reimaging of Mormon theology and religious practices must take place. As one possibility, Terry Tempest Williams offers one counterpoint to a long-standing church doctrine concerning the Mother-in-

Heaven, God's wife and humanity's spiritual mother (which is the closest thing Mormonism has to a divine feminine). Williams calls this new conceptualization of Heavenly Mother "the Motherbody . . . a spiritual counterpoint to the Godhead, perhaps our inspiration and devotion would no longer be directed to the stars, but our worship could return to the Earth" (241). With more and more rhetoricians calling for more feminist orientations toward ecological care through spiritual frameworks, William's "Motherbody" is one of many doctrinal innovations to Mormon theology that could begin from the ground up. As regional, place-based and hyperlocalized frameworks for the Intermountain West, new Mormon teachings on ecological mindfulness could be pivotal in reorienting more religious, rural publics toward creating meaningful and lasting climate activism, as well as helping build more resilient communities across the Great Basin as the American West and the rest of the world faces the deep unknown. Because if climate change is as dire and apocalyptic as entire scientific communities say, then more radical actions and rhetorics of resiliency are needed from every level of human society, from the religious to the secular. Perhaps, in some ways, we should consider what Christopher Ketcham claims: "[W]hat we need is a Bundy environmentalist. The Bundys may have been wrong in the subject of their advocacy, but at least they were willing to sacrifice and struggle and suffer for their beliefs."

In any case, more radically ecological theologies can at least give us hope that changing the most stubborn and zealous of minds is possible, perhaps in helping them join a unified effort toward solving each of the enveloping crises that beset us in this new age of precarity and uncertainty. Through it all, it is more than essential to remember that the human species is surprisingly resilient; the means to adapt and survive is so baked into our DNA that it gives me hope of humankind's survival in the face of these seemingly insurmountable challenges that we

face. The only remaining question, then, is what we are willing to let go or sacrifice in the process: whether that be ideologies and systems of power designed to maximize the wealth for a privileged few or entire populations of people left vulnerable because of these former ideologies that enable and enact violence as a means of their own survival.

Indeed, in this era of America's history, we must find new ways of gauging and navigating the tensions, conflicts, and discord within these impasses between rival publics deliberating over matters of environmental and ecological concern in ways that are generative and ethical. Writing, teaching, and researching during times of disruption requires us to live and act with a sense of urgency and compassion, as though our time were limited. Write against power. Write as protest. Speak and act with an eye toward dismantling oppressive institutions. Live and act as though the world were ending. Fight for the survival of all species and all forms of life as though they held and performed as much agency as you. Find peace with living in the moment and making peace with whatever shall befall us. This last point is largely the most human and sacred endeavor that we could ever pursue.

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