

The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School
School of Humanities

**BELIEVING IN THE END: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE PREPPER
COMMUNITY**

A Dissertation in
American Studies

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2018

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines “preppers,” a vernacular community of individuals who believe that the world is on an unsustainable trajectory and only through individual production can humanity be saved. The research took place offline through attending various prepper shows on the East Coast and online through observing prepper interactions on websites and forums. The study was launched with a driving question of why preppers, unlike other prophetic apocalyptic groups, could survive their continuous failed prophecies around the end of the world. The research reveals that preppers survive because of the community’s ability to absorb the impact of a failed prophecy through its vernacular interpretive practices. Other more hierarchical apocalyptic communities have little room for shifting blame when the world does not end. Preppers believe in a secular apocalypse, one that is void of control by God, but the majority of preppers are Christians. The study explores the challenges created by the dissonance between Christian prepper’s belief in Jesus and a call to care for others, and the secular need to protect himself and his family. To overcome this dissonance, Christian preppers have removed Jesus, Noah, and Joseph from the Bible and transformed them into preppers. This study demonstrates how preppers use a broad range of media, including the Bible, movies, and YouTube clips, to construct their vision of the apocalypse. Without institutional leadership, preppers fill this void with their individual voices and construct the vernacular apocalypse through various forms of media. Preppers believe that the apocalypse will purge society and create a new localized egalitarian world. In this study, I argue that the post-apocalyptic world of preppers is void of multiculturalism and neglects the progress and contributions of women and non-whites to society.

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Dedication

Dedicated to my sister, Ashley M. Frearson.

Chapter 1: Introduction

You are driving home from work. The drive goes smoothly, passing familiar landmarks, along the usual route. Your engine suddenly stalls. The power steering fails as you struggle to pull off the road using the car's inertia. When the car rolls to a stop, you sigh and take out your cell phone to call for help. It is at this moment that you notice how quiet it is. There are no other cars driving past on this once busy roadway. All cars have stopped; the silence is startling. Your phone is dead. You know you had a full charge because it had been plugged in. Looking around traffic lights, streetlights, business signs, show no signs of electricity. As you realize what is happening, your heart pounds in your chest. If you were lucky, you would be close to home, but not today, your home is still another half hour drive. The man emerging from a pickup across the street further raises the tension as he screams at the driver of the car behind him. His foul language and demeanor is alarming. You know how quickly order can collapse and right now every second counts.

Fortunately, you are a prepper. While you do not know whether this is the result of an electromagnetic pulse or a solar flare, you read all the signs and quickly diagnose the situation: anything with a microchip is not going to operate. While others mingle aimlessly talking about what could do this, you lean over to pop the trunk of your car and also draw your handgun from the holster under the dashboard. As you step out of the car, you discreetly tuck it into the small of your back. When you lift the trunk, there is your "go bag" with everything you need: a flashlight, a map, some food, extra water, a compass, and extra ammo. As you leave your car a man behind you shouts, "Where do

you think you're going?" You ignore him and tighten the straps on your backpack. In this new frontier, you already know that cars have no value. The value is in your skills and tools. You open your map and identify a set of powerlines east of you. It is safer than the road.

A gentleman, maybe a lawyer or a professor, steps out of his Mercedes. In the brief seconds it takes to walk past his car, you know he has invested in a world that is crashing down around him. Five minutes ago, he was a respected man with power; now you are the one with power. He invested his resources and time in a world that is no longer here. His 401k and electronic balances have been wiped clean. Thieves will ransack his home. You spent what little you had on preparing for today. Now the contents of your backpack have more value than his Benz.

Reality hits as the brake lights of the Mercedes light up as he cuts you off. You hear your "Go Bag" roll forward in the trunk. The man in the pickup truck aggressively leans on his horn. There is no electromagnetic pulse. All electronics are working. Google Maps suggests you'll be home in an hour due to traffic. You lean back in your seat and sigh. Your imagination provided you the opportunity to see the world that will come; the world that one day will be. The promise of the frontier gives you hope needed to thrive today.

This fictional scenario is very real for preppers. Throughout this ethnography, the most surprising worldview of preppers is the unwavering reality preppers view of the apocalypse. It is not a matter of *if* the apocalypse will come, but *when*. The ability of preppers to construct an enduring faith in the apocalypse sets this community apart from other apocalyptic communities. Preppers find hope in a future that will one day reclaim

the monotony of the homogeneous global capitalism that has drained individualism from the American dream.

“This is not a trash can”

Jimmy Waller, a retired Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Specialist, stood in front of his audience in a town hall stage in Winchester, Virginia.¹ On the table beside him were Geiger counters, masks, and other items, but at the far end of the table I was drawn to a small trash can with a piece of paper attached to it with a message in all caps, “THIS IS NOT A TRASH CAN.” Waller, thirty minutes into his presentation, placed a hand on it and called out, “This is not a trash can! I know it looks like a trash can. If you go to Tractor Supply, you can get one of these for \$21. This is a Faraday Cage, some guy named Faraday came up with it.”² Waller went on to explain how to insulate it and cover holes. He encouraged audience members to make them and place electronics inside to protect them from a potential electromagnetic pulse, which would destroy anything with a microchip.

Waller’s trashcan is the prime example of the prepper ideology. Physically, the trash can visual looks the same. So much, in fact, that he needs to label it so people do not think the trash can is a trash can. The trash, with little financial value, has been converted into something new and valuable. “This [Faraday Cage] is an insurance policy,” Waller went on holding the lid, “it may work, it may not.” Waller encouraged audience members to put a ham radio in their Faraday Cages. “[Ham radio] is going to be the internet after the bomb, they will be broadcasting when no one else will be. Not only

¹ The names of presenters at public events have been changed throughout this research.

² Jimmy Waller, “NBC Preparedness” (New Castle, VA: Prepper Expo, 2015).

that, you're going to get unfiltered information coming directly outside that guy's house."³ Waller's prepper ideology changes the trash can into something new today. When I initially sat down at this presentation, despite the sign, I thought I was looking at a trash can. When I heard Waller's description of the Faraday Cage, it became clear that this "trash can" and the end of the world had the potential to change the landscape surrounding preppers. The secular apocalypse, a phrase which will later be explained, creates a dual world for preppers. The apocalypse underwrites prepper ideology, that in turn, reorganizes their perceptions and interpretations of the world around them.

The word "apocalypse" in Greek means "an uncovering," and here Waller "uncovers" a deeper meaning with his trash can. Preppers create an inverted ideology, where the things, jobs, and places that are valued least by society are valued the most. A trash can is the means to communicate and connect when others cannot. A mechanic's ability to fix a car is far more valuable than a researcher who can write a paper. The prepper ideology is a solution to those who feel they have lost the individual ability to produce.

Preppers believe they are constructing authentic independence from homogenous global capitalism. "Globalization" has been received in the United States with mixed emotions; initially decried by labor unions and leftist activists in the 1990s, opposition to globalizing forces has more recently become strongly associated with the right-wing populism that resulted in the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency.⁴ Preppers

³ Ibid.

⁴ Owen Worth, "Globalisation and the 'Far-Right' Turn in International Affairs," *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 28 (2017): 19–28,

who keep bags in their trunks, offices, and basements, live in a dual space between tomorrow's apocalypse and today's security. A prepper is not a man or woman who is a pessimist obsessed with the demise of society. In their terms, he or she is a realist who sees what others do not. Ultimately, preppers engage in a discourse that separates them from others in society because they are not operating within its traditional parameters. Therefore, on a topic such as gun control, preppers are unwilling to engage in a debate because prepper apocalyptic ideology shows that guns will be necessary at the end of the world. Preppers believe that those with guns will take on the role of protectors in the apocalyptic frontier; those without will perish. A gun for preppers is not only a means to protect a family today, but to reclaim civilization from roving bands of thugs in the apocalypse.

Increasingly, commentators have noted that political divides have become more challenging to overcome as shared-interest communities online have become echo chambers for already accepted views.⁵ Preppers, however, are even more difficult to engage; they operate within an ideological framework that shares little in common with non-prepper ideologies. Therefore, it is important to understand this fundamental framing in order to achieve political dialogue and progress with those who adhere to prepper viewpoints.

Textual Interpretation

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3318/isia.2017.28.8>.

⁵ Kiran Garimella et al., "Political Discourse on Social Media: Echo Chambers, Gatekeepers, and the Price of Bipartisanship" 1801, no. 01665 (2018), <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1801.01665.pdf>.

To see the secular prepper apocalypse properly, it is important to establish how preppers construct the apocalypse and how scholars have examined communities that engage in similar behaviors. One particular dichotomy throughout this dissertation is the institutional and the vernacular. Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* examined how Star Trek fans use the institutional form of the television show within vernacular frameworks. He begins addressing how individuals who embrace something beyond specific norms of the culture, are not accepted by society. For Jenkins, these were “Trekkies” who went beyond simply enjoying the show to creating their content and “poaching” from the institutional elements of the program. The institutional is the formal, written, portion of Star Trek, and the vernacular is created as the fans take from the show and produce new meanings beyond the original goals of the author. The fans become poachers as they go on the “land” of the writer and “poach” or take what they want.

Preppers draw from many institutional forms of the apocalypse. They cite articles from the CDC and join local FEMA response teams for additional training. Those outside of the prepping community look at preppers and perceive them as going beyond what is considered appropriate preparation for a disaster. Like the people who stood outside the Ark and laughed at Noah, a popular figure within the prepper community, the non-prepper sees the prepper as someone who is wasting his time. In the same way that “Trekkies” take their fandom beyond what is considered appropriate, most in society watch a show like *Doomsday Preppers* and believe that they have gone too far.

Pierre Bourdieu, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, argued that the doxa, the norms, and values of society are norms learned through socialization and we never think of them. Habitus occurs through socialization, but in principle, can consider and

manipulate. Habitus produces dispositions to act in certain ways. It becomes ingrained that we act a certain way in a certain situation. We do not learn it from someone telling us, but by living it.⁶ Preppers resist these dispositions of consumerism and comfort within society. I was initially drawn to the topic of preppers because I was fascinated with the perplexing issue of why, when the world is safer than it has ever been, would people be drawn to such a dark future.

Bourdieu's scholarship provides some answers to my discomfort with the apocalypse. People want to view things and experience them, but due to "bourgeois aesthetics" people are careful not to get too involved with a text. Many people have flashlights and batteries in case of a power outage, but too many batteries can cross a social boundary into uncomfortable territory. Individuals are more comfortable with a television show like *Last Man on Earth*, a comedy where a few individuals survive a flu epidemic, than attending a prepper conference on epidemic preparedness. The comedy allows for individuals to look at the apocalypse through the comfortable lens of humor and observation. Sitting in chairs and hearing from a former CDC employee requires a more intimate embrace of the apocalypse.

Just as Trekkies violate the sanctity of Star Trek, preppers violate the sanctity of films such as *The Road*. The creation of the text was under specific conditions for specific reasons; the appropriate response is to read the text and appreciate it. We often

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

become offended when people overvalue popular culture. The material that fans produce has little economic value but contains its own expressive culture.

Fans are textual poachers as they go on the “land” of the writer and “poach” or take what they want, not necessarily what the writer may have intended.⁷ Fans violate the sanctity of the text. Texts are for specific conditions and reasons; the appropriate response is you read it and appreciate it. Fans get to keep their “poached” material because it creates little economic value, but it contains its own expressive culture. Preppers buy tampons from shelves in the feminine hygiene section of a store and stockpile them with first-aid kits because they can stop the bleed from a bullet wound.⁸ This production repurposes the text, in this situation, a tampon, into a survivalist tool.

Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* wrote on the dominance of social structures as significant, but less determinative of actions than Pierre Bourdieu.⁹ Jenkins gives examples of this among Star Trek fans; although the show did not create a relationship between Captain Kirk and Spock, slash fiction paired the two. While the institution sets up the basic systems people use, ultimately, individuals choose their paths. Subaltern groups can resist social structures that seek to suppress them. Through the logic of practice, these individuals can resist in ways that may or may not be recognizable to outsiders. Practice theory seeks to examine the relationship between the institutional and

⁷ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁸ Bob Rodgers, “13 Ways To Use A Tampon In An Emergency Survival Situation,” *Prepper’s Will*, 2015, <http://prepperswill.com/13-ways-to-use-a-tampon-in-an-emergency-survival-situation/>.

⁹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

the way we interact with it, either through institutional dominance or vernacular resistance.

This framework is important throughout this piece because it highlights how preppers resist against the threat of globalization. Without practice theory, it would be difficult to understand how someone who buys goods at Costco, stores them, and thinks about how to protect them would be rejecting the global trade. When looking at the material goods, the films, and even Jesus, it is possible to reconstruct the prepper apocalypse and the empowerment it creates for the community. It is important to be cautious when examining sources with deceptively simple answers. This dissertation will explore and explain complex issues that came through this research, such as a prepper who may open a presentation with a prayer but may not believe Jesus is in control of the apocalypse. This framework helps analyze how a wife may be in charge of the kitchen and children, but her authority exceeds her husband.

Janice Radway's influential text *Reading the Romance* encouraged scholars to look deeper than the surface of how individuals read their meaning into texts. The women in her work wanted an escape from bills, husbands, and children. They turned to romance novels that featured anti-feminist narratives. The power and escape for women came through from the physical, the act of reading the text instead of participating in household chores, and the intellectual, the resistance against the portions of the text that create limitations for the readers. Women like the idea of bad boys at the start of the book who become tender because the transformation occurs through the efforts of women.

The digital landscape has changed the way Christians create their apocalyptic predictions and establish rhetorical authority. Preppers, similar to Robert Glenn Howard's

study of online communities, engage in a co-production of the apocalypse. Anyone can be involved in the process and the creation of apocalyptic predictions. For Howard, the world wide web is more than a place to create digital interactions, but is also web of human interrelations and textual relations. There is a tactical level of interacting with things and the way in which people can create their own experiences within the community.¹⁰ Howard explores the individualized journey through a linked body of text. Individuals can create a cohesive argument that guides the reader through the texts. A prepper may argue: “look at the Bible in this patter, and you’ll get it.” Howard sees this as an individual religious expression.¹¹

John Carpenter’s film *They Live* (1988) provides a useful analytical metaphor for understanding prepper ideology. The film’s protagonist John Nada, his last name Spanish for “nothing,” is a homeless vagrant worker. He finds a pair of sunglasses. When worn they reveal the truth: aliens control humanity through consumerism. When he looks down at the money in the hands of a vendor, he sees the phrase THIS IS YOUR GOD. Behind an advertisement for computers: OBEY. When he looks at people through these lenses, some are aliens, who are controlling society.¹² These lenses reverse traditional concepts of ideology. Traditionally, ideology is the lens through which someone views the world. Slavoj Žižek suggests Carpenter’s film reverses this: what people see naturally, without glasses, is ideology.¹³ Preppers know the world looks safer and appears to be more

¹⁰ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

¹¹ Robert Glenn Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 116.

¹² John Carpenter, *They Live* (USA: Universal City Studios, Inc., 1988).

¹³ Sophie Fiennes et al., *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2012).

peaceful, but when they put on Carpenter's glasses, they see the truth: the world is racially divided and fragile. Preppers see themselves as practical, not ideological; applying this practicality to penetrate the liberal ideology of multiculturalism and reveal the truth: we only coexist because we are comfortable. But this peaceful coexistence, preppers believe, has lulled people into complacency and a loss of economic and political power and will render them unable to respond to the ultimate failure of modernity. The wilderness of the apocalypse offers refuge and release.

If anyone survives this frontier, it must only be through commitment, courage, and strength. The fact that a "pathetic wimp" should die reveals prepper anxiety toward the domestic world. The wilderness is a world of emotion or connection. The apocalyptic frontier is devoid of weakness, fear, and the wimps. The frontier systematically eliminates these domestic elements. It is this function of the frontier that shares a common ground with the frontier of the Western genre. As Jane Tompkins writes in *West of Everything*, the wilderness is a godless world, where instead of "being created by God, it is God."¹⁴ It is the wilderness that tests and purges humanity of its faults. Scrappy believed the father, and his feminine son failed that test. Tompkins explains that the wilderness says to the hero, "This place is a hard place to be; you will have to do without here. Its spiritual message is the same: come, and suffer."¹⁵ The same message is what the Prepper community desires from media; they want the apocalyptic frontier to be a dangerous wasteland, where only the prepared can survive.

¹⁴ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

The concepts of vernacular and institutional cultures were defined by scholars to help provide me with language to discern different levels of participation. Lawrence Levine, in *Highbrow, Lowbrow*, is similar to Robert Glenn Howard, because they are both examining vernacular communities. Vernacular communities are not only interested in consumption; they take an active role in participation. Levine saw that print media established a divide between the vernacular illiterate understanding and the literate institutional understanding of Shakespeare. Levine gave evidence of Shakespeare in vernacular culture through pioneers who had the book and how the text of the play would often change to accommodate the desires of the crowd. Shakespeare was popular culture because the masses enjoyed him until Shakespeare became “culture.” When Shakespeare was malleable, he was vernacular; he was folk when Shakespeare became a formal symbol of the upper class, he became institutional.

Throughout this piece, it becomes clear that preppers use humor online and offline when they talk about the apocalypse. In Greene and Gournelos’s *A Decade of Dark Humor*, two authors provide different approaches to the concept of reception theory and how individuals use texts differently. In Greene and Gournelos’s introduction, they argue that satire is an inherently unstable category, one that is neither progressive nor reactionary. Irony allows for new ways of speaking on issues to enter the public discourse. Gournelos’s contribution *Laughs, Tears and Breakfast Cereals*, argues that irony is a weapon against the national discourse, a discourse that tends to “exclude and finalize.”¹⁶ Hallway, in *Republican Decline and Culture Wars in Post 9/11 Humor*

¹⁶ Ted Gournelos, “Laughs, Tears, and Breakfast Cereals: Rethinking Trauma and Post-9/11 Politics in Art Spiegelman’s *In Shadow of No Towers*,” in *A Decade of Dark*

argues that it is more complicated than this. Using *Team America* as his example, he demonstrates how it can uphold or tear down national discourses. Individuals interpret films as they like.¹⁷

Although preppers may pull from “viral” or popular media, these are often used differently by the community and repurposed in new ways. A zombie television show or a video of a black man breaking into a shop may have a lot of attention from different people, but Janet Staiger and others remind scholars to look at how a particular text is used and not to focus too intently on the text itself. Janet Staiger in *Interpreting Films* highlighted the complex role of interpretation by members. Staiger argued that films could be used differently at different times to meet the needs of each audience. D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 was used as a text to defend racism and in the 1940s defenders of Griffith used the film to demonstrate parallels with occupied France.¹⁸ The fluid interpretation of the same text over different periods creates perpetual flexibility for text as members utilize it to meet their needs.

Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green in *Spreadable Media* (2013) encourage scholars to move away from the concept of viral, that media is simply shared around because of its popularity, which is a one-size-fits-all category for explaining the

Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America, ed. Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 96.

¹⁷ David Halloway, “Republican Decline and Culture Wars in 9/11 Humor,” in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 99–118.

¹⁸ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

popularity of a media file shared online. Spreadable stresses the instance of passing along media, each share can be for different meanings people have constructed. After the initial value of media has been realized, what remains is the “residual culture,” which can produce new meanings and new technologies. Jenkins, Ford, and Green encourage a new type of “moral economy” where media companies and audiences collaborate in the same environment.

The digital environment creates folklore expressions that can be movable between the physical and the digital world. Trevor Blank in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age* explores how images can become folk culture. An image of a police officer spraying students can move from a physical event and photograph to a digital space and moved to different spaces. For Blank, this is a figurative move as this symbol of authority is reestablished as an expression of resistance and frustration with authority. The meme becomes a form of symbolic resistance as it allows the creator of the meme to prove his or her authenticity online.

Who is a Prepper?

If a woman has batteries, a flashlight, extra boxes of spaghetti, or a fire extinguisher in her kitchen, many preppers would point out that she is a prepper. Preppers seem to feel more comfortable when they talk about these preparedness actions as a common foundation of all preppers. According to preppers, they are no different from anyone else who wants to take appropriate action to prepare for possibilities in the future; yet preppers, by virtue of the very specific ideology they construct, I argue are in fact organized around a much different set of practices than those who simply buy supplies.

Non-preppers may take small personal steps to prepare for the unknown and even enjoy a disaster or apocalyptic film, but for many people preppers cross a comfortable boundary society has established for preparedness. Pierre Bourdieu labeled this “bourgeois aesthetics;” we want to watch things and experience them, but people are uncomfortable with proximity.¹⁹ Jenkins examines “fans” as those who move beyond this comfortable proximity with their appreciation of Star Trek.²⁰ The apocalypse is something we can watch in films or talk about, but not something we would be comfortable believing in. Preppers, however, embrace the apocalypse as an ideology that establishes a new framework for understanding the world today, and for reimagining their socio-economic, political, and cultural status.

The prepper is a civic individual. He takes it upon himself to go above and beyond the government’s suggestion: emergency supplies, including food and water, for seventy-two hours.²¹ A study by Homeland Security in 2006 was alarmed at the number of underprepared Americans. Only 57% of Americans have supplies in their home set aside for emergency use only. Of these individuals, most only have food (74%) and water (71%). Of those who have not prepared, the majority (61%) has not done so because they plan on emergency services providing aid in the first 72 hours.²² Few people question the necessity of government programs such as the CDC or FEMA. Preppers are very critical

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

²⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992).

²¹ Ibid.

²² U S Department of Homeland Security, “Emergency Supply List,” 2006, <http://www.ready.gov/build-a-kit>.

of these organizations, not because they are not important, but because they are underfunded and ill-equipped to handle a global disaster scenario. Preppers on the most basic level are doing what the government has always asked of its citizens: be ready. Like “Trekkies,” Star Trek fans, when Preppers go beyond what is considered appropriate, they are labeled as crazy.²³ A woman can have a flashlight with extra batteries in her kitchen, but when she stockpiles 1,000 gallons of water, she is a prepper.

The concept of preparedness is prevalent in our society, in fact, we often pay into required and optional programs to prepare for varying levels of protection from the unknown. When the preparations for a disaster are collective and institutional, society is far more comfortable. Few people would argue that organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are unnecessary. As institutional organizations, they have clear levels of leadership with a single controlled goal. These organizations are supported by a broad range of individuals because they help us prepare for unforeseeable challenges and are easy to embrace due to their established institutional role. This first level is collective institutional preparedness, the most comfortable level within our culture with preparedness.

The next level is individual institutional preparedness, which appears to be increasingly individual and less comfortable. The CDC and FEMA encourage civic individuals to participate in a wide range of preparations. For example, the CDC encourages citizens to get the flu shot each year and FEMA reminds people of the importance of having three days of food and water stored. During the Cold War, parents

²³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

who built a bomb shelters in their backyards and children participated in duck and cover drills in the classroom are classic examples of individual institutional preparedness.²⁴ These actions appear less comfortable because the preparations have moved past collective organizations to individual actions, however, they seem to remain institutional because the actions are sanctioned by institutional organizations.

The least comfortable step is at the level of individual vernacular preparedness. The vernacular is the antithesis of the institutional; it emphasizes individual interpretations that are not guided by a single controlled leadership. The “fans” of Star Trek would fall under this final category.²⁵ Preppers, as a vernacular community, create their own interpretations of what is coming and how to prepare for it. Ted Fletcher at a presentation at Prepper Con stated, “Most people that I talk to, they can’t really nail it down, is it the economy? I’m not sure. ISIS, politics, all of those other things. Most people can’t nail it down to one thing. The way I’ve presented it is that we’re living in some uncertain times, it just seems like things are going on.”²⁶ For preppers like Fletcher, it appears that it is not a single challenge humanity is facing, but that there is a need to see all of the challenges that come and be open to all of them within the community. Each prepper has his or her own personal thoughts and conclusions about the end of the world and what it will look like, which is inherent in the vernacularity of the secular apocalypse.

²⁴ Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

²⁶ Ted Fletcher, “Emergency Plans” (Winchester, VA, 2015).

A frustration among preppers is how *Doomsday Prepper*, a show on National Geographic, asks preppers what specific event they are preparing for. Dennis McClung, who stated that he was on show, claimed that the producers wanted him and his family to only talk about one event:

Our family thought that it was great to see prepping on TV, however it was very sensationalized and scripted. The producers insisted that we only talk about solar activity in 2012 because they already had folks talking about the normal stuff. After everything I said, and much of it was coached, they made me add something about 2012. I turned on my 2012 countdown during the interview to advertise my business, but the editors took out any mention of my survival supply website. We do not believe in doomsday, as they made us seem to appear. Doomsday was never mentioned. The show was simply called "Preppers" through all of the production. The time I did say doomsday was out of context. We refused to mention a great part of our plan, including our bug out locations and defense. We felt that they would just exploit it and blow our operational security. We also happened to film shortly following the Tucson shootings so it [felt] really appropriate to show weapons at the time.²⁷

McClung's online post revealed his vernacular resistance to the institutional show and the producers' desire to package preppers as preparing for "doomsday," as in a specific, nearly prophetic, event. I have heard Preppers talk about what they are preparing for and I have never encountered a prepper who was preparing for a singular event. A prepper who believes an EMP will knock out electronics, will also be prepared for a super volcano and political tyranny. The stockpiles of preppers would apply to a broad range of scenarios. McClung displayed his frustration at how the show manipulated him by editing pieces of his filming without context, but McClung in turn felt he manipulated

²⁷ Dennis McClung, "Doomsday Prepper TV Show (Merged Topics)," *The Survival Podcast (Blog)*, 2011, <http://thesurvivalpodcast.com/forum/index.php?topic=28325.msg327180#msg327180>.

the producers. McClung stated that he chose to not share specific details of his plans. McClung, aware of the publicity of the show, saw it as a political opportunity to broadcast through the producers his views on gun control through their display. Henry Jenkins in his chapter “Spoiling *Survivor*,” a chapter in *Convergence Culture*, discusses the power struggle between producers of the show and those who were trying to spoil it. Jenkins observed that in online communities, fans engaged in participation, at times conflicting with producers and others in collaboration, but both mutually benefiting from one another.²⁸ Preppers, such as McClung, appear to be caught in a similar tension between the show *Doomsday Preppers* and the advertising for their community, but also the need to retain vernacular control of the definition of prepper.

McClung’s post highlights the challenging and conflicting use of the word “prepper” to describe this community. For McClung, he was comfortable with the word “prepper,” but the institutional use of “Doomsday Preppers” as a brand was uncomfortable, he felt manipulated when his use of the word “doomsday” was edited out of context.

The dawn of the contemporary prepper community coincided with the crash of the housing market in 2008. The year 2009 saw the creation of what has become the largest and most popular online prepper community, the American Preppers Network. Preppers became a source of interest in popular culture with shows such as National Geographic’s *Doomsday Preppers*, which aired in 2011, and the Discovery Channel’s *Doomsday Bunkers*, airing a year later in 2012.

²⁸ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

There are three core beliefs that I have found persistently present among preppers. The first is a belief in the secular apocalypse, a framework born from the 20th century.²⁹ Throughout history, the religious apocalypse was traditionally ordained and orchestrated by God. People were active participants in God's plan, constructing Puritan settlements or fighting for independence. Calvinist theology placed these acts as instruments of God's will. The apocalypse was reliant on divine acts of God and humanity played a limited role in engineering the end of the world. The apocalypse changes in the 20th century; humanity develops the ability to destroy itself without God's assistance. Nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons are the "do it yourself" tools of the apocalypse. Wójcik advocates that advances in science not only allowed humanity to destroy itself but establish the intellectual framework to interpret events such as disease or disasters, as secular as opposed to divine intervention. A post-Darwinian framework leaves God out of the picture.³⁰ Ironically, the secular apocalypse for preppers does not necessarily mean that preppers are not religious. Most preppers are Christians, however, as will be addressed later, they believe that it is up to them personally to prepare physically, whereas God can only help them spiritually. This philosophy creates a strange dissonance between the Christian prepper and the secular apocalypse.

The most difficult question I set out to solve with this study is how the prepper community has survived the multitude of failed secular prophecies. For example, it was not uncommon to hear preppers talk about how Obama would refuse to leave the White House and become a dictator. When Obama peacefully transitioned out of the White

²⁹ Daniel Wójcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 97.

³⁰ Ibid., 98.

House, members of the community remained. Traditionally, failed prophecies result in members leaving or communities entirely disbanding.³¹ Ebola, bird flu, H1N1, the North Korean satellite launch, were all events preppers believed would end the world. Later on, this dissertation examines how the individual vernacular production of the apocalypse allows the community to survive because it lacks a central institutional figure to blame for incorrect prophecies. The broad range of apocalyptic theories allow the community to organically absorb any blows from a false prophecy. Manuel Castells's concept of "networked society" in *Communication Power*, demonstrates how decentralized power can help the prepper movement absorb these blows to the community. In a networked model, power is not in a centralized location, but spread across nodes throughout a large network. An individual may post about in a comments section about how Obama will refuse to leave the office peacefully, which creates a node in that space of the community, but when this prophecy fails this particular node is impacted, but the networked community evolves and creates new nodes in its place.³²

The second core belief among preppers, which easily flows from the first, is that it is only through individual preparation and production that preppers can prepare for the apocalypse. This core value allows preppers, like Waller with his "this is not a trash can," to produce new powerful meanings for simple and cheap items. However, this also allows preppers to distinguish outsiders, those who are preppers but try to consume their way into the prepper community centered on a philosophy of production. Winston Holland, an

³¹ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

³² Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

expert on prepper groups at Prepper Camp, gave a presentation and shared the following from his stage under a large white tent:

Unless you're going to be that guy with the fat checkbook and you go up to a group, and there are groups that do this, and I see it all the time, there are people that write \$50,000-\$100,000 checks, corporate guys, to survival groups and they buy the infrastructure for a retreat compound with generators and all kinds of stuff and they say, "I don't want to be part of your daily operations, but if the time comes, you have to let me in." You might think, "That's a great idea! I can get some money and we could build up our infrastructure that way." What happens when that guy shows up?³³

In response a woman calls out, "Shoot him!" A man says, "How many people were thinking that?" Another man shouts, "I think everybody's thinking it!"³⁴ As the audience laughed, I was struck at the dark humor and tension between the classes.

The third and final core belief among preppers is that they will participate in the redeeming and reclaiming of society and culture once the ash has settled from the secular apocalypse. Although a great deal of prepper focus is how to prepare and survive the apocalypse, there is a utopian desire among preppers to rebuild the world that was lost. Like Noah, they see themselves and their families, emerging from their homes with a mission to build a new and localized community, free from the globalized bureaucracy of today. Preppers view this period as a revitalization. It appears to me that this is a prepper dream lost in a return to a white man's world, void of empowered women and minorities.

Unlike previous apocalyptic movements, where the movement was constructed largely through institutional methods, such as a church, the prepper apocalypse is

³³ Winston Holland, "Prepper Groups" (Saluda, NC: Prepper Camp, 2015).

³⁴ Ibid.

vernacular. Daniel Wójcik wrote that these shared beliefs represent the apocalyptic-folklore of the community. These beliefs are “expressed through oral traditions and customary lore,” and increasingly through online expressions.³⁵ The post-apocalyptic world, which Preppers have vernacularly constructed, may not physically exist, but it has materialized in the collective imagination of the community. This apocalypse is a “virgin land” and shares similar ground with all other frontiers in American history as a place of rebirth.³⁶

Preppers broadly appear to reject the notion of hopelessness in the secular apocalypse. Most believe that through preparation they will survive and thrive, living in luxury amidst a world of chaos. I see a similarity in Charleston Heston’s character in *Omega Man* (1971), as he lives in luxury, drinking wine and playing chess while the world is falling apart outside his balcony. These preppers believe apocalypse will not be in vain; but an opportunity for renewal, to redefine oneself, rebuild society, and purge society of its evils.

Prepper Insiders and Outsiders

As with any community that values privacy, it is difficult to statistically quantify preppers. The American Preppers Network boasted over 100,000 unique visitors in one month in 2012.³⁷ Some place the estimate as high as three million Americans, but these

³⁵ Wójcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*, 16.

³⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950).

³⁷ American Preppers Network, “APN Member Visit Frequency” (American Preppers Network, 2012).

numbers are speculative at best.³⁸ Preppers do not think of themselves as exceptional. It was not uncommon to find preppers in speeches or discussion boards talking about how normal it is for people to fill up a gas tank when it is half-full or keeping batteries and a flashlight in a kitchen drawer. In a phone interview with John, a prepper from the Midwest, he said, “Practically we’re all Preppers... some buy a dozen eggs; some have two dozen hens. Some are prepping [to survive] for four hours, the rest of a week, or [are interested in self-] sustainability. Society and labels, I don’t put any stock in that.” However, few individuals who keep extra batteries in their kitchen drawer think of themselves as preppers. It seems that preppers try to rhetorically connect their practices to preparation habits perceived as “normal,” as they attempt to normalize their own processes, both interpretive and otherwise.

The difficulty in studying preppers, aside from their cautious isolation, is that they often work to downplay their perceived differences from other people. Preppers connect to a civic past with historical roots in the Cold War era. Trevor Harris, a presenter at Prepper Camp, began his presentation on radiation detection and prevention with a discussion of his childhood and the Cold War:

I've always been a so-called prepper, back then we called it survival. I've been doing this since I was a little kid and I've always had the mindset that my parents did. I've always been interested in stuff. One thing about radiation, because I see a lot of people here old enough to remember the 50's and 60's, they really scared us to death with the duck and cover, nuclear war, fallout shelters, civil defense, and [the] bombs kept getting

³⁸ Tara Brady, “Fill the Pool with Fish and Stockpile the Guns: Up to THREE MILLION ‘Preppers’ in the U.S. Are Prepared for for the End of the World,” *Mail Online News*, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2099714/Meet-preppers-Up-3-MILLION-people-preparing-end-world-know-it.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>.

bigger and bigger.³⁹

Harris downplays the idea of a “so-called prepper” and seems to create a sense that his presentation and the prepper movement was nothing new, but connected to a civic and historical past. In the Cold War, these “preppers” built bunks and had their students duck and cover under desks. Preppers do not want others to see them as different or unique, but connected and civic. Harris, like many other preppers, likely finds disdain in the word “prepper” because it suggests a distinction from society, however, the community needs this word to connect with like-minded individuals.

By contrast, at a prepper convention in Maryland, Ted Fletcher addressed the two different approaches among preppers.⁴⁰ Fletcher first mocks those who avoid the term prepper. “Self-reliance, ever heard that one? Preemptive planning? That’s the technical term,” in a voice mocking a highbrow response he continued, “*We’re* not preppers. Preppers are crazy. *We’re* into preemptive planning.”⁴¹ Fletcher seems to use humor to highlight how preppers are uncomfortable with how the definition.

An example of an internal debate over the application of the term is the controversy over Tyler Smith. The National Geographic show, *Doomsday Preppers*, Season 3, Episode 7, featured Smith’s plan to steal from other preppers for survival. Smith’s group “Spartan Survival,” declared that it would target other preppers and their

³⁹ Trevor Harris, “Radiation: Forbidden Knowledge” (Saluda, NC: Prepper Camp, 2015).

⁴⁰ The names of individuals who presented publicly have been changed.

⁴¹ American Preppers Network, “Tyler Smith, You Are NOT a Prepper,” *American Preppers Network (Blog)*, 2013, <http://americanpreppersnetwork.com/2013/11/tyler-smith-prepper.html>.

supplies when the apocalypse comes.⁴² This episode received a fierce online backlash as preppers felt that Smith's stated plans violated prepper ideology. Smith was preparing for the apocalypse, but not in a way that upheld the community's vernacular values. The backlash against Smith revealed that despite the grassroots nature of the community, preppers have established collective values. Thus, when Smith was presented as a community representative but was expounding views that violated these collective values, it was perceived as an outrage.

Preppers blamed Smith, but also National Geographic, for falsely presenting Smith as a prepper. The American Preppers Network, the largest online community of preppers, published an open letter, an institutional move for a vernacular community, publicly asking Smith to "stop calling yourself a prepper." It continued, "a show called 'Doomsday Preppers'—should be about preppers... If you're going to do a show about something like 'Preppers,' a definition should be made so you could then evaluate whether a potential guest meets the qualifications to represent your topic."⁴³ A prepper in a presentation commented on Smith, stating "Preppers are the opposite of Tyler Smith. Preppers are very family oriented... [and take] steps to mitigate the long-lasting effect of a severe impact on their world... through stocking items."⁴⁴ The backlash around Smith's status as a prepper highlights a challenge within this study. If an individual or organization uses the term prepper to connect with others or define themselves, it does

⁴² Alan Madison, "Doomsday Preppers: We Are The Marauders (S3 E7)" (USA: National Geographic, 2013).

⁴³ American Preppers Network, "Tyler Smith, You Are NOT a Prepper," *American Preppers Network (Blog)*, 2013, <http://americanpreppersnetwork.com/2013/11/tyler-smith-prepper.html>.

⁴⁴ Billy Washington, "Understanding the Grid" (New Castle, Virginia: Prepper Expo, 2015).

not necessarily mean the community will accept them. Scholars have explored the tension between “us” and “them.” Frederick Barth argues that the concept that a community has clearly defined boundaries is more relational than it is scientific.⁴⁵ The prepper community wants to show through posts and definitions that it can objectively label Smith as an outsider. However, the vernacular community is subjective in determining who is an insider and an outsider. Although communities work hard to establish boundaries and create a sense of hierarchy and authenticity, these divisions are constructed more from perceived relationships than static and homogenous.⁴⁶

By all accounts, Smith’s gang fits the definition of preppers as far as preparing for the apocalypse, but it is not so simple, as individuals and organizations wrestle with establishing borders through posting reviews and creating definitions for this loosely connected community. Culture is messy and the conflict within the prepper community around Smith highlights this mess, given that preppers lack central organized leadership and operate on an organic structure of creativity. Preppers have to work hard in their online discourse to create borders in the wilderness of the secular apocalypse.

I would argue the underlying problem preppers have with Smith is his role as a consumer. Smith consumes from other preppers and creates nothing. The heart of preparedness is production because production is what liberates the prepper from global capitalism.

⁴⁵ Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1969).

⁴⁶ David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Preppers are concerned about the rise of globalization and consumerism in the 21st century. They desire a more powerful role as producers. Preppers label their preparations for the apocalypse “preps.” Preps is a broad vernacular term for anything a prepper would build or construct as he or she prepares for the apocalypse. Preps could be canning food, storing rice, or building a barbed wire tank-trap. Preps serve an important purpose because they embrace the apocalypse and free preppers from a world where they transform from passive consumers to active producers. However, preppers for this study are not defined by their preparatory actions, but by their ideology, which in turn produces a set of vernacular interpretative practices by which they interpret the world around them.

The Prepper Perspective of History

Preppers do not see themselves as an isolated phenomenon; rather they interpret their position as a community seeking to restore traditional values of American impendence. Preppers will point to Noah as the first prepper as he listened to God and built his ark. However, many preppers would argue that the category “prepper” is not even applicable before the industrial revolution. Preppers point to the rise of consumerism in the late 19th century as a turning point for civilization. The industrial revolution gave birth to groundwork which would one day be globalization.

Preppers argue that the industrial revolution made everyone into consumers. Billy Washington, at a prepper event in New Castle, Virginia, presented his talk, “The Grid,” discussing how the failed relationship between consumers and producers manifested into the need for preppers. “[Pre-industrial revolution farmers] had pasture and grain on their

farm, so they grew their own fuel. Once the tractor came along, it changed all that, because they were now dependent upon an outside source of fuel that they had to have cash to pay for.” As farmers needed cash and mechanization, they increased production and sacrificed impendence. The long and complex global distribution systems between consumers and producers is vulnerable. Washington finds comfort in the Jeffersonian farmer who is self-reliant. Washington goes on to clarify that “modern isn't bad,” but it “needs to be understood.”⁴⁷ He argued that the problem ultimately resides in the fact that America has a “just in time supply chain system.”⁴⁸ Washington recommends several steps at the end of his presentation for people to take from “stop watching TV” to getting a weekly share from a “community supported agricultural farm in your area.” These concepts are not conservative, survivalist, or prepper, but they represent the heart of the preparedness community. Washington’s non-partisan and balanced approach was not a common observation. It was refreshing to hear him embrace ideas that I too shared, such as “buy local” and the challenge of unseen costs with our reliance on fossil fuels.

As a vernacular movement, there are many different voices within the community that point to different historical movements that gave rise to the modern prepper. There is a large consensus among preppers that families in the 1950’s did a better job as consumers because they made purchases in bulk and had bulk storage in their homes. At a conference, there was a panel of preppers, and one reflected, “Fifty years ago, if you had the privilege of being around your grandparents, there would be no prepper movement fifty years ago because everybody in our nation for the most part for

⁴⁷ Washington, “Understanding the Grid.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

generations had food storage--they put up food. Their lifestyle was: if there was a blackout or some kind of emergency, they didn't freak out, they went to their pantry, they didn't have to go to Wal-Mart, there's no 24-hour stores.”⁴⁹ Preppers believe the problem with the modern consumer is not only his lack of production but that he does not have inventory.

The Cold War and the atomic era consistently appear in prepper discourse as a reason for why they “prep.” Tracy Davis in *Stages of Emergency* examines the psychological and theatrical performance that playing out doomsday had on the Cold War generations. Davis argues that the theatrical performances of the Cold War, such as the often-mocked duck and cover drills, were important because they created a sense of reality and certainty in the new Homefront of atomic warfare.⁵⁰ In this sense, the prepper movement is a continuation of the Cold War because the Homefront is still the battlefield. Rituals around preparedness create feelings of control in an economic, political, and cultural environment that they feel is beyond their power to change.

Prepping and the Frontier

I contend that the heart of prepper philosophy is not preparations, but a reclamation of the world through a new frontier. Preppers are a generation of Americans who perceive themselves to have lost power in traditional spheres of influence. The growth of the Federal Government under the Obama Administration left preppers feeling alienated. Preppers appear to embrace the local and are drawn to a more nationalistic

⁴⁹ Steve Williams et al., “Panel of Experts” (Winchester, VA: Preppercon IV, 2015).

⁵⁰ Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense*.

rhetoric, which was in direct contrast to Obama's support of global organizations such as the United Nations and increasing global trade. Preppers believe that the increased connectivity of the world is a threat to sustainability. Donald Trump's nationalist agenda of tariffs and "American first" has slowed the globalization trend and makes preppers more comfortable. The prepper solution to globalization is the hyper-local sustainability. Preppers look at the unsustainability of buying groceries from foreign countries and find the solution to the problem in a garden in their backyard. Preppers are concerned about the global and the foreign. Foreign debt, immigrants, terrorists, and globalization all represent threats to that would be resolved through the frontier's apocalyptic purge.

The election of Donald Trump was a victory among many preppers, but it appears that most feel that his presidency is only a reprieve from the dangers of globalization and urbanization. A tenet of prepper philosophy is that when American culture transitioned to a consumer society in the 20th century, Americans became soft and dependent, and set on course for an apocalypse because citizens became dependent on a system that was no longer local, but global. It was this new, fragile, global system of capitalism that no longer required people to know how to farm, build, or create. The frontier gave way to the urban landscape.⁵¹

A catastrophic disaster would reset the world and resolve the challenges of global capitalism. As illustrated with the dramatic introduction, those who have power and authority under consumerism lose everything in the apocalypse. According to prepper ideology, those who produce will have power in the apocalypse. By contrast, consumers,

⁵¹ Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

both the wealthy and those who rely on “handouts” from the Federal Government, will perish or become violent. The collapse of globalization will give birth to localization, and from the ashes of the apocalypse, preppers will rise. Preppers will survive the tribulation period by “bugging out,” escaping the danger, or “bugging in,” bunkering down. Ultimately preppers will participate in the rebuilding of society; a world free of liberals, secularization, and globalization. The new frontier will be a place void of modern challenges, a new Garden of Eden, free of the Machine in the Garden that made globalization possible.⁵²

While preppers look to redemption in the future, they create day-to-day meaning through the reconstruction of consumed goods and media. The transformation of objects, films, and even biblical characters through prepper discourse reinvests them with new meanings in the context of prepper ideology. An illustrative example is the following “meme,” which circulates on many prepper websites:

⁵² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).



Figure 1: NOAH, The original Doomsday Prepper, August 15, 2018, 90 Miles From Tyranny, <http://ninetymilesfromtyranny.blogspot.com/2016/06/noah-original-doomsday-prepper.html>

Preppers identify with Noah because he was rejected by his community, seen as crazy, and had faith in an apocalypse that seemed impossible. I would argue that preppers see themselves as parallel with Noah for more reasons than just because he also prepared for a seemingly unlikely disaster. Preppers see themselves as, like Noah, a vessel of reconstruction. It was through Noah's survival of a disaster that God renewed his covenant with humanity. Similarly, central to prepper philosophy is neither the apocalypse, nor the preparations necessary to survive, but rather the post-apocalyptic

world, where they will recraft the world into a landscape that upholds white, masculine, conservative, values.

Like Noah, preppers believe they will survive and those outside the ark, who are not preppers, will die. Renegade Ziggy on *The Survivalist Boards* wrote, “the fact that people showed up once the rain began to fall goes to show how it'll be in today's world if something terrible happened. Everyone stopping by, wanting a handout.”⁵³ I have witnessed some preppers who are comfortable with the suffering of non-preppers. Preppers believe non-preppers will suffer appropriate consequences because they failed to embrace the spirit of American individuality. The prepper could have chosen to be dependent on consumerism, but instead worked hard to establish his independence from the creature comforts of modern civilization through production.

Preppers perceive their world as dramatically changing, where white male power is dwindling, and multiculturalism is on the rise. Preppers find hope for these challenges in the secular apocalypse. The prepper belief in the imminence of the apocalypse transforms a commute, a home, and a dead-end job into new spaces where preppers are here now but living in the future. It is not a hope that their job situation will improve, but that the job will no longer be necessary. Instead of investing in a 401k, preppers invest in grains, gold, and guns, something that they forecast will have far more value than any paper currency or stock option. Preppers do not reinterpret their world alone, it would be difficult to adopt a world-view single-handedly, but collectively through the online

⁵³ Renegade Ziggy, “Noah: The Ultimate Prepper,” *Survivalist Boards*, 2013, <http://www.survivalistboards.com/showthread.php?s=276062a8f36dd3db599def5a64aa7e68&t=326985>.

community, preppers share their thoughts and construct a world with a redemptive future, built on the reconstruction of the present.

Preppers, as a full-time networked community, are consistently aware of the impending apocalypse and adjust their lifestyle to be prepared. Backpacks of supplies sit under desks in office cubicles and “Bug-Out-Bags” rest in the trunks of cars, all providing a method of physical escape, but also psychological, as they transform traditional spaces of stress, such as work and commutes, into spaces of control. Concerns of road rage or getting laid off are not only overshadowed by the impending apocalypse, but these environments become entirely new spaces. The cubicle is no longer space where a woman works; it is an outpost on the frontier, reinvented by a can of beans, a flashlight, and a map stored in the bottom drawer.

Methodology

This ethnography involved observations, interviews, and participation with preppers online and offline. Like other professionals, preppers create expos, inviting both notable guest speakers and companies looking to sell their goods and services, to provide an opportunity for preppers to connect with likeminded individuals, gain knowledge, and buy supplies. I attended public prepper events in Saluda, North Carolina and New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, as well as New Castle and Winchester, both in Virginia. At these events I heard over 15 different speakers, interviewed three willing “preppers,” and regularly visited ten online prepper blogs.

Before this ethnography began, this study sought and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study’s protocol. As part of the IRB process, I would only attend prepper events that were publicly accessible through a Google search

and would not disclose the name or any identifiers of individuals who were willing to be interviewed.

Throughout this study I never masqueraded as a prepper online or offline. At public events I registered with my real name, e-mail, and other identifiable information. For the online portion of this research, I chose not to utilize websites or blogs that required users to register and create a username. In the physical space of event, when I register, my presence is noted as I moved throughout the event. As a white male in his 30's, it was very easy to blend in with the prepper crowd. When I stood near an individual looking at solar ovens, he or she could observe my presence and adjust his or her language. In the online prepper community, it would be difficult to make my presence known without consistently posting to the sites I was viewing. To accommodate for the privacy of online prepper communities, I chose to not go to websites that required logging in to view posts and comments.

Despite the very public nature of the events I attended, I factored in the perception of anonymity within the prepper community. When I approached a vendor's table of books at a prepper convention in Maryland, the woman was very excited to speak with me, because as she said, she felt that there were not enough young preppers. Another time, I was asked to stand up and help hold up some of the items a man wanted to showcase during a presentation. These encounters revealed how comfortable people were with me and that they inherently believed I was a member of their community. If individuals asked why I was present, I would tell them I was researching preppers, but this only occurred once. Even though the IRB approved of this study using the publicly

presented names of presenters, the perceived privacy of these public events moved me to conceal these.

Preppers, as a community, favor anonymity, which is why it was easy for me to walk around without being questioned. If I had chosen to do a study on Mennonite Quilting in Lancaster, I believe more individuals would have inquired as to what I was doing, or if I was lost. Preppers understand that connections create opportunities to enhance their ability to survive in the apocalypse, but they can also present new dangers. Two preppers working as a team can help one another out, but if they cannot trust one another, they could potentially exploit the other person if the time came. The perceived privacy of the community was important to protect within this study because these speakers and others that I connected with, felt comfortable with my presence. They did not know their words would reach these pages, and while I disagree with the community's conclusions about people and society, I believe it is important to respect their perceived privacy.

The online portion of the ethnography was central to this study. The online platform is ideal for preppers because it allows an anonymous connection. Over the past four years I focused much of my attention on American Preppers Network, which claims (and I would agree) to be the largest online gathering of preppers. To limit the scope of this study, I only looked for events and communities that used the word "prepper" to connect with one another. Although an event may be titled "Survivalist Expo," it would not fit the definition of this ethnography, unless the promoters of the event used the word "prepper," I did not attend. If a user on American Preppers Network shares a link to the "Survivalist Expo" and approves of it as of value to the community, it then falls under the

parameters of this study. I found the event “Prepper Con IV” posted on PrepperShowsUSA.com, which by its title and listing on a prepper website, placed it within the confines of this study. When I walked into the rented ice rink space, I was confronted by a white board with “East Coast Preparedness Convention” written on it. In the perceived privacy of the internet the organizers of the event felt comfortable to use the label prepper, however it appears that in public “preparedness” felt more appropriate. I went into the event, not because of my two-hour drive, but because the event in the parallel space of the internet had been packaged as a prepper-sanctioned event.

In hindsight, the tension between the National Geographic Channel and the prepper community was inevitable. When an outsider speaks to a community, whether a television show or academic research, it is difficult to avoid some tension between insider and outsider perceptions. Rather than try in vain to avoid this dynamic, I have instead chosen to make it simply explicit: I never masqueraded as a prepper. The privacy of the prepper community would have made it particularly easy to do so. At one Prepper event in a fire hall, for example, I was given an “optional” name tag and informed that I was welcomed to speak with vendors or attendees, but to be respectful if people prefer not to talk. I was also aware of the way my identity made it more possible to camouflage among preppers: I am a white male in his 30’s.

Even something as simple as being present could have influenced a presenter or speaker. In some sessions, my seat represented more than 10% of the audience. Even the location of my seat may have impacted the speaker. Usually, I sat towards the front to ensure I could hear the presenter and the audience. My relative youth and proximity to

the speakers on more than one occasion resulted in being called on. I have been asked by speakers to help build barbed-wire tank traps and even modeled prepper apparel.

I was careful never to present myself either during fieldwork or in writing as a prepper. Every event discussed in this work was open to the general public. Every individual I interviewed I connected with through public sites. This approach, while sensitive to the community's desire to self-identify, did result in some important limitations. While, at times, I was able to observe some of the more extreme Prepper groups or other communities that come into contact with preppers (for example, I have overheard conversations ranging from the inevitable Barackapocalypse⁵⁴ to open anti-Semitism), the limitation of my work to exchanges in public spheres tended to skew it away from the extremes: more peripheral and radical elements are often unwilling to engage in a public discourse.

Online prepper communities were far more willing to participate in racist discourse behind the anonymity of online profiles. To maintain consistency between the online and offline portions of this research, the online ethnography only explored websites that were public and did not require a username or password. All of the resources in this study, online and offline, were accessible via a Google search. Even though these were public observations, this approach does not address the impression of privacy, either online or offline; it was clear that individuals assumed that only like-minded peers were present.

⁵⁴ This term was loosely applied to any scenario where Barack Obama would bring on the apocalypse. A common example would be Obama using martial law to take control of the country and make himself dictator.

In hindsight, I should have been more aware of the challenges I would encounter in trying to find preppers who would be willing to be interviewed. The greatest weapon a prepper has is his or her ability to hide from others. In an end of the world scenario, the fewer people who know a prepper has food and water in his basement, the better. Although legally binding, an IRB only provides legal protection if the legal system exists, in the lawless frontier of the apocalypse, there is nothing to protect Preppers from others. The two preppers who were willing to be interviewed were unique scenarios. The first, a man from the Midwest was only willing to concede to an interview if we did it over a Skype phone call, allowing him to provide very little potential for me to locate him. The second interview took place over the phone with a man from North Carolina who barely considered himself a prepper, so was willing to talk because he was far from the “end of the world” ideology that often drives preppers.

[Apocalyptic Literature Review](#)

Michael Barkun’s *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, provided insight into the psychological framework of conspiracies in the 20th century. Barkun connected with right-wing conspiracy advocates with UFO beliefs. His study focused on a “New World Order” conspiracy from the 1980s. In this “New World Order” evil forces overtake the world and control humanity. The “New World Order” is an apocalyptic event, not necessarily in the medieval tradition of an apocalypse in which time would end, but rather an event through which humanity would pass through. Barkun labeled this type of apocalypse “improvisational millennialism,” as it takes from various

religious and secular texts to forecast an imminent apocalypse.⁵⁵ This new order has an inherent distrust of the institutional. Vernacular forms of information take precedence over the institutional, as “they” cannot be trusted. In the conspiracy world, the suppression of truth is redeemed through exchange among members of the group.

Barkun’s work was influential in this study because it helped establish a framework for the prepper perspective of the apocalypse as a period that will purge society of its problems. Barkun established the role of fear in the conspiracy framework. It is a fear expressed through anti-Semitism, anti-freemasonry, and other groups. The conspiracy theories that emerge from the 20th century provide a framework for understanding the groups’ perceived fears. If it is possible to associate Jews or Freemasons with globalization, it provides a complex sense of both relief and fear for the believers.⁵⁶ For preppers, the fear and relief is globalization, because globalization has created their anxiety but it will also be their relief when it fails and they are redeemed. I believe there are preppers who, if provided an apocalyptic button, would push it. The prepper’s beliefs are so strong that I believe there are those who not only believe the apocalypse is coming but want it to come.

One of the most influential frameworks for this dissertation is in Charles Lindholm and José Pedro Zúquete’s *The Struggle for the World*, which connected movements through their challenge to globalization. As the title suggests, they argued that various movements challenged capitalist globalization and liberated the world from

⁵⁵ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2006), 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 157.

its negative consequences. These groups feel disconnected and insecure in the world and blame globalization. Lindholm and Zúquete focused on a variety of movements from the far-left to the far-right and even those groups beyond the political spectrum. Through this process, Lindholm and Zúquete establish connections between the Slow Food Movement and Al Qaeda.⁵⁷ Preppers would easily fit within their study of apocalyptic communities.

In their final chapter, Lindholm and Zúquete suggested that the foundation these groups share is far more than simply an anti-American consumerist approach, but a religiously redemptive philosophy. Each group within their study shared the belief that the world is on the path to imminent collapse. These groups believe that they must take up an emotional, political, and religious cause to stop the apocalypse. The good guys must stand and face off against the perils of the capitalist market. Each movement believed that they would reclaim the earth for humanity and establish an enduring peace.

The successful evangelism of preppers would negate the dangers of the apocalypse. The apocalypse is coming, not because God is sending it, but because the fragile system of globalization is unsustainable. The danger of the apocalypse is in the people who are not preppers and will be seeking food and shelter.

R.G. Mitchell's years-long research within apocalyptic communities resulted in his publication *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times*.

Mitchell's ethnography connected with people who felt marginalized and lonely within the post-industrial society. Mitchell coined the term "Planet Microsoft" to describe the

⁵⁷ Charles Lindholm and José Pedro Zúquete, *The Struggle for the World: Liberation Movements for the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010).

unique challenges presented by globalization.⁵⁸ From their perspective, the world is void of choice, and they are simply pawns in the global games between countries and corporations. These survivalists see a future in which they will be able to thrive again as individuals.

Mitchell's empathetic approach to the survivalist community allows for a deeper understanding of the community. It is culturally acceptable to want to control tomorrow; in our industrial society, we put effort and energy into forecasting tomorrow. Survivalists believe in these same basic elements of control and proper preparation. What separates survivalists is that they perceive our current place in society as the crescendo of industrialization. Any day they believe that society, "Planet Microsoft," will collapse. Therefore, what the larger population sees as an excessive compulsive behavior, survivalists interpret as a rational and legitimate response to their fears.⁵⁹

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the members of the Prepper community who have participated in this study. Preppers are protective, and this study would not have been possible without the people who were willing to make themselves vulnerable to me. As a result, I have been invited into their mindset and have found my perspective shaped. It is difficult for any ethnographer not to be impacted by the people they study.⁶⁰ Since the start of this study, I have begun storing water in my basement, and I kept a "bug out bag" nearby. These

⁵⁸ Richard G. Mitchell, *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 183.

⁵⁹ Mitchell, *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times*.

⁶⁰ Myerhoff, *Number Our Days: Culture and Community Among Elderly Jews in an American Ghetto*. (Myerhoff 1994).

things do not make me a prepper. Because these are evidence of individual institutional preparedness, I am not forming my own vernacular interpretations of the end of the world. If preppers have a simple evangelical message that is worth sharing it is this: be prepared. The concerns of preppers are very real problems facing the United States. A congressional EMP commission in 2004 and again in 2008 warned Congress of our nation's vulnerability to an EMP attack and how an "unprecedented cascading failures of our major infrastructures could result."⁶¹ An EMP has the potential to create what preppers call an "ITEOTWAWKI" scenario, where a series of "cascading failures" would end the world, as we know it due to its low risk and high impact.⁶² These types of disasters would include asteroids, mega-volcanoes, or global events such as epidemics or droughts.

Preppers are concerned about high-impact disasters and sudden onset hazards, such as blizzards, flash floods, terrorism, earthquakes, tornados, and hurricanes. Sudden onset disasters have a higher risk, but lower impact.⁶³ Preppers believe that the industrialized world is on an unsustainable path to self-destruction that will be initiated by a natural or human-made event. The concept that society must change or face systemic

⁶¹ Renegade Ziggy, "Noah: The Ultimate Prepper," *Survivalist Boards*, 2013, <http://www.survivalistboards.com/showthread.php?s=276062a8f36dd3db599def5a64aa7e68&t=326985>.

⁶² "It's the end of the world as we know it," this is high impact event with apocalyptic consequences.

⁶³ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

consequences is nothing new to scholarship.⁶⁴ The unique characteristic of Preppers is that they reclaim positions of power through their apocalyptic preparations and visions.

Billy Washington, a horticulture expert, is one of the few speakers I encountered to challenge preppers to be part of the solution. With fans blowing on a warm April day, Washington spoke at a prepper street fair in New Castle, Virginia. In a crowded bingo hall, he warned against the dangers of distractions such as sports and social media: “If we’re going to make positive changes in our communities, we have to have the time to take action to do things.”⁶⁵ Washington does not use an apocalyptic scapegoat to distance the Prepper community from their responsibility to solve real-world problems. He offers tangible solutions; joining farm share programs, marching on Washington, and getting more connected with local communities. These actions would deescalate not only these real-world apocalyptic dilemmas but also provide new settings for prepper discourse to engage with mainstream culture. The isolation of preppers into psychological bunkers has constructed an online echo chamber where issues of race, class, and gender go unresolved and unrecognized.

As preppers construct this vision of the apocalypse, they do so in a way that is both messy and complicated. With any loosely affiliated community, there are a variety of perspectives that are not only difficult to align and can contradict one another.

[Chapter Outline](#)

⁶⁴ Michael Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2006).

⁶⁵ Billy Washington, “Understanding the Grid” (New Castle, Virginia, 2015).

The next portion of the study, in “Prepping Religion,” examines how Christian preppers, who believe in divine intervention, cope with the prepper movement which embraces the secular apocalypse. This dissonance is overcome through the secularization of Jesus and utilizing him and other Biblical characters, such as Noah, “the first prepper,” to be a testament of the need to be prepared. Ironically, through this process the secular apocalypse becomes sacred, and the sacred faith of Christian preppers becomes secular.

The study then begins an exploration of race and gender within the prepper community. The chapter “Queens of the Apocalypse” explores gender and race identity in the prepper community. Prepping is male-dominated culture, but females use the space to create a different type of power and authority. The kitchen is not only a place to keep food on the table, but it is a place to serve a feast while others starve. The female identity is not without its racial connections to whiteness, as single African American mothers are used to justify the need to prepare and reinforce the femininity of the white female prepper.

The final portion of this study, “Errand into the Apocalypse,” draws on clear American Studies roots with its connection to *Errand into the Wilderness*, by Perry Miller, and explores the persistent frontier in the American mind. The chapter examines how preppers construct this frontier through media and how, unlike previous frontiers, this is a frontier that will come to all of us.

Chapter 2: Prepper Religion: The Secularization of Jesus and the Sanctification of the Secular Apocalypse

Scholarship does not occur in isolation; it is a constellation of ideas that allow for a rich discourse that can provide new answers and new questions. This exploration of preppers is part of a larger academic discourse regarding how communities reinvent their world to create new structures of power. Preppers appear to have struggled to find new forms of power in the cultural and political arenas. The election of Donald Trump appeared to provide many in the community with a sense of hope, but even the power of the Oval Office could not turn the tide against the individualistic consumerism that preppers believe will ultimately pull the rug from under civilization. When the apocalypse happens, it will invert traditional structures of power and place preppers at the top of the cultural hierarchy.

Literature Review

This study of the prepper community primarily drew from the fields of ethnography and social history, as well as digital and popular culture studies. As a “subculture,” preppers are not subordinate members of society. Albert Cohen argues that subcultures have the agency to construct and craft new frameworks with others who share the same concerns.⁶⁶ Although divided on what a disaster would look like, preppers collectively agree that society is on an unsustainable path that establishes an institutional dependence on corporate and government sustenance. Preppers fit Cohen’s definition of a subculture because they meet on and offline as actors with similar challenges and interact to create

⁶⁶ Albert K. Cohen, “A General Theory of Subcultures,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (New York: Routledge, 1997), 13.

new frameworks to provide new solutions.⁶⁷ However, for this study, I will refer to preppers as a community because this is how they perceive themselves and they believe themselves to be connected members of society, whereas if this were a study of survivalists, I may be more comfortable with the use of “subculture.”

Ethnographers in the past failed to always recognize the potential influence their presence had on their subjects. Festinger et al. in *When Prophecy Fails* is a study that shares a common ground here as he explored how communities adapt when prophecies fail. Festinger and his colleagues played a significant participatory role that limits the application of his study. As fifteen people gathered for an alien encounter, a third of them were not believers but anthropologists.⁶⁸ Participant observation requires a delicate balance between observation and participation. Excess participation in a prophetic community can derail a study. The community exists because people believe. By simply sitting I was affirming the community’s beliefs. To minimize my impact on the study I interacted as little as possible while maintaining a respectful relationship with both the audience and the speaker.

If Festinger’s study is an example of how to poorly conduct a study, Elliott Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* (1967), is as an example of how an ethnographer can be the academic voice of a misunderstood community. Liebow studies the street corner culture and meets blacks “on their terms.”⁶⁹ Similarly, I do not question the reality of the

⁶⁷ Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, eds., *The Subcultures Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 54.

⁶⁸ Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World*.

⁶⁹ Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 10.

apocalypse for preppers. Franz Boas was the first to encourage scholars to step away from traditional ethnocentric approach with the notion of cultural relativism.⁷⁰ Therefore, I have allowed the apocalypse to be real for me. If I could not believe in the apocalypse, it would be impossible to enter their world compassionately.

Robert Orsi, in his ethnography, *Snakes Alive*, challenges ethnographers to believe the groups they study. Orsi argued that scholars should advance religious studies beyond the traditional framework of observation and critique. Scholars authentically explore a community when they step into a space between their moral judgment and that of the community. The challenge of this space, between believing and observing, is that the ideology of preppers in its most extreme form embraces the apocalypse with sexist and racist arms. Orsi addresses this complexity: “The space is a dangerous one because one cannot, after all, simply abandon one’s deepest values or tolerate the intolerable, even though something awful and intolerable might make sense in someone else’s world.”⁷¹

George Marsden, similar to Elliott Liebow, in his text *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, encouraged scholars to slow down and look at movements in their own right and on their terms. Marsden argues that fundamentalism was not an irrational movement, it was intellectually frozen in the empirical facts of Baconian science. Fundamentalism was appealing as a social and political phenomenon because it provided a simple answer to the complex issues. Fundamentalism grew with other early 20th

⁷⁰ Franz Boas, “Museums of Ethnology and Their Classification,” *Science* 9 (1887): 612–14.

⁷¹ Robert A Orsi, “Snakes Alive: Religious Studies between Heaven and Earth,” in *American Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway et al. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 202.

century ideologies that provided simple solutions to complex issues. Satan vs. God provided a simple framework of understanding for the post World War I rise of communism and anti-Semitism. Marsden addresses tensions throughout the fundamentalist paradox between trust and distrust of intellect. The movement was rooted in Francis Bacon's 17th century philosophy that relied on common sense observations. Marsden provided several factors that make fundamentalism uniquely American phenomena, one of which is the intellectual tendency in America to embrace primitivism. Without a long history, there is an American desire to start a new age by returning to a pristine state.⁷² The empathy of researchers is clear within reception theory through Jenkins, Howard, and Radway, which is explained in the next chapter in its relationship to preppers and framing this study.⁷³

Ted Daniel's *A Doomsday Reader* is a broad text in its scope and sequence. Daniels provided a voice to the often-voiceless apocalyptic communities. Daniels shared a singular presentation of various apocalyptic movements. In the first part of the book, he examined "Enlightenment and Secular Millenarianism," where he addressed Fascist, Marxist, and Environmentalist perspectives of the apocalypse. The second explored "Millennial Evil," which in some ways runs parallel to Barkun's *A Culture of*

⁷² George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925*, Paperback (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁷³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*; Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*; Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Second (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

Conspiracy. The final and third section addressed “Well-Known Contemporary Movements,” some of which are religious apocalyptic visions, while others are secular.⁷⁴

Catherine Wessinger’s collection of seventeen scholars in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, examined several case studies on various apocalyptic movements. The authors explored the interconnectivity between the political and the religious in millennialism movements. Wessinger’s introduction outlines three different variations of militant millennialists. The first, “assaulted groups,” were seen by society as deviant and saw themselves as victims. The second group, “fragile groups” used violence to fulfill their political or religious goals. The third group, “revolutionary groups” were founded on Marxist or utopian theories but are willing to engage in legitimate levels of violence. Overall, some groups chose to engage violence, other reached for violence, while others found violence on their doorstep.⁷⁵ It may seem that preppers reach for violence, but in reality, preppers believe they will find violence and that it will come to them. When things start to fall apart, they will have roving gangs of urbanites to battle.

Many of the authors suggest that much of the violence associated with millennialism is the result of institutional forces refusing to recognize them as seriously religious. Even when faced with the threat of violence from outside forces, they do not interpret them as an end-all, but rather part of the religious experience of the group.

⁷⁴ Ted Daniels, *A Doomsday Reader: Prophets, Predictors, and Hucksters of Salvation* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁷⁵ Catherine Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. 1st (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

Eugene Gallagher, in his chapter “Theology Is Life and Death,” focused on the mindset of David Koresh when he came under the assault of the FBI. Instead of the FBI presence becoming an opportunity to withdraw claims of true millennial revelation, it instead became a validation of the groups’ cause. Gallagher argued that the best way to destabilize these groups is for the secular community to extend a hand of tolerance, as these populations will eventually run their natural course when the apocalyptic promise fails to deliver.

American Dream and the Frontier

Central to the concept of the American Dream is the frontier. The frontier defined the earliest works of American Studies and how it was used to shape the identity of the Puritan community. Unlike prior studies on the frontier, Henry Nash Smith, Perry Miller, and Sacvan Bercovitch were not seeking to write on the history of the frontier, they wanted to provide an escape from the traditional approaches that failed to address sources that were deemed by others as unworthy of scholarship.⁷⁶ Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) wanted his students to analyze popular poems and cheap fiction with intellectual approaches. Smith sought to move writers beyond a historical narrative and to consider how ideas can embody their narrative through non-traditional texts.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*; Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

⁷⁷ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950).

Perry Miller, while on a journey through the Congo, established a new analysis of the Puritan frontier. Miller provided American Studies the interdisciplinary approach that creates new connections to previously disconnected ideas. Miller argued that 20th-century scholars, who saw the economic and the religious as separate spheres, had unintentionally done the same for Puritans. However, for Puritans, the religious and the economic were inseparable concepts. Initially, the errand of Puritans was to provide an example to the world. Their journey was not necessarily an escape from Europe, but their departure would ultimately reform England, Europe, and the world.⁷⁸

The final frontier thesis in this trilogy is Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* (1978). Bercovitch, a Canadian, was influenced by Clifford Geertz's examination of cockfights in Bali and wanted to extrapolate the layers of meaning from things that looked deceptively simple.⁷⁹ There are many different elements of the prepper community that appear simple but have deep layers of meaning. Geertz established a new era of scholarship as he suggested that scholars could study deceptively simple cultural interactions and draw new conclusions about people and culture. Similarly, this dissertation looks at the layers of meaning within a prepper's practice.

Bercovitch criticized Miller's use of the frontier because it did not explain the pervasiveness of the jeremiad theme throughout 18th and 19th-century literature. The American Jeremiad is alive today and in continuous conflict with the rest of the world between those chosen and those who were not. The American Jeremiad is gradually

⁷⁸ Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).

⁷⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Daedalus* 101 (1972): 1–37.

fulfilled as the world is reclaimed from Satan. Miller compared the second generation of Puritans to a husband who, while on an errand for his wife, forgot about the request. Bercovitch takes this a step further and suggests that the husband refuses to acknowledge the mistake.^{80,81}

An early study by Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1902) can set the intellectual foundation for what preppers are attempting to liberate themselves from in the consumer culture that rose in the late 19th century. The division of labor and the assigning of labor-intensive jobs allowed for managers to be paid more, even though they were less productive than manual laborers. Veblen argued that capitalism replicated traditional barbarian systems, where businessmen were the latest manifestation of the leisure class because they did not produce products, rather simply transported and distributed them. Contrary to the Protestant work ethic, Veblen argued that people could gain money by showing that they could waste money.⁸² Buying clothes and other accessories can get access to better friendships and job opportunities.

Gender studies provided a framework for examining the role gender plays as individuals negotiate their place in society. Ann Douglas, in *The Feminization of American Culture*, addressed the complex process which made American culture

⁸⁰ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

⁸¹ Myth and Symbol was further rebuked by Kuklick as a field that used Cartesian reasoning and used image and perception, when it should rely more heavily on empirical data. Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," in *Locating American Studies*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 71–90.

⁸² Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Prometheus Books, 1998).

sentimental and anti-intellectual, producing a nation of consumers rather than producers. Douglas argues that the first products of modern mass culture were romance novels and lady's magazines. There was resistance to the sentimentality of the age and Douglas uses Melville as an example. For Melville, mourners have no role. The white whale kills Starbuck, despite his cries for God, a God who is indifferent to happiness. When Ishmael is looking at the oil painting, Melville is inviting the reader not to be a consumer, but a producer in constructing meaning.⁸³

Amy Kaplan, in her article "Manifest Domesticity," provided an additional layer of complexity to the domestic role of women. Kaplan examines how the domestic became a marker that distinguished the civilized from the savage. In an age of imperialism, both the rich and poor allied in their fight against the foreign. Domesticity was not an anchor, but a weapon that can move beyond national borders to the greater world.

Cultural Studies

Janice Radway's work has been important in moving popular culture into the scholarly realm. Much of her work is looking at pathetic elements of entertainment, which she reexamined as authentic elements of empowerment for women. Her essay in *Cultural Studies* titled *Mail Order Culture and its Critics* demonstrated how the critics of the book-of-the-month club reveal their insecurities. They label the club as feminine, dependent, and lacking the masculine values of democracy. Radway argues that in the

⁸³ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Anchor (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 308.

end, they create the very world they are trying to criticize. Radway would like to see the wall between pleasure and intellect tore down.

Carolyn Steedman in her essay, *Culture, Cultural Studies and the Historians*, argues that the challenge with popular culture is that it does not set any limits on itself. Scholars in the field connect ideas that may not warrant connectivity.⁸⁴ These are not new criticisms of fields within American Studies. Gene Wise's "Paradigm Dramas" prompted similar criticisms for a field that was too reliant of ritual rhetoric, too acceptant of ideas, and lacking intellectual grounding.⁸⁵

Secular Apocalypse

Throughout history, God and the Apocalypse have enjoyed a close relationship. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek meaning "to unveil," as the apocalypse was God's moment to reveal His power and authority to the world.⁸⁶ Norman Cohn, in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, focuses largely on Christianity and its impact on millennialist philosophy. Traditionally, the apocalypse was a symbol of hope since it was an opportunity to be redeemed from the earth and to reconnect with God. The actions of humanity have historically played an important role in orchestrating the apocalypse. Flagellant movements and various utopian movements believed that the actions of their followers played a direct role in hastening the second coming of Christ. Similar to

⁸⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁸⁵ Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," in *Locating American Studies*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 166–214.

⁸⁶ Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 11.

preppers, Cohn argues that “the poor” have been drawn to the apocalypse as it was a redeeming event.⁸⁷ It was these Europeans who were willing to take drastic, draconian steps to hasten the coming millennium. Cohn theorized that people came to these groups because of the paranoia and social disorientation of the period. For many of these people, religious and governmental changes were happening quickly, and these groups provided a sense of security for those on the “inside.”⁸⁸ Puritans believed their settlement of the frontier would hasten the apocalyptic return of Christ.⁸⁹ Those on the “inside” felt that there was nothing to raise the alarm. An apocalypse ordained by God inherently has a sense of order, hope, and control.

In the 20th century, however, shifting technology and secularization of Western culture gave rise to a new framework about these possibilities: the secular apocalypse. Daniel Wójcik coined this phrase to describe the new apocalypse that was born from humanity’s technological advancements in the 20th century. The most obvious example would be a nuclear war. Few individuals would doubt that nuclear weapons pose a threat to the survival of civilization given the number of weapons that exist and the damage they could collectively create, it would be enough to destabilize any government from being able to reestablish the standard of living that currently exists. In addition to the tools that humanity could now use to self-destruct, pragmatism and the enlightenment created a framework where disease and disaster could be understood scientifically.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Revised an (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 308.

⁸⁸ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

⁸⁹ Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness*.

⁹⁰ Wójcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*.

Prepping for God

Preppers, like any culture, do not have neat lines drawn around the perimeter. Preppers are against big government but are favorable toward the military; the one historically authoritarian branch of government. Preppers reject technological advances and argue that humanity has become too reliant on government handouts and consumerism. Meanwhile, in ethnographic observations of preppers at conferences in poor rural Virginia, it is hard to believe these individuals are not getting assistance from the government. Each of these perplexing intersections do not speak to the uniqueness of prepper culture, but more importantly the messiness of all culture. The deeper the study of a culture, the more difficult it becomes to see clearly.

The Tension within the Christian Prepper

One surprising intersection of cultures is that between preppers and Christians, particularly given that the prepper apocalypse is secular. A man giving a sermon at a prepper event claimed that he believed 95% of all preppers were Christians.⁹¹ Although I have no quantifiable evidence, from my observations, I would not be surprised. Throughout this study, every prepper event has shown comfortable displays of Christianity. Conferences have been opened and closed with prayers and there have been alter calls for people to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

On the surface, the ideologies of preppers and Christians seem compatible. Preppers and Christians both believe in a need to look to the future: sacrifice now to

⁹¹ Ken Whitney, “Sunrise Service” (Saluda, NC: Prepper Camp, 2015).

enjoy the fruits of labor later. Storing up treasures in heaven and bunkers requires faith and perseverance, a neglecting of present desires for an investment in a future that will transform modern understandings of value into new frameworks.

The tension between Christians and preppers became apparent to me at a Sunrise Service at Prepper Camp. I woke up early, along with over twenty other people, to participate in the service. It was a beautiful morning as I sat with a view of a lake with the sunrise shining through the humid, but cool, morning air. I walked to the service wondering how the sermon would address the selfishness of filling your basement with food and thriving, like Charlton Heston, while your neighbors are dying. The sermon was in the morning on the last day of Prepper Camp and for two days I had heard nothing but faith in the apocalypse through personal preparedness and how it will redeem preppers. I sat down wondering how the sermon would address the problem of Jesus. In a parable, Jesus talks about how a rich man who filled his barns with food but dies before he can use them (Luke 12). Jesus challenges his followers with the “greatest commandment” to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12). These teachings seem to run contrary to everything prepping stands for.

I expected to hear a sermon where a man or woman share his or her personal interpretation of these verses with a hermeneutical framework that allowed preppers to selfishly hoard as others suffered. Despite “Jesus” being mentioned over 25 times throughout the sermon, I found that the person of Jesus, as in his actions, word, or behaviors, were never mentioned. Following the benediction, I was frustrated that I had not found what I was looking for, but it was then that I had in fact observed the resolution

of the dissonance for the Christian prepper. The Christian prepper secularizes Jesus in order to place his faith in life after the apocalypse.

Christian preppers overcome multiple layers of challenges. On the one hand, they must defend why they place their faith in food and water storage and not in God. Simultaneously, they must justify keeping their stores for themselves and their family amidst the great suffering of others. To overcome this dissonance, Christian preppers reinterpret their faith through a new framework that secularizes Jesus and sanctifies the apocalypse. Ultimately, preppers produce an answer that makes hoarding during scarcity more palatable.

Preppers create a virtual apocalypse, one that may not exist in time and space, but exists within the culture of the community, the borders of which are crafted by the conversation of the online community. In the process, preppers become more than consumers of media, but active producers of an apocalyptic vision.⁹² Exploring what portions of the Bible Christian preppers accept and refute allows for the construction of a vernacular prepper ideology. Like any vernacular culture, this is a messy space where conflicting messages and ideas are not only present, but where a beautiful mosaic is painted by the rhythm of online discourse.

The use of the labels “Christians” and “prepper” are not to provide a homogenous interpretation of a very diverse group of individuals. There is neither the time nor space here to explore the various individual theological components of Christians or how those individuals approach preparedness in their unique framework. With this in mind, there

⁹² Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

are some broad observations that I have made through fieldwork and online studies to establish limited conclusions regarding Christians in the prepper community. First, Christian preppers are not believers in a pre-tribulation theology; they do not believe that a rapture will protect them from the apocalyptic world to come. Second, Christian preppers truly want the world, as all preppers do, to become a better place. However, if the world does not turn from its ways, the apocalypse serves as a reset button, as it resets the playing field for the apocalyptic frontier.

Prophecy, Puritans, and Preppers

The impending dangerous frontier brought on by the secular apocalypse, while new, is a return to the wilderness motif within the American identity. It was Perry Miller who framed the Puritan identity within the concept of the frontier. The Puritans ventured on an "errand into the wilderness" not only to show Europe what a "city on a hill" would look like but to export their covenant theology back to the Europeans. Like Puritans, Preppers use the frontier to forge their collective identity, but unlike previous frontiers, this is one which will errand to society. There is no need for preppers to physically move to the wilderness since the wilderness will return on its own. When the power goes out, the grocery shelves will be empty, gangs will roam the streets, and the wilderness will reclaim the predictable order and progress of modern civilization.

Miller criticized the scholarship of his day for separating the economic from the religious, arguing that these must be analyzed in conjunction to achieve a comprehensive understanding.⁹³ In examining the Prepper community, it becomes easy to separate the

⁹³ Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness*.

religious from survivalism, as the community attempts to do this as well. Popular internet sites for Preppers segregate religious discourse into separate spheres on the site, but this fails to acknowledge the interconnectedness of secular and the religious. The secularization of apocalypse preparedness presents a challenge to Christian preppers seeking to engage in religious discourse.

Ken Witley preached on Sunday morning at prepper gathering's sunrise service and shared his hermeneutical understanding of Jesus's words. He shared that often he finds himself defending his prepper position against other Christians. "People ask me, 'Why do you prep Scott? You believe that Jesus is going to come down and take his bride out of here and you have this escape valve, this get out of jail free card?'"

I prep because of what Jesus said in verses (Revelation) 7 & 8. He tells me what the signs were in 6,7, & 8. That's enough for me to prep. An earthquake, a famine, how about Ebola last year? Ebola is still there, along with AIDS and everything else. There will be famines and pestilences. There will be beasts, but they might be microscopic beasts, that we will have to do warfare against.⁹⁴

Witley's interpretation of Jesus's prophecy emboldened his need to be a prepper. Jesus told him to be a prepper, so he became one. Fundamental to the prepper faith is an underlying belief that humanity has become lazy and dependent on the government and consumerism for comfort and security and that this unsustainable network will collapse and purge the world of those who have embraced the passive fallout of homogeneous global capitalism. Witley defended his hybrid faith in the secular apocalypse and Christianity and suggested God would never play a "get out of jail free card." Humanity

⁹⁴ Ken Witley, "Sunrise Service" (Saluda, NC, 2015).

deserves jail, it deserves the horrors of the secular apocalypse, because only then will the prepper's faith in their preparations be fully revealed. Stockpiling cans, jars, and bullets becomes an activity that creates community, but more importantly, the ritual perpetuates a mental framework that believes in the reality of the apocalypse. Each purchase on each shelf, every ear of corn growing in the backyard, and every box of dry ammunition is an investment in a future that preppers believe is increasingly a reality.

A more culturally acceptable parallel to the prepper stocking shelves is the employee making 401k contributions. In these cases, individuals take money and invest it toward a future that they see as inevitable. Each of these actions requires faith. When an individual puts money into a 401k, there is no certainty he will get back all the money he puts in. An individual can log into a retirement account, examine his portfolio, and meet with other investors to help his faith in his retirement grow. If anything, it is easier for the prepper to have faith in the apocalypse and his preps, because his shelves of food provide an immediate and tangible resource; one that does not only show itself as numbers on a webpage, but cans that can be held, opened, and eaten.

Throughout prepper culture at events is a charismatic belief system that has adopted the language of Evangelical Christians. Presentations at prepper events take on the culture of a church service. Preppers call out during meetings; they share their prepper testimonies and the challenges they face when their spouse doesn't "believe." They ultimately believe that the apocalypse is a reality that is hard to challenge. In one discussion with a prepper over the phone, I asked him what he would think if he is on his deathbed and the apocalypse never came. He could not answer the question, not because

it offended him, but because, “That won’t happen.”⁹⁵ His faith in the instability of the world did not allow for an alternate reality.

Rituals of Faith

In examining ritualizing, it is important to move beyond the rituals themselves and examine the experience and culture the rituals create.⁹⁶ The very act of stockpiling supplies and running through apocalyptic drills become religious.⁹⁷ The rituals are religious because they require preppers to believe in a near-future where their visions will manifest into reality. When a prepper checks a hidden, loaded firearm in a bag of rice in her basement, this action creates a new lens. The gun is no longer a defensive tool, it is a sacrament testifying to the prepper’s faith that the apocalypse will come. The lines between the religious and the secular blur as preppers, both secular and religious, transform preparedness routines into rituals and rites.

Jesus the Prepper

To successfully construct a hybrid faith in the secular apocalypse and Christianity, preppers fix the problem: Jesus. The secular origins of the prepper movement have created a secular rather than a sacred apocalypse, despite the deep Christian roots of most preppers and the Christian inflections of many aspects of prepper discourse. This disjunction presents a problem: how to reconcile the deep Christian

⁹⁵ Pedro, “Interview with Andrew C. Miller,” 2014.

⁹⁶ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁹⁷ Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2005).

beliefs of preppers with a non-Christian view of the apocalypse. One way in which preppers attempt to bridge this gap is by adapting the figure of Jesus to accommodate the more secular aspects of their concerns.

People have interpreted Jesus throughout American history in various contexts. Stephen Prothero explored Jesus, not Jesus Christ, which would have theological implications, and how Jesus was an icon for social, political, and cultural reasons. Prothero established a cycle that preppers themselves are participating in continually. Christians (and non-Christians) refuse to accept traditional conceptions of Jesus and the next group, in this case, preppers, choose specific elements and practices and isolate them, while neglecting others. The authority of Jesus is used to condemn practices which here would not be prepping. As the new Jesus gains traction, the authority of Jesus grows.⁹⁸

Jesus comes up frequently at public prepper events. However, under closer reading, it becomes clear that preppers meld the seemingly incompatible worlds of the secular apocalypse with Christianity by secularizing Jesus and sanctifying the apocalypse. Poaching scriptures from the Bible, preppers choose verses and frameworks for verses that support a Jesus that does not complicate their ability to hoard during the apocalypse.

Witley's sermon looks closely at Jesus and the importance of "knowing him" and emphasized that Jesus does not care about "preps." "Jesus isn't concerned with the works of man's hands, is he? He's not necessarily impressed with what we can do or how good

⁹⁸ Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*, 41.

our preps are or how good we have our bug out location. He's more concerned with matters of the heart.” These “matters of the heart” did not come through the sermon.

Jesus is only addressed in the following aspects:

- Talk to others about Jesus.
- The past prophecies of Jesus came true, and future prophecies will come true.
- Listen to Jesus.

During the transition from the sacred to the secular apocalypse, the emphasis of Jesus moves from the “head” to the “heart.” It was difficult for people to worship a distant and angry God, so God becomes a God of love as opposed to wrath.⁹⁹ Hymns from the 19th century reflected a shifting attitude towards a more heart-led relationship with Jesus, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (1855). There is a dramatic shift from theology and thinking, to relationships and mercy.¹⁰⁰

This secularization does not strip Jesus from the Bible or Sermons; both were present in Witley’s sermon, but rather they ignore the complicating sayings of Jesus. Noah and Joseph are stripped of their uniquely divine relationships with God and interpreted as individuals who prepared for apocalypses and survived because of their preparations. For the Christian prepper, Jesus is a figure who calls on us to be prepared and to focus on our families in preparation for the apocalypse.

Website forums relegate the potential tension between Christianity to specific portions of the website. *American Preppers Network* (APN), with 30,476 members, has quarantined religious and political topics in the category of “General Discussion,” located

⁹⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 58.

at the bottom of the topics page. Site moderators prowl APN for individuals who are breaking the “Terms of Use” policy or enacting what they perceive to be unacceptable use of the site. However, nowhere within the “Terms of Use” does it mandate that individuals maintain proper thread topics of discussion.

If members discuss religion in a thread other than "Faith," moderators quickly exercise their authority and move the conversation. On APN, “Watchman220” posted a new thread entitled “Considerable Thought for the Long Term Prep.” In this post, Watchman220 stated that he is “interested in Biblical Prophecy,” and encouraged Preppers to buy a book called *The Glorious Battle* that addresses prophesy and the "New World Order.”¹⁰¹ Within an hour the first response came from Lynda, a "State Moderator," who stated, “*Books or General Faith* would be the best sub-forums for this topic [*italics added*].” Her brief post includes the signature, “THINK.....It's not illegal yet.”¹⁰² Moderator Lynda’s signature is about the potential of the government as an institutional force, to impose its will upon the vernacular, but the irony is that here she is engaging in the same authoritarian methodology her signature criticizes. The second post on the thread is by “Tabor” who agrees with Lynda’s suggestion of moving the Watchman220’s post.

I agree lynda the mods will move it im guessing..i have a problem with the title of the book, there is no such thing as a Glorious Battle because by

¹⁰¹ Watchman220, “Considerable Thought For Long Term Prep,” *American Preppers Network (Blog)*, 2013,
<http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=155&t=35621#p311332>

¹⁰² Lynda, “Re: Considerable Thought For Long Term Prep,” *American Preppers Network (Blog)*, 2013,
<http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=155&t=35621#p311333>

definition a battle denotes death and destruction and the taking of life is never good just sometime an evil necessity..i wont go into the religious content because i am a firm believer that faith and religion are a persons choice and should not be pushed or beaten into another.¹⁰³

Tabor kept with the spirit of the site and refused to acknowledge the religious nature of watchman220's suggestion of a religious apocalypse. In keeping with the Prepper approach to the secular apocalypse, Tabor sees the apocalypse as a secular event and religion is simply a "personal choice." Before the end of the day, Watchman220's original post was moved to the "Faith" section by a "Forum Moderator" with the username "IceFire." After it moved, no one else commented on the post. This exchange over Watchman220's post reveals the multiple levels of institutionalized control sites place on Prepper dialogue. Major sites like APN discourage religious discussions and prefer secular approaches to the apocalypse. The site is structured by moderators policing the boards and the members themselves show distrust in mixing the religious and the secular. The virtual community rejected Watchman220; his profile shows that this was his last post.

The Christian prepper community is frustrated with the lack of an open dialogue on the intersectionality between faith and survivalism. "Jeans" on survivalistboards.com posted, "a lot of preppers are very antagonistic toward anything that is about God or Christianity" in an entry titled "Preppers vs. Christians" in the religious forum.¹⁰⁴ The

¹⁰³ Tabor, "Re: Considerable Thought For Long Term Prep," *American Preppers Network (Blog)*, 2013,
<http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=155&t=35621#p311402>

¹⁰⁴ Jeans, "Preppers vs. Christians?," *Survivalist Boards*, 2012,
<http://www.survivalistboards.com/showthread.php?t=275235>.

first two responses agreed with Jeans' post, but the conversation quickly became aggressive. "Jojo" responded, "The only people I know here who get upset with Christians posting would be when they repeatedly make religious posts in sections other than the religion section. No one says you can't talk about God, but there is a place for it. It IS a prepping forum." Preppers such as Jojo appreciate the institutional control moderators place on the site since they see that there is a place for religion discourse, but not in the public spheres of this site. The closing argument was posted by "Ebberton," "a lot of christians think they'll be taken up in the rapture.... a lot of preppers know better." Jean never participated in the discussion after her initial post, likely because the aggressive nature of the posts did not invite responses.

Central to the concept of prepping is the survival of the fittest approach, where the prepared will survive, while the unprepared, or "sheeple" as Preppers call them, will be led to the slaughter.¹⁰⁵ Prepper philosophy is about centralizing power through stockpiling resources so that an individual can care for himself, as well as his family. This individualistic survivalist approach is in direct contrast with the communal compassion of the Christian faith. Christian preppers are well aware of this internal conflict, but because of their demotion to the backwaters of Prepper sites, they cannot collectively explore these topics.

¹⁰⁵ Southern Belle Prepper, "Glossary of Terms/Acronyms," *Southern Belle Prepper (Blog)*, n.d., <https://sites.google.com/site/southernbelleprepper/glossary-of-terms-acronyms>.

Prepper Prophecy

Christian sites allow Preppers to more freely address topics of faith without fear of rejection or relegation. On the website *Godlike Productions* "A Friend" posted a new topic thread with the line "Is the term Christian Prepper an oxymoron?" "A Friend," wrote, "The Bible would seem to say that we should not be 'preppers.' Am I reading it correctly? As a Christian, what do you think?" "A Friend" then quoted the following scriptures:

Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these... Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"Anonymous Coward" replied in agreement, "As Christians living in these last days we aren't to 'prep' for anything except the coming of Jesus!" "Anonymous Coward" is a believer in the religious apocalypse and therefore disagrees with the Christian Prepper's secularization of the "last days." "A Friend" responded "Thank you... I tried to decide between faith and provisions. I hope/pray faith wins out!"¹⁰⁶ For "A Friend" the conflict is one of the biblical proportions, that for someone to be a Prepper is to place faith in their "provisions" instead of Christ. The conversation moved forward as Christian preppers joined the conversation. "Paul" posted a rebuttal, "Only a fool would see the signs of a storm coming and ignore it. My advice to you is to prep with all of the Abilities

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous Coward, "Re: Is the Term Christian Prepper an Oxymoron?," *Godlike Productions*, 2012, <http://www.godlikeproductions.com/forum1/message1867374/pg1>.

that God has given you, and trust in him as the lilies do."¹⁰⁷ Janice Perjak followed with "well consider the ant and also Joseph...they were both Preppers not just for themselves but for Others."¹⁰⁸ For both Paul and Janice the terms Prepper and Christian are not mutually exclusive. "Drow13" responded in kind with a lengthy post citing several biblical reasons why prepping fits within Christian theology.

You shouldn't store up treasures on earth but if you're prepared when hard times come then you will be able to freely give to others... The verse about the fool that was hoarding everything up for himself is an example of the type of prepper that will get all of the canned goods and ammo that he can carry and sit in a bunker and try to ride it out without thinking of anyone else. That's clearly against the teachings of the bible because we're supposed to serve others and put them before ourselves. Not sharing when you think that you might not have enough is a lack of faith in God. The world view is to hoard everything up and try to ride out the storm, but Jesus said give.¹⁰⁹

"Drow13" differentiates between Christian and secular preppers. Secular preppers are who Jesus was talking about when he warned against storing treasures here on earth. With confidence, "Drow13" believes that the storing of treasures will lead to treasures in heaven, for when society collapses it will be the Christian preppers who will be the only ones who can follow the command of Jesus to give. Each of these individuals on the site *Godlike Productions* are engaging in what Howard calls the "virtual ekklesia." They are an online digital church engaging in ritual deliberation on the application and

¹⁰⁷ Paul, "Re: Is the Term Christian Prepper an Oxymoron?," *Godlike Productions*, 2012, <http://www.godlikeproductions.com/forum1/message1867374/pg1>.

¹⁰⁸ Janice Perjak, "Re: Is the Term Christian Prepper an Oxymoron?," *Godlike Productions*, 2012, <http://www.godlikeproductions.com/forum1/message1867374/pg1>.

¹⁰⁹ Drow13, "Re: Is the Term Christian Prepper an Oxymoron?," *Godlike Productions*, 2012, <http://www.godlikeproductions.com/forum1/message1867374/pg1>.

interpretation of the Bible.¹¹⁰ Here Christians are engaging in a community that may be virtual, but connects with the physical world of the members. Just as Preppers construct a virtual apocalypse, these members are creating an "imagined community" around the discourse of survivalism and faith.¹¹¹

Christian preppers are reconstructing a version of Jesus that fits their philosophy of self-preservation. As they see it, Jesus is not the one who said, "If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt (Luke 6:29)," or that to "Love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31)," as these complicate the dissonance of Christian prepping.¹¹² Stephen Prothero suggests the reinventing of Jesus is not new in American culture. "Jesus may be 'the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8),' but American depictions of Jesus have varied widely from age to age and community to community."¹¹³ Hoarding supplies are acceptable because "Jesus said give," and in the impending apocalypse, only preppers will be able to provide. While this may seem to solve the dilemma for Christian preppers, it only intensifies it. If preppers are prepping to provide, sharing resources jeopardizes the shelter-in-place philosophy of self-survivalism.

The virtual ekklesia of *Godlike Productions* is limited in that it is not primarily a prepper site, but rather a Christian site addressing the topic of survivalism. These sites do

¹¹⁰ Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*, 12.

¹¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹¹² Luke 6:29, Matthew 22:39

¹¹³ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 8.

not provide Christian preppers with the proper environment to establish their ekklesia to address the conflict between self-preservation and self-sacrifice. Since they find rejection within both Christian and Prepper spheres, Christian preppers create vernacular mediums to deliberate on the theological implications of their beliefs. These vernacular forms of ekklesia, while achieving a greater level of authority, simultaneously impede on the egalitarian exchange available on the blogs. Unlike a blog format, where individuals can create their posts and discussions, these sites centralize authority.

One such site is *New Life on a Homestead* is for Christian survivalists. The site manager, Kenrda, posted in February 2011 a blog titled, "Should Christians & Believers Be Preppers?" "I've been surprised," she writes, "by how many people have emailed me asking how to handle a spouse or loved one who is of the mindset that Christians, or believers in general, shouldn't be preppers." Ultimately Kendra argues that Christians can be preppers because God calls humanity to work hard. Citing Joseph's storing up food for Egypt's famine she writes,

[God] never says, "Don't worry my children. Sit back and relax and I'll take care of everything." Actually, He instructs us to be diligent and hard working, and then we will reap the benefits of our labor. His provision comes as a blessing to our obedience, not simply for our faith alone. He even goes so far as to call the unprepared fools, sluggards, and worse than unbelievers!¹¹⁴

The lengthy post of over 1,800 words cites multiple examples from scripture that Kendra interprets as supporting a prepper's self-preservation philosophy. The post drew

¹¹⁴ Kendra, "Should Christians & Believers Be Preppers?," *New Life on a Homestead*, 2011, <http://newlifeonahomestead.com/2011/02/should-christians-believers-be-preppers/>.

the attention of members on the site with over thirty-eight comments excluding those made by Kendra. Unfortunately, the institutional elements of the site do not allow for a free-flowing virtual ekklesia. Individuals can only comment directly on Kendra's post, which is listed in order of their time stamps. If two individuals are engaged in a discussion, one post can interrupt the format. Members do attempt to place their vernacular authority over these restraints by addressing their post to someone else directly. This occurred when a member wanted to comment on the first post which was made by "Lanna" who wrote, "I tend to fall back on the phrase 'God helps those who help themselves.'" "Tony," wrote in response, "Lanna, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the Bible never said 'God helps those who help themselves.'" While the site did not allow Tony to comment on Lanna's comment directly, Tony still attempted to circumvent the institutional limitations of the site by addressing it specifically to Lanna as opposed to Kendra.

The Prepper's Bible

Christian preppers create a new narrative of the Bible to fit the secular apocalypse. Reinterpreting figures in the Bible is nothing new to American culture. In the economic boom of the 1920s, Bruce Barton explored the hidden business qualities of Jesus in *The Man Nobody Knows*.¹¹⁵ Barton argues that Jesus is not only the sacrificial lamb of God but a man whose marketing skills allow him to take a small group of inexperienced fishermen and build a global religion. Preppers read the Bible and

¹¹⁵ Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925).

construct a narrative framework that develops a new meaning for the text and allows them to reconcile the dissonance between stockpiling food and giving to the poor.

Jeremy Johnston, a presenter at a Prepper convention in New Castle Virginia, shared his thoughts on Noah at an open-panel: “The key to this whole thing is there are two ways you can look into preparation: Anyone ever heard of Noah? Craziest Prepper that's ever lived. Think about it: he's awesome. People thought he was crazy--until they saw the water. He had the best insight he could have.”¹¹⁶ Preppers and Noah are both “crazy” until the apocalypse proves them right. Noah has many commonalities with preppers since he did prepare for an apocalypse. I have found it particularly disturbing how preppers resonated with Noah, redeemed on the ark, and looking at those who one laughed at him, drowning in the rising waters.

Noah’s apocalypse was far from secular, but a direct order from God. Johnston added, “Every dude around [Noah] thought, “Dude, you are freaking nuts!” Until they saw the rain. Then they figured out that this guy is with it.” For Johnston, Noah is not only a symbol of faith in the secular apocalypse, but more importantly a symbol of redemption. It seems that Johnston envisions himself as a modern-day Noah and equally hopes to be redeemed by the secular apocalypse. Noah allows preppers to distance themselves from non-believers. Just as Noah stood on his deck and watched the rain come, they too will have while others have not.

Noah’s reconstructed identity provides a connection to the Bible, reconciling the dissonance for Christian preppers and their beliefs. *Answers in Genesis*, a website

¹¹⁶ Williams et al., “Panel of Experts.”

dedicated to a conservative-fundamentalist interpretation of Genesis, posted an article, “Noah, The Super Prepper.” *Answers in Genesis* introduces the audience to prepping and writes, “Solomon tells us there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9), and that includes prepping. Think back to Noah’s day. Noah can be called the world’s first Super Prepper!” The author goes on to encourage readers to visit *Ark Encounter*, a life-size replica of the Ark, to “see how [Noah] might have provision the Ark, his family, to build a new world.”¹¹⁷ It appears that Noah’s reinvention as a prepper provides a bridge between the Christian and prepper worlds. If God allowed for the destruction of the world and saved a man and his family through his preparations, then it easier to one day turn away those in need during the apocalypse.

As seen earlier, another secularized Biblical figure is Joseph. Dare Tuitt wrote on the website *Prepper Recon* on how Joseph provides several lessons for preppers. Tuitt argued that one lesson is not to rely on others. “Once Joseph was promoted in Egypt, he didn’t just sit back and say ‘GOD will take care of me,’ he got involved. He devised a plan to cope with the coming crisis. Then, he worked hard to implement the plan. He put Egypt on a plan to live below their means so they could have something for the future. If you consume everything you produce, you will have nothing tomorrow. It is such a simple concept, but one that is so far from the modern American mindset.”¹¹⁸ Tuitt’s message of anti-consumerism and delayed gratification are valuable observations and criticisms of American consumer culture. However, there is a hidden irony in this

¹¹⁷ “Noah, the Super Prepper,” *Answers in Genesis*, 2013, <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/noah/the-super-prepper/>.

¹¹⁸ Source

interpretation as Tuitt fails to address how to respond to those who do not prepare. Herein lies the greatest challenge of any Christian prepper; reconciling giving to others with hoarding supplies. The use of the word “hoarding” here is intentional; it clearly defines what will happen, as preppers feast while others perish. Only the word “hoarding” conveys the contrast between those who will have supplies and those who will not. This may appear leading, to discuss how preppers may act in an eventual apocalyptic landscape, but it is worth reiterating that the frontier of the apocalypse is a very real space for preppers. Outsiders may see the frontier as an eventual possibility, but preppers genuinely believe in the laws and guiding principles of the apocalypse that they construct its boundaries and landscape using media, as was seen in the first chapter.

Focusing on figures in the Old Testament allows Christian preppers to avoid the complicated portions of scripture, but some are willing to embrace the post-apocalyptic duty of preppers to rebuild, help, and give back. This may appear as a useless trajectory to go down, as this is no longer a discussion involving interpretation of the apocalypse, but an additional layer of interpretation as we look into the world that will exist following the apocalypse. This world, although distant from the securities of today, is very real to preppers and is constructed through the media that they consume (as presented in the first chapter). The Christian preppers are willing to venture into this dark space work to reconcile the dissonance through sacrifices from both belief systems.

"Prepperspastor" provides leadership through his YouTube channel for Christian preppers in how to build a religious framework for the secular apocalypse. "Before I [became a Prepper], I had to make sure it would work correctly with a biblical worldview. It has, and it does." Rev. Cheek then continues by providing his insight into

the topic of faith and prepping, "Let me assure you, if you have been involved with the Prepping mentality, you're familiar with the three B's: beans, band-aids, and bullets. Well, I'm going to add a fourth one to that today, I'm going to add the Bible... The Prepper mindset does have a biblical worldview."¹¹⁹

"What are you going to do when [desperate people] come knocking on your door?" asks Rev. Cheek. He approaches the topic from two perspectives, that of the unprepared sheople and the Prepper. In his opening arguments, he states,

It is a sin to be too lazy to work. It is a sin if you choose to live and take entitlement programs to keep from working. It is a sin if you do not take care of your family, if you do not take care of your children. If we are in a crisis situation it is going to be a tough call... if I help and how much I help. If we know to prepare for difficult times and we choose not to, we ignore the warnings, then we have sinned also. I believe that. I believe the word of God teaches that.¹²⁰

While his comments have political implications, he is not freeing "sheople" from their responsibility regarding the apocalypse. Since this is a secular apocalypse, religious Preppers do not hold a monopoly on information. It is a "tough call" because, for him, the unprepared are reaping that which they have sown, but simultaneously, there is a Christian responsibility to care for others. Rev. Cheek suggests placing food, bible tracts, and "some words of encouragement" into grocery bags to hand out to people as they come. In his concluding comments, he remarks,

¹¹⁹ Terry Cheek, "Pastor Intro.," *YouTube*, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ROboY6wnec&list=UURSw0w63TvDH2zR1iUO3XxA&index=33>.

¹²⁰ Terry Cheek, "A Few Words about Charity in a Crisis," *YouTube*, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NleIxt10LrA&list=UURSw0w63TvDH2zR1iUO3XxA&index=29>.

What is most important for the Prepper is to resolve in your household and in your perspective with the resources you have answer this question: 'How am I going to handle charity in a crisis situation?' It's that simple. It is better if you do it now, while there are no emotions, while there is no fear, while there is no stress, while there are no frustrations, while there is no traumatic or dramatic events going on in your life.

Rev. Cheek and the members subscribing to his YouTube page are attempting to deconstruct the elements of Christianity that they reject as unreasonable. Jesus complicates the issues throughout the scriptures, such as when he instructs the rich young ruler, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."¹²¹ These preppers are engaging in the process of reshaping Jesus to fit their conceptions of him. They reject the concept of assisting the poor through entitlement programs and use the authority of the Bible to condemn these practices.¹²² There is a redeeming nature though, as the apocalypse becomes a tool of evangelism as preppers hand out a can of beans and a Bible to those passing by.

Individuals posted various comments establishing the virtual ekklesia of Rev. Cheek's YouTube channel. "Ssamorgan2044" posted in agreement that "Charity will be a difficult decision to make and one that I know I will struggle with." "Bctruck" joined stating "This is something every prepper needs to ponder. I wouldn't have a problem sharing a couple cups of beans and rice with someone at the end of my gated driveway." These comments support Rev. Cheek's solution to the Prepper-Christian paradox. Rev. Cheek complicated the role of the religious and the secular in prepping.

¹²¹ Mark 10:21

¹²² Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, 41.

Just as Miller and Gould complicated the relationship between the religious and the secular within their communities of study, preppers also muddle these spheres. The theology of Rev. Cheek secularizes the religious nature of prepping by limiting the sacrificial role of Christian preppers in the apocalypse. Jesus is reconstructed by the community as a man compassionate for the poor as someone who saw dependency as a sin. Conversely, the secular becomes religious as the canned goods in the basement no longer simply mean survival in the secular apocalypse, but a means of evangelism. The solution for the prepper community is making the religious-secular and secular religious.

Rev. Cheek's "preps" take on a greater level of meaning, as they become an evangelical tool, representing his religious faith. It is through his preparations for the secular apocalypse that he expresses a "lived religion." The way in which Rev. Cheek lives out his faith needs to be incorporated into constructing religion.¹²³ Of the twenty-nine videos he has uploaded to his channel, only four videos would qualify as traditional concepts of religion. The other videos are topics on various prepping techniques such as tracking, networking, or gardening. Drawing from Orsi's concept of a "lived religion," these videos can be brought into the religious fold, because for Rev. Cheek, these survival techniques become religious when they become an integral aspect of his faith.

Ultimately, the YouTube channel of Rev. Cheek contains the same inherent limitations of Kendra's blog. Neither site truly explores the digital potential of individuals to establish vernacular authority. Cheek and Kendra, due to the mechanical framing of

¹²³ Robert A Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

their sites, do not allow individuals to create or establish their own authority. In each site individuals must engage in a sphere of discussion that centers either around a post or video. Since popular secular Prepper sites do not allow Preppers the freedom to engage in the challenging topic of faith and survivalism, they move the conversation to sites that establish their own authority. It is at these sites that Christian preppers break down the secular barriers between religion and prepping, as they practice their religion through the physical preparations and rituals themselves.

Preppers ultimately construct a worldview that compensates for the disparity between the secular apocalypse and their religious beliefs by swapping the fundamentals foundations of each. The apocalypse becomes a sacred place that takes on the role of God, deciding who lives, and who dies. Preparing for the apocalypse through preparedness rituals creates a belief system that will ultimately solve all the world's challenges. Conversely, Jesus is secularized as "preppers" such as Noah and Joseph are poached from their Biblical and divine context and transformed into the first preppers. These stories allow preppers to transform their faith; allowing preppers to feast while others starve.

Chapter 3: Queens of the Apocalypse: Race and Gender in the American Prepper Movement

Exhausted from an uncomfortable night in my tent at Prepper Camp, I sat down in the front row of my first presentation under a large white canopy. A senior woman came in and sat a few chairs down from me and immediately engaged me in a warm conversation. She wore an American flag leather jacket and bandana. She shared with me her late husband, retirement, fears of Obama, flight from Florida, and her excitement for Prepper Camp. Leaning closer, she opened her purse to reveal a handgun; looking up, she smiled, and said, “The world just isn’t safe anymore.” I returned what felt like an uncomfortable smile. The presentation began, and it was not long until she fell asleep. Throughout the presentation, I couldn’t help thinking of how this woman breaks many of the prepper stereotypes regarding age and gender. As a single senior woman, one would assume that she would not have any interest in the male-dominated culture of preppers. Throughout this ethnography, it became clear that women in prepper culture, perceived themselves as feminists who believed in both their independence from men and modern society. The apocalypse is a place where the woman by my side can gain independence from modern restrictions of age and gender. I would argue that this prepper feminism is blind to the realities of the white masculinity that permeates the prepper community.

Men are not only the dominant gender at prepper events, but masculinity dominates the prepper discourse as preppers engage the apocalypse. Men are often alone at public events; it is rarer to see women on their own. This was clear from the very first prepper presentation I attended at a fire hall in central Pennsylvania, where only one woman sat by herself, all other women sat next to a male. Throughout this ethnography,

seating was only full at one event, making it easy to survey a crowd and see who was alone and who was with others. Throughout the presentations and conferences of this study, there were less than thirty women who sat with empty chairs on either side.

The overall theme of the prepper secular apocalypse aligns to masculine values. As was evidenced by the film *The Road*, which will be address in detail later, the mother's desire to commit suicide was acceptable, but the father's inability to support her and keep her from suicide was not. Women in the male-dominated prepper community are perceived as outsiders. Preppers view the apocalypse as a place where men and women will return to more traditional roles with women in the kitchen and taking care of children. Women at prepper events rarely speak on topics beyond the realm of the domestic. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that this is a powerless space for women. The frontier of the apocalypse, similar to the historical frontier, is a space that allows for unconventional gender roles, where the norms of civilization do not bind individuals.¹²⁴ In the frontier, identity is a more fluid concept.

Initially, my research seemed to suggest that male preppers disempower their wives by returning them to more traditionally feminine roles. There appeared to be only one place for the female prepper: the kitchen. Females in the apocalyptic frontier have to raise their children and feed the household. However, as Janice Radway suggested, it is important to look beyond the immediate appearances of a community and examine how

¹²⁴ Susan Lee Johnson, "Domestic Life in the Diggings," in *American Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway et al. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 135–44.

the individuals themselves perceive and use their space to create power.¹²⁵ Female preppers are not the tools of masculine domination of male preppers, but each female prepper interprets her own gender empowered framework to lift herself up. Female preppers perceive a transformation that will take place in the domestic sphere and it will become a space of power: where food preparation and childbearing is a sign of strength.

Feminist Reception Theory

The relevant scholarship of Janice Radway and Amy Kaplan provided frameworks for how spaces that appear to be dominated by masculinity can be reinterpreted through a feminist lens. Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* analyzed how individuals consume Romance novels; more important than what is read, is how it is read. Radway examines how women may read about rape and male domination in literature, but they read their interpretation into these texts that empowers them despite the narrative's dominant sexist themes.¹²⁶ Likewise, female preppers are not victims of male domination in the apocalyptic frontier and forced into domestic roles to serve the egotistical agenda of their husbands but use the space of the apocalypse to create dominant roles. Women preppers look forward to the apocalypse as a time when they will be central to the home and reinforcing conservative culture. Kaplan argued in *Manifest Domesticity* that the domesticity of women in the 19th century was not an “anchor” within American imperialism, but a weapon to extend America's dominance throughout the

¹²⁵ Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*.

¹²⁶ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Second (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

world.¹²⁷ For female preppers, if the world were to collapse, food would be a top concern and the kitchen would not be a prison, but an outpost of the same kind of domestic dominance Kaplan identified.

Online Gender Identity

It is easier for individuals in online spaces to cross gender lines, but some prepper forums attempt to reinforce traditional binary concepts of sexual identity online. The Survivalist Boards website has a separate section for “Lady Survivalists,” limited and accessible only by individuals who click “female” when they created their profiles. However, there is nothing to keep a user from checking one gender or another. One user, Hilltopper, shared that she had been blocked from the female-only forums because when she created her account, she checked off male. “I wasn’t going to volunteer any info till I had looked around,” she defended herself.¹²⁸ It was not that Hilltopper believed in the fluidity of gender and clicked “male,” rather she was concerned about privacy and anonymity and giving too much information away to the site. Despite the binary choices offered users when they create their accounts, Hilltopper reminds us of the fluidity of gender in online performance. This ethnography is grounded in self-identification, I am not advocating that any particular individual is or is not a “prepper,” rather the word “prepper” is used to locate various communities on and offline. Similarly, for gender identification, this research allows users to self-identify their gender through either

¹²⁷ Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” in *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 111–34.

¹²⁸ Hilltopper, “***Ladies Section*** Single Women Preppers,” *Survivalist Boards*, 2012, <http://www.survivalistboards.com/showpost.php?p=12496329&postcount=7>.

personal declaration, i.e., stating that they are a female or male, or posting in gender restricted platforms.

Prepper forums and articles construct a vernacular interpretation of the female prepper identity. Debbie, the “Chief Editor at Primal Survivor and tough female prepper,” wrote an article titled “10 Tips for Female Preppers,” acknowledged that “most of the voices and advice in prepping community comes from men,” and wanted to “address prepping from a woman’s viewpoint.” Debbie suggests several ideas, such as creating a reusable menstrual cup, taking self-defense classes, and getting in shape. Her 9th suggestion is to “embrace your feminine side.” “Mental survival is just as important as physical survival,” and encouraged her readers to “stockpile something that makes you feel good as a woman,” such as a hairbrush or face cream.¹²⁹ The identity of an “authentic” woman is where we can reconstruct the values of the prepper community. As preppers debate the ideal prepper woman, rough or refined, her race, class, her identity is constructed.

The complexity of prepper culture is magnified as female preppers bridge the gap between modern consumer feminist ideals portrayed in media and advertising with the rough and independent world of the apocalypse. There are those who would like to see a fundamental embrace of the wilderness and rejection of modern conceptions of beauty, but most women preppers fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, embracing the apocalypse, but stockpiling beauty supplies and other non-essentials to maintain modern

¹²⁹ Debbie, “10 Tips for Female Preppers,” *Primal Survivor*, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.primalsurvivor.net/tips-female-preppers/>.

ideals. The makeup itself becomes a tool of dominance as prepper women will have the luxury to wear mascara while the non-prepper women of the world will only have nothing.

Camouflaged Heels: Femininity and the Apocalypse

Prepper females and males reject the homogenous nature of global capitalism. Preppers testimonies often involve discussions of their lives before coming to see the reality of the apocalypse. The common theme is an empty obsession with consumerism, wages, and advancement in the workplace. Survivor Jane, a celebrity prepper featured on *Doomsday Preppers*, shared her consumer testimony on her website. “Not too long ago, I was like a lot of you ... I had no clue as to what was going on around me. I consider myself a 'girly-girl.' So my main focus was always on bling and things (guess it stems from my desire to be a princess as a child *grin*)." ¹³⁰ She continued,

Sadly over the last 100 years we have become a society of consumers. So, unless you have experienced camping in the wilderness (the hard way in a tent - not in an RV with a shower, air conditioning and hair straightener) you probably don't have the slightest idea how to survive in a situation where there is no food, no shelter, no protection. It is for this reason and more, I created this web site - initially geared specifically for women (girly-girls) who were a lot like me not too long ago - but I have since branched out to women in all walks of life as well as men. ¹³¹

Jane's hybrid identity as a “girly-girl” and frontier woman allow her to proselytize her message of feminine salvation and liberate women from consumerism within the apocalyptic frontier. In her book *Where There is no Cosmetic Counter: How Not to Look Like a Zombie - Even After the End of the World As You Know It*, Survivor

¹³⁰ Survivor Jane, “Welcome to Survivor Jane,” *Survivor Jane*, 2017, <http://www.survivorjane.com/>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Jane shares her testimony and pre-prepper life as a 21st-century businesswoman. A car-jacking at gunpoint opened her eyes. “Decisions had to be made. My world as I knew it was coming to an end... Ultimately, after a lot of thought and planning, I took a huge ‘leap-of-faith’ and move away from the world I knew (the city) to a more rural... I walked away from a corporate job, nice home and car and relocated to the top of a mountain, literally.”¹³² An empowered Jane rejected capitalism and its benefits and entered a world as a prepper feminist.

Masculine Views of the Feminine Prepper

The working woman is not a valued member of the prepper community. Winston Holland presented at Prepper Camp on how to create and maintain prepper groups. Throughout his presentation, his words and those of the male members in the audience framed the role of women and provided a male lens of female dependence. Holland, while discussing the importance of screening individuals that join prepper groups, talked about only letting in people with “real skills.” He explained, “If you're a computer programmer, you're an attorney, I love my wife dearly, she is an attorney, and I'm always throwing her under the bus when I do these classes. In a grid down situation, I may not need some legal advice; I might need some real skills to help me out.”¹³³ Holland’s wife does not have “real skills,” because no one would need legal advice on the apocalyptic frontier. It seems that Holland would deny his wife entrance to his group. The apocalypse could provide Holland with a release from a masculine deficiency that he is not the

¹³² Survivor Jane, *Where There Is No Cosmetic Counter: How Not to Look Like a Zombie - Even After the End of the World As You Know It* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

¹³³ Holland, “Prepper Groups.”

financial head of his household. His faith in the impending apocalypse would allow him to invert his wife's financial and leadership contributions to the home.

Male members of the audience reinforced Holland's beliefs by jokingly calling out during his presentation that women are not equal members of the prepper community. When Holland spoke about creating a plan in place for everyone in the family, a man in the audience called out, "Do we have to take care of our mother in law?" Holland and the audience laughed and responded, "That is up to you, what does your wife say?" In this brief exchange, wives need to be listened to, not because they are leaders or have authority, but to appease them. Prepper events follow a similar culture in African-American churches, where the audience not only verbally and non-verbally praises or rejects the speaker, but that the line between presenter and audience blurs as they collectively construct a message.¹³⁴ Women may interpret their roles as domestically dominant, but men consistently mock them. This mindset allows prepper men to place themselves as the dominant force in the home today because their skills will ensure the survival of the family tomorrow.

The prepper woman occupies a curious space in the prepper community. The modern working woman is rejected throughout prepper discourse, however, women like Survivor Jane, they become leaders, writers, and entrepreneurs within the prepper community. Prepper feminists value the vernacular businesses they create in the prepper community, more than the institutional world of the modern working woman. The

¹³⁴ Gerald Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1987).

prepper woman, through an embrace of the apocalypse, rejects the homogeneity of global capitalism. On Survivor Jane's homepage is an image of camouflaged high heels. The image is an appropriate metaphor for her and others, as she creates a hybrid vernacular reinterpretation of high heels, a symbol of the institutional, through camouflaged heels.¹³⁵

To provide clarity, I disagree with the prepper feminist. Many of these women feel empowered and more localized strengths, but they have given up one form of consumerism for another. They are consistently mocked by men in forums, both online and offline, because men perceive them as outsiders of the core community of preppers.

Thriving While Others Struggle to Survive

A common theme among preppers is to thrive while others struggle to survive. Charlton Heston's role in the 1971 film *Omega Man* is an appropriate illustration of the ideal prepper situation as Neville, played by Charlton Heston, lives in complete luxury within the safety of his apartment while nearby communities are struggling to survive. Among his fine clothes, wine, and food, his loneliness is the only evidence of the apocalypse just outside his door.¹³⁶ The concept of thriving in the wilderness is as old as the "City on the Hill," when Puritans believed that their settlement of the frontier would reshape the world.¹³⁷

Preppers do not fear the looming apocalypse; it will be the dawn of their millennial reign and a testament to their faithfulness. As noted earlier, this does not mean that the prepper believes in a sacred apocalypse, as in, ordained by God, the prepper apocalypse is secular. However, the secular apocalypse becomes sacred as preppers place

¹³⁵ Survivor Jane, "Welcome to Survivor Jane."

¹³⁶ Boris Sagal, *The Omega Man* (USA: Warner Bros., 1971).

¹³⁷ Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness*.

their faith into the redemption that it will provide. The new apocalypse will transform women into powerful and dominant members of their community as they provide feasts for their families while others starve.

Kellene Bishop, also known as the “Gourmet Prepper” or “Preparedness Pro,” was highlighted in the first season of *Doomsday Preppers* and revealed her dominance of the domestic in the apocalyptic frontier. Bishop’s dream is to create a “kitchen on a hill,” not to serve the public, but to maintain her foodways into the apocalypse. Bishop’s testimony, similar to Survival Jane, highlighted the consumer lifestyle she once lived. “I used to run a multi-million-dollar business, I had my bling that my husband gave me every Christmas, now the only type of bling I ever ask for is the type you find in a solar oven.”¹³⁸ While dipping cheese into wax she reflected, “In the event of a financial collapse, I suspect that a lot of people are going to have to just eat that nasty powdered stuff. Not me. I am having Swiss cheese on homemade naan bread... Under a doomsday scenario, I’ll be the only one standing there with another 100 pounds to lose, everyone else will be skin and bones.” At the end of the episode, Bishop serves a meal for her local community and toasts to “eating well at the end of the world.”¹³⁹ Food storage and learning how to cook from the prepper pantry empowers Bishop. Food is not about surviving, but thriving while others are struggling to survive. Bishop produces new meaning for traditional gender roles of domesticity through their interpretation of the impending apocalypse.

¹³⁸ Alan Madison, “I Hope I Am Crazy” (USA: National Geographic, 2012).

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Female preppers occupy a complex cultural space within the prepper community. Culture is messy and rarely works within the confined spaces that make for neat and concise arguments. Therefore, it is worth pausing to highlight the competing perceptions of females here. For male preppers, women are to be feared, as they increase their political involvement and financial leadership of families, prepper men feel anxiety around their leadership of the home. Holland and the comments of the audience are reminders that wives, even lawyer wives, as well as mothers-in-law, need the help of men. For prepper men, the apocalypse neutralizes the modern gains of women, as Holland claimed he will need “real skills” when the apocalypse comes since his wife won’t be helpful. Prepper women step into traditionally domestic roles, but they perceive this to be an empowering framework. The community rejects women who embrace modern society and work in a bank but praises those who return to the domesticity of the kitchen, but in their return, they reinvent the kitchen as a domestically dominant and build business fortunes within the prepper community.

Individuals may not always have the power to choose the identity culture assigns to them, but they can exploit the assigned identity and create new self-empowered frameworks. Ann Douglas, in *The Feminization of American Culture*, explored how women formed a new identity in the Victorian culture at the turn of the 20th century. As traditional roles of women became obsolete, Victorian women moved into the production of literature that feminized American culture. Women exploited the identity assigned to them.¹⁴⁰ Within the prepper community, women assigned the identity of the domestic to

¹⁴⁰ Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*.

exploit this role to emphasize their power and authority. Bishop is not a woman who is in the kitchen at the will of her husband, but a dominant domestic force.

Female preppers reject the domesticity of the 1950s since the grocery store and packaged goods of that era have created a cycle of dependence on the institutional world. Growing one's food, or at least knowing how to dip swiss cheese in wax, creates a new vernacular framework for preppers like Bishop. Just as intuitional trash cans have the potential to transform into a vernacular faraday cage, store purchased goods, when moved into vacuumed sealed pouches and oversized Tupperware containers, take on a new vernacular meaning. Bishop in the show shared with viewers how to store eggs, but there was no evidence of chickens on her property. The dependence of preppers on the very products they are trying to distance themselves from is a complex space within the community.

I would argue that the female prepper, although empowered, is wandering in the space of the apocalyptic frontier. The female prepper envisions the frontier as a space where she will have power but given the progress women have made in the public sphere, there is little to see in 1880's frontier life would be worth returning to. The prepper's in the inevitability of the apocalypse allows them to reap the benefits of both the real and fictional worlds. The female preppers I observed online and offline work and run businesses as feminists and place their faith in future apocalypse frontier that will liberate them from the liberalism of the modern feminism, the very concept of which they are reaping the rewards of. I find it ironic that female preppers are looking to be saved tomorrow from the very thing they are engaging in today.

Families and Preparedness

Community is a central philosophy among preppers and it creates new challenges and opportunities for the single female prepper. Debbie, in her article “10 Tips for Female Preppers,” encouraged her readers to “8. Learn to Be Alone” and “10. Meet Other Female Preppers.” In the restricted area of the ladies-only forum, a user posted a question as to whether women should intentionally seek out men to provide more protection. JustWright61 responded, “Hello well there isn't that many of us. I find it hard doing it alone, communities will survive. There is safety in numbers. Going it alone later. . . Let's just say the odds aren't in our favor.”¹⁴¹ Liberty911 agreed, “That is so true, not in our favor at all. What am I gonna do, have a gun at every window and try to fight them all off? Pretty scary being on your own.”¹⁴² These comments should not come as a surprise; if the apocalypse were to come, an individual would have a harder time surviving, regardless of his or her gender.

Not all women interpreted their position as a single-female-prepper as a disadvantage, but rather as a reinforcement of their feminist independence. “Women are remarkably resourceful, and we are capable,” wrote Hilltopper, “As a single mother I raised my sons farming the land I bought for 23 years and flourished, without welfare, without alimony, no inheritance, just standing on my own two feet and I am well positioned today just persevering with my vision. I am hardly a stand out in that respect,

¹⁴¹ JustWright61, “***Ladies Section*** Single Women Preppers,” *Survivalist Boards*, 2016, <http://www.survivalistboards.com/showthread.php?t=617297>.

¹⁴² Liberty911, “***Ladies Section*** Single Women Preppers,” *Survivalist Boards*, 2016, <http://www.survivalistboards.com/showthread.php?t=617297>.

there are more than a few on this board.”¹⁴³ On the Survival Boards, a user can “thank” an individual for a post, similar to the “like” feature of Facebook, it allows users to acknowledge a post that they value publicly. Hilltopper’s post was the most “thanked” in this thread. These women, unlike single moms that accept welfare, are American heroes.

The Welfare Queen

Welfare is the inverse of the preparedness philosophy. No other program is more polar from preppers than welfare. The American spirit and the individuality of the frontier is the heartbeat of the prepper; the more independent a prepper is from consumerism and assistance, the higher they are on the scale of preparedness. Preppers perceive cities as the centerpiece of consumerism and those on welfare in the city are in another circle of this doomed community. The “Golden Horde” will be the exodus of people, who have long relied on government assistance, that flee the city looking for resources located in the independent rural communities.¹⁴⁴

Ronald Reagan’s myth of the welfare queen is alive and well within the prepper community and provides preppers with an antagonist to drive their need to prepare. From the prepper perspective, it is because of welfare they need to prep. Resistance to the 21st-century global consumer-driven market is the heartbeat of the preparedness community; the ability to live “off the grid” and independent in an increasingly connected world, is sacred among preppers. Preppers believe 21st-century consumers fail to produce their livelihoods and meaning. The irony among preppers is that they are still consumers, but

¹⁴³ Hilltopper, “***Ladies Section*** Single Women Preppers.”

¹⁴⁴ Pat Henry, “Is It Crazy to Worry About the Golden Horde?,” *The Prepper Journal*, 2014, <http://www.theprepperjournal.com/2014/08/28/crazy-worry-golden-horde/>.

their vernacular culture provides a framework to reconstruct goods into apocalyptic items. Preppers can turn barbed wire into a tank trap, a sock into a water purifier and a trash can into an EMP proof faraday cage. The welfare queen is worse than the consumer, not only does she fail to produce her vernacular meaning of consumer goods, but she fails to produce her income.

It is impossible to enter the landscape of “welfare queens” without encountering race. When the website SHTFplan.com posted a video and accompanying the article when a “lady completely loses control after stamps card is denied.”¹⁴⁵ The article and comments that followed highlight the intersectionality between race, class, and gender, as the preppers define “womanhood” and self-sufficiency in contrast to the welfare queen in the video. The black, urban, and dependent woman occupies the polar example of the white, rural, and independent woman of preppers.

Slavo’s article suggests the woman and her behavior are evidence as to why there is a need to prep. “With some 100 million Americans now receiving government assistance in one form or another,” wrote Slavo, “it’s only a matter of time before glitches or all-out system failure leads to civil unrest.” The woman “destroyed a convenience store after having her food stamp benefits card declined.” Slavo provided a transcript from the video, “I got kids to feed. You know? And because the government’s down, I can’t feed my family? What’s going on with America? Now they are trying to

¹⁴⁵ Mac Slavo, “Watch: This Lady Completely Loses Control After Her EBT Food Stamps Card Is Declined,” *SHTFplan.Com*, 2016, http://www.shtfplan.com/headline-news/watch-this-lady-completely-loses-control-after-her-ebt-food-stamps-card-is-declined_06052016.

starve us to death? This is crazy. I got six kids I have to feed. I'm just trying to figure out how to get something to eat.” Salvo argues that if a foreign government would attack the welfare system, the US “would descend into chaos within 72 hours, which is precisely why we regularly urge our readers to prepare for a worst-case scenario.”¹⁴⁶ The short 554-word article drew 255 comments with over 15,000 words. In the shadows of the comments section, the race, class, and gender of the woman became an archetype of all that is wrong with society for the preppers posting.

The black woman is distanced from preppers and humanity in her “otherness,” as many of the posts described her as an animal. Her non-human otherness makes it easier to attack and distance her from womanhood. Describing black women like beasts and animalistic has a long racist legacy that black women are unruly and predisposed to become prostitutes.¹⁴⁷ Watchdog began with the post, “Mindless cattle on the loose. Watch out.” Pakundo replied to his comment, “Literal ‘Bull’ in a candy shop...” Chuck Feney wrote, “the black Hippo reacted violently.” WhoWTFKnows labeled her a “black baboon.” Braveheart1776 wrote, “she had ‘mad cow disease.’ LOL.” “That bitch needs to ‘look into’ getting a god-damn job (with six kids to feed)!!! No sympathy at all for her,” Jonny V responded. “You need to remember,” Jonny V continued, “that there will be millions of these useless breathers on the rampage when the SHTF.”¹⁴⁸ For some, the “welfare queens” are not even humans, or animals, but “breathers.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Delia Jarrett-Macauley, ed., *Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black Women* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁴⁸ Slavo, “Watch: This Lady Completely Loses Control After Her EBT Food Stamps Card Is Declined.”

Users brought in different media through the posting of links to provide parallel examples and other forms of “evidence” to support their arguments. Jonny V posted a YouTube video “to help everyone put it in perspective.” The video is a user-generated video using the song, “The Rainmakers: ‘Government Cheese,’” with lyrics on how welfare turns “everyone into beggars” because they eat “government cheese.” While lyrics sing, “give a woman free kids and you’ll find them in the dirt,” the camera shows black homeless men and a black woman walking the street in a short dress.¹⁴⁹ The racial tension grows when username Juandos replies to the video, “Thanks for the link to gorilla cam.”¹⁵⁰ The voyeurism takes place on several levels within the comments section. She is entertainment and reinforcement of the prepper ideology, but also a prejudiced racial identity that black women, like prostitutes, are something to see.

The loose sexuality of black women was extended by a link to a video posted by Da Yooper. “IF you loved the pavement ape above, watch this,” posted Da Yooper. The video shows a black woman with fifteen children talking about her struggle to provide for them despite the help of agencies. A user named Citizen replied, “15 kids? Talk about throwing a hotdog down the hallway. Mandatory birth control if on the government tit.”¹⁵¹ This short post by Citizen has an incredible depth to it as it addresses, race and gender in the prepper identity. Citizen highlighted her promiscuity, suggested the need

¹⁴⁹ John Gallagher, “The Rainmakers: ‘Government Cheese,’” *YouTube*, 2011, <https://youtu.be/WLzFhOslZPM>.

¹⁵⁰ Slavo, “Watch: This Lady Completely Loses Control After Her EBT Food Stamps Card Is Declined.”

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

for enforced sterilization, and that the government is a woman. Welfare, as a form of institutional breastmilk, reveals broader prepper ideology concerning independence. Central to the prepper white manhood is the ability to live independently of consumerism, government, and the global economy. As username *Enemy of the State* posted, “What’s the sign say out in Yellowstone Park? Oh, ‘Don’t feed the bears, it creates dependency.’ Then we have this... is it any wonder? All I gotta say is, you dam sure better be ready.” Others argued that the store owner for her behavior should have killed her. “She should have been killed on the spot. Shot in the back, beaten to death with a hammer, or stuff a snickers bar down her throat (if they make one big enough) and add a new chapter to ‘I can’t breathe.’ Think of how much better this world would be if she and millions more like her were dead, dead, dead, and could never produce again. Tash is trash and trash brings flies.”¹⁵² I felt disgusted reading the comments of these users about killing people on welfare. Preppers in this post displayed a fascism far from the Marxist ideology described earlier.

As the comments continued, users crossed another racial threshold from joking about her animal behavior to embracing murder. Bud posted a comment that referenced hunting, asking another user if he thought “she’d dress out at about 285 to 300. What-d-ya think?” Old Geezer referenced the killing of the gorilla Harambe, “I guess her tirade started the other day when the zoo keepers at Cincinnati killed her mate and father of her 16 children.” There is a belief among preppers, expressed by comments such as these that they are agents of a necessary purge. Weak people will die in the apocalypse, but not

¹⁵² Ibid.

always at the hands of the environment, but at the hands of the survivors. This theme runs in clear contrast to the idea preppers uphold that they will be the saviors of traditional culture and values when they emerge from bunker to rebuild the world. Preppers often perceive themselves as the Noah's Ark of traditional values, but these values have deep racial currents.

Users questioned the welfare queen's sexuality and gender because, even to suggest she is a "lady," represents a potential threat to white womanhood. Paranoid wrote a comment to the author concerning his choice of the word "lady" in his title, "MAC you should watch what you say. Female this POS may be; Lady NO." Dan Morgan agreed, "First, she's no Lady. Second, when did it become my responsibility to feed your six children? Third, maybe if you didn't use your benefits card to pay for hair and nails, your six little ***** would still have sumtin to eat?" These users believe consumerism blinds the welfare queen and through a lustful pursuit of sex has squandered the title of "lady." For many of these users, a black woman on welfare is the perfect example of the anti-prepper and preppers poach from other vernacular resources to reinforce the concept of otherness in the urban, black, woman. As addressed in the introduction of this piece, the dependent consumer is the farthest on the spectrum from the independent producer, where preppers align their values.

If the urban black woman is the opposite of prepper womanhood, its paragon example appears to be found in the past in the rural white woman. Another video posted to the Survival Boards forum title of "7 Reasons Why Prepper Chicks Are Sexy," linked to a YouTube video by Morningmayan. The video is less than four minutes but has 296 comments. Since this video is linked to through multiple prepper sites and specifically

references preppers in its title, the YouTube comments are an easier space to examine the different perspectives of what is a “sexy” female prepper. Morningmayan, the woman in the vlog, is white, with blonde hair, and wore a tank top. The comments below the video described her as a “fine wife,” “cute,” and “hot” among other things.¹⁵³ Many of the comments were appeals for her hand in marriage or offering a date; users described her femininity and how well she aligned to the ideal female prepper.

The users who posted to Morningmayan’s video were consistent with other research as they rejected the excessive consumerism that they believe the modern American woman has succumbed to. In listing the various reasons prepper chicks are sexy, number five is that “prepper chicks don’t buy Chanel, they will not be maxing out your credit card to go get some piece of junk that has a logo on it, that really means nothing. Prepper girls use cash, they don’t contribute to the corporate credit card business, and when they do use their cash, they use it wisely.”¹⁵⁴ Unlike the black woman who was using the only card worse than a credit card, this white woman is financially independent. Howard Fortyfive posted the comment “Well it was a way long time ago but I had a girlfriend who wore Chanel #5 perfume. One whiff of that stuff all I was thinking about was guess what?!?” Chanel in the forum becomes a symbol of excess, an inner cultural line within prepper culture. Consistent with the inconsistency of culture, Morningmayan’s videos on her YouTube channel display her conspicuous consumption

¹⁵³ Morningmayan, “7 Reasons Why Prepper Chicks Are Sexy,” *YouTube*, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

as she films herself in a large open floor plan kitchen and on her balcony overlooking the trees and other suburban homes in her neighborhood.

In this culturally messy space, where the lines of identity shift through the vernacular nature of the comments below the video, it is possible to see how individuals use the apocalypse to draw lines in the world to create new virtual spaces. A conservative prepper, who do not embrace the multiculturalism of the 21st century, may not be able to return to a past where blacks are separate and unequal, but the apocalypse transforms a black woman angered over her inability to access her government assistance, into a person who will soon die because of her lack of self-sufficiency. It seems that the problem of the racist prepper is solved through the eventual purge of the apocalypse. The “glasses” of the apocalypse could allow individuals to endure progressive multicultural policies because of their faith in the eventual collapse of society. Morningmayan’s video and the comments of others on YouTube reveals the flexibility of the prepper “faith” as each individual uses the apocalypse to draw his or her own lines of what he or she believes will survive in the apocalypse. Although Morningmayan’s race and feminine characteristics were overwhelmingly accepted, her class and materialism of her makeup, hair, and clothes, were seen by some as a rejecting of the ideals of preparedness philosophy. One particular user, Micki Moritz suggested Morningmayan crossed the consumerism line of prepping.

Also no shopping. She (sorry about the judgement) does not seem like a girl I want to be stuck in the woods with. Since prepping became mainstream, there are lots of well-meaning people who think because they shop at Costco, they are preppers. But what will you do when your fancy toys no longer work? When your roots grow out? Prepping is a state of mind, not a trend. It’s the same kind of girls

who wear makeup and jewelry hunting. Maybe you can bait your own hook, but can you really cook it up, on the run, without a pan, and still make it taste good? I am not waiting for your nails to dry to find out. Go ahead be sexy.....dead sexy.¹⁵⁵

Moritz's believes Morningmayer fails as a prepper because of consumerism and her feminine appearance. For Moritz, people who "shop at Costco" are not authentic preppers because they are reliant on industrialization to survive. On the spectrum of preppers, Moritz believes that an authentic prepper lies closer to the end of a survivalist who not only consumes goods and produces new meanings but has the skills to survive without buying anything. In addition to Morningmayer's consumer behavior and "fancy toys," Moritz sees faults in Morningmayer's appearances. Moritz sees her as too feminine, similar to the "kind of girls who wear makeup while hunting." The flexibility of vernacular culture allows Moritz to move the line of what is considered acceptable to accommodate her needs and could potentially help her accept her own feminine identity today. The apocalypse may be in the future, but for preppers, it has real-world benefits as the doomsday prophecy realigns their values to match their current place in society. Moritz uses the apocalypse as a feminist filter to free herself from modern gender identities supported by makeup and nails. Embracing the apocalypse allows Moritz to be free from the front cover of *Cosmopolitan*. Moritz is independent of society and consumerism, but Morningmayer's video creates a problem for her as it embraces both the apocalypse and the gender identity she is attempting to escape. Rejecting

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Morningmayan's video is a rejection of hair and nails and the homogenous nature of global capitalism, and a feminist embrace of an independent spirit.

Chapter 4: Errand into the Apocalypse

“I’m not going to sit here and color coat anything,” Jeremy Johnston warned. “This is where the story is going to get a little bit ugly, how many have you heard of a collapse?” Hands went up in the audience. Johnston was one of the several expert guest speakers at Prepper Con IV in Virginia because of what he described as his “combat experience” during the rescue and relief effort for Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Preppers believe people should prepare for local and global collapses, from flash floods to the invasion of the United States. Speakers such as Johnston provide an appropriate perspective as they help preppers anticipate what can happen in a disaster scenario. “We were tasked with combat patrol. I’m going to repeat that, we were tasked with combat patrols, in the United States, in a major metro area.” Johnston wanted his audience to understand his world. It likely took little convincing for the preppers in the audience to agree with him.

This dissertation thus far has explored textual practices, religion, race, and gender. The purpose of this final chapter is to explore how the frontier will offer renewal to those who prepared. Johnson and others embrace the dark future of the apocalypse because it will be a period of redemption. In this apocalypse, it is not the end of the world, but the transitional period addressed earlier, where humanity must move through to emerge in a new purity on the other side.

The City is Dangerous

Preppers see the city as a dangerous place. First, the modern urban lifestyle is not sustainable without industrialization as urban populations represent the greatest demand for food, energy, and waste collection, but the same population is also the farthest from

these resources. In 1977, a blackout in New York City, caused by two lightning strikes, lasted 25 hours, and despite the brevity of the event, it had both environmental and societal implications. Sewage spilled into the waterways around the city as backup generators failed to provide adequate energy.¹⁵⁶ Firefighters during the blackout serve as an example of the dueling failures of the city; they were pulled not only to buttress the industrial failures of the city, placing a generator on the roof of the Jewish Hospital and Medical Center of Brooklyn but also to combat 1,037 reported fires.¹⁵⁷ Preppers are overwhelmingly rural and see the city as a place void of community during a crisis. The 1977 blackout supports this with the police making 2,931 arrests.¹⁵⁸

We were tasked with combat patrol. I'm going to repeat that, we were tasked with combat patrols, in the United States, in a major metro area ... Now combat patrol is when an eight or four-man team goes out, locked and loaded, with seven 30 round magazines, on their body, with night vision, water, all the MRE's they can carry, in vehicles, are you following me? This is New Orleans, Louisiana, no different than Winchester, Virginia. The reason we had to do that is that the people turned on each other in three days. In any major metro city in the United States with 10,000 people or more, you have three days' worth of food in the store.¹⁵⁹

Johnston wanted his audience to know his experience was authentic and could happen in any urban setting. Preppers believe that the world of today is superficial and the city is where the ice is thinnest. When the levees broke in New Orleans, the city entered its natural state. Preppers believe that once the façade of unity breaks down,

¹⁵⁶ Pascal James Imperato, "Public Health Concerns Associated with the New York City Blackout of 1977," *Journal of Community Health* 41, no. 4 (2016): 707–16.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Jeremy Johnston, "Calm During the Storm: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans" (Winchester, VA, 2015).

people will turn on one another, just like they did in the 1977 blackout. The challenge for preppers is that the 1977 blackout and Hurricane Katrina's impact in New Orleans were both local disasters. The widespread collapse of society that preppers believe will happen is yet to occur in the United States, leaving preppers to construct a vision of the apocalypse collectively.

Preppers believe that humanity is on an unsustainable track to self-destruction, but that redemption can be found through prepping. The general population has ignored the warning signs of the 1977 blackout, Hurricane Katrina, and other incidents. The errand of preppers is to prepare. If they do not take on this errand, all of civilization will collapse, because, without preppers, the world will fall into the hands of vandals and criminals. They have invested financially into a nontraditional retirement plan. Instead of an IRA, they have food stores and guns. The working-class skills of preppers take on a new meaning in the apocalypse. Winston Holland, who loves his wife "dearly, she is an attorney," "may not need some legal advice; I might need some real skills to help me out."¹⁶⁰ Holland sees his wife's skills as essential but not "real," in that they do not provide any value in the errand of the apocalypse. The apocalypse would invert his relationship with his wife, providing him the opportunity to be the sole provider of his household.

Class and Race

The errand of the apocalypse provides relief from prepper anxieties around race, gender, and class identities in contemporary society. White working-class preppers are

¹⁶⁰ Winston Holland, "Prepper Groups" (Saluda, NC: Prepper Camp, 2015).

particularly concerned about race as a broad political and social issue and tend to see the recent demographic changes in the United States in negative terms. However, on an individual level, prepper organizations do include members of color. For example, in my fieldwork at prepper conventions and events, I have seen African Americans participate as both attendees and speakers. At all the prepper events I have attended, with a total attendance of over 1,000 preppers, I have only seen seven people of color.

Preppers themselves do not overlook this racial homogeneity. Demcad, a black prepper vlogger on YouTube with over 56,000 subscribers, for example, posted a video in 2011, entitled “Why Are There So Few Black Preppers?” “Most people in this country don’t look like me,” he observed, which is a “disadvantage if you’re trying to fit in a group in a crisis.” Over 1,800 comments were posted, many of them by self-identified preppers supporting Demcad and saying he would be accepted regardless of his race.¹⁶¹ Although it may seem counterintuitive at first, these comments struck me as genuine expressions, based on my fieldwork. Accepting preppers of color like Demcad is possible within the vernacular interpretive framework of prepping because its ideological anxiety is not applied to individual relationships but rather to collective groups. “The white prepper will have more respect for you since you do not fit the typical mold,” wrote one commenter. “You are different.”¹⁶² Ironically, of course, while Demcad’s video is shared

¹⁶¹ Demcad, “Why Are There so Few Black Preppers?,” *YouTube*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFswM-5Nmzs>.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

as a trophy of racial equality among preppers, it inadvertently reveals concerns about the status of people of color by both white and nonwhite preppers alike.

These anxieties are apparent in Jeremy Johnston's reconstruction of the events of Katrina through his experiences, which included material from a variety of urban legends.¹⁶³ When Johnson saw the iconic Superdome, surrounded by water, it was empty, but this did not keep him from conjuring images of the events that occurred there.

Parts of the roof were missing. You had 50,000 people crammed in there. You had rapes. You had murders. You had robberies. You know how the Louisiana State troopers fixed that? Anybody here do any precision shooting, hunting, or long range shooting? You have a spotter and somebody who sends that little message. They did that about six times from the Skyboxes and that stopped. They didn't want to do it, but they had to do it.¹⁶⁴

The levees unleashed not only floodwaters but also the savagery of the urban man. Throughout his speech, Johnston does not mention the race of the people in his stories. His speech leaves his audience free to imagine who they believe was being shot from the skyboxes. But framing this urban legend in an obligatory language of "they had to do it," Johnston revealed the "errand" of prepping. Preppers believe they have a responsibility to civilize the frontier of the apocalypse by force, if necessary. Like cowboys of the Western motif, preppers are the embodiment of justice.

¹⁶³ David Mikkelsen, "Kyle File," *Snopes*, 2016, <http://www.snopes.com/politics/military/kyleclaims.asp>.

¹⁶⁴ Johnston, "Calm During the Storm: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans."

The apocalypse envisioned in prepper discourse also has its roots in the myth and symbol of the American frontier. Preppers see the apocalypse as a frontier where they will escape their class barriers and restore white masculinity, which is perceived to be under threat. The frontier in America has often been seen as a place of escape and imagination, but unlike previous frontiers, this frontier will come to you. There is no need to pack up a wagon and head off west because the apocalypse will destroy all of modern civilization throughout the United States. The apocalypse is a reverse frontier, where instead of humanity embarking on the frontier of nature, nature reclaims the industrialized world.

The Frontier and Reception Theory

While preppers do not describe the apocalypse as a “frontier,” it shares common characteristics with common frontier motifs in American culture. The apocalypse of the prepper is a modern version of Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, a landscape where preppers write their narrative.¹⁶⁵ Smith, a foundational figure in the field of American Studies, explored the myths and symbols that framed the “virgin” west as a place of rebirth. Although labeling an area occupied by Native Americans as “virgin” is historically problematic, it is relevant to the way in which preppers see the world. They embrace the myth of the broken white man seeking symbolic restoration through the frontier. In this way, the apocalypse gives purpose and direction. If a prepper believes nonwhite people in the city will be dangerous, it is easier to embrace homogenous racial

¹⁶⁵ Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*.

landscapes as a practical necessity. In many cases, tomorrow's apocalypse enables preppers to embrace the racial barriers in the world they live in today.

The prepper apocalypse is a dangerous wilderness. The death of children and the rape of women, all thematic elements of the prepper apocalypse, are a warning of things to come. Perry Miller, another central figure in American Studies, explored the "errand" of the Puritan "City upon a Hill." Miller argues that scholars long misunderstood the "errand" of the Puritans. Puritans did not want to escape Europe. Their frontier "errand" was intended to foster a European Reformation.

Similarly, although stockpiles of food, water, and ammo are important for preppers, preparations are not the errand of prepping. It is easy to get lost in the consumption of preppers. Television shows such as *Doomsday Preppers* emphasize preparations but miss the role of the apocalypse in prepper culture. It is on the imagined landscape of the apocalyptic frontier that preppers redefine themselves and the world around them. The apocalypse is a cultural reset button, as multiculturalism, liberalism, gay rights, and the federal government, and all of the other elements they see as indicative of the dangerous decay of modernity collapse in the wilderness.

In their everyday vernacular culture and expression, preppers construct an upside-down world. This "virgin land" of the coming apocalypse is not only dangerous but also a place where, unlike the world they perceive around them today, working-class skills and white masculinity are valued. The wife who once restricted her husband's wallet will rely on his bullets. The mechanic who drives an old Ford pickup will have far more value than the English professor who drives a Saab.

Similarly, preppers “poach” from various films, TV shows, and books to create the apocalypse. The community rarely accepts entire films and books unanimously; preppers accept ideas and images from selected portions, chapters, and scenes while denying others. This selective framing and interpretation is a chaotic process, as with anything vernacular, authority is not centralized but collectively shared among the participants. There is no official version of the apocalypse approved by a board of preppers; rather I have collected identifiable characteristics that come up in presentations, interviews, and online blogs that reveal the borders of the apocalypse.

The paradigm shift to the secular apocalypse has made Christian preppers less religious and prepping itself takes on religious dimensions. Preppers label nonbelievers “sheeple,” a clear reference to the biblical image of the “lost sheep.” At prepper conventions, individuals often share their conversion narratives—testimonies of how they came to be awakened as preppers. Prepping is a belief system that allows preppers to engage the world around them through a new framework that empowers them. They no longer see themselves as victims, but protectors.

[The Religion of Prepping](#)

Working-class skills and white masculinity are valued in the “virgin land” of the apocalypse. Preppers construct a vernacular belief system through the formation of a “virtual ekklesia.” Robert Glenn Howard coined the term “virtual ekklesia” in his study of apocalyptic Christian prophecy in digital spaces. Howard uses the term to refer to the way in which these unorthodox believers “enact a sort of community” based on shared ideas rather than physical proximity. These shared ideas are formed as believers gather in

digital spaces to engage in “ritual deliberation,” a form of discussion that helps to create the shared belief framework through which the *ekklesia* is sustained.¹⁶⁶ Prepper predictions on H1N1, Ebola, the Baltimore riots, and the “Obamapocalypse,” which is any doomsday prophecy involving Obama, have all failed, yet the community remains strong. It is the collective dynamics of this virtual *ekklesia* that allow the group to survive through the failures of their concrete predictions.

But preppers also face a fundamental problem: they do not know what the apocalypse will look like. For the Puritans, the apocalypse was institutional: ordained and orchestrated by God. Humanity could participate in God’s plan, constructing Puritan settlements and fighting for independence, but Calvinist theology saw these acts as instruments of God’s will.¹⁶⁷

The landscape of the prepper apocalypse, by contrast, is constructed in the digital spaces of forums and YouTube channels. It is a dark place. It is difficult to understand why someone would reject the psychological, let alone physical, comforts of modern society. Richard Mitchell Jr. in *Dancing at Armageddon* argues that people are drawn to survivalism because they want to escape from the predictable monotony of modern society. Survivalists reject the prepacked “Planet Microsoft” in which we live in today.¹⁶⁸ Modern commercialized homogeneous society has little to offer them: “they want

¹⁶⁶ Robert Glenn Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 10–11.

¹⁶⁷ Wójcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*, 24.

¹⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times*, 183.

something more and different.”¹⁶⁹ Preppers approach the apocalyptic frontier with the same attitude: the frontier may be dangerous, but it is far less threatening than the predictable monotony of life. Psychologically, the frontier functions as a coping mechanism for those unsatisfied with modern society.

Lessons from Hurricane Katrina

Although no one has experienced the collapse of society, many preppers have survived large-scale disasters. These individuals become prepper celebrities. Their testimonies and invented memories become case studies for preppers in constructing the apocalypse.¹⁷⁰ The recollections of prepper celebrities do not need to be authentic, just as Sanford recalled his invented experience at the Superdome. Shane Steinkamp shared his experience in Hurricane Katrina on his blog *Listening to Katrina*.¹⁷¹ The Steinkamps “bugged out” (a prepper term for rapid evacuation from an area after a disaster) of southeastern Louisiana and met up with family in Texas.

On his account, Steinkamp was not in New Orleans when the Katrina hit; however, he shared his perspective of what occurred there: “It doesn’t take long for certain elements to realize that the rules of polite society no longer constrain them,” wrote Steinkamp in his chapter “ANALYSIS—Armageddon Lite.” “Some of these will restrict their activities to making a few beers run, while others will take to forming armed

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷⁰ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

¹⁷¹ Shane Steinkamp, “Listening to Katrina,” *The Place Without a Name (Blog)*, n.d., <http://www.theplacewithnoname.com/blogs/klessons/p/0003.html>.

rape gangs that rove neighborhoods looking for their next bit of fun.” His language of “these” and “certain elements” emphasizes the sense of otherness. Adjacent to the text is a photograph of one of “these”: a black male, smiling, wading through water, with a plastic storage bin loaded with beer bottles. The photograph proves a specific racial image for the otherness of the people he is describing. Steinkamp is outlining the immoral errand of the African American in the city during a disaster.

Steinkamp’s apocalyptic frontier is a place where the “natural” order of humanity will emerge as an antidote to the artifice of “political correctness.” “THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH RACE!” Steinkamp’s text loudly proclaims, “[m]ulticulturalism is some kind of strange un-natural bullshit that I don’t quite fathom. People segregate themselves naturally for a reason.”¹⁷² As you can imagine, this has everything to do with race. The wilderness will become a place of racial separation and warfare. Racialized others, often represented with black bodies, will emerge from urban centers, seeking to drink, rape, and murder. However, this prophesized destruction is not in vain; it provides a landscape for preppers to redeem. Preppers believe that they will need to protect whiteness from others when the collapse happens and the thin blue line no longer exists to hold back minorities.

Virtual ekklesia is best constructed in digital spaces, with the infrastructure to support vernacular creativity and interaction. Sites that allow users to create content and comment on one another’s content as well as one another’s comments foster more

¹⁷² Ibid.

vernacular forms of authority.¹⁷³ Johnston's lecture, presentation board, and microphone, all worked together to centralize his authority. Steinkamp's website did not allow users to comment, post, or create content on the site. The layout encouraged an intuitional flow. Users could not easily navigate and skip around the site. At the bottom of each page were three linear links "BACK—TOP—NEXT."

Additionally, the authority of the prepper celebrity is difficult to contest. Virtual ekklesia flourishes when all users can equally share in ritual deliberation.¹⁷⁴ Sites that create a sense of safety among users, through a balance of moderation and open discourse, invite preppers into a creative space where they can feel part of a community while still expressing their prophecies.¹⁷⁵ It is perhaps in these spaces where we see the most broad-based construction of the ekklesia of prepping, especially through their deliberations around media texts and media images of current events.

The Road and the Evils of the Apocalypse

The Road is one example of a media text that preppers have readily engaged with to build their vision of the apocalypse. Written by Cormac McCarthy in 2006, the book follows the journey of a boy and his father who make their way through a frontier wasteland, where civilization has been destroyed.¹⁷⁶ The book was lauded by "Oprah's

¹⁷³ Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 126.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷⁶ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Random House Digital, Inc., 2006).

Book Club” as showing “the worst and the best of which we are capable.”¹⁷⁷ Due to its popularity, it was rushed into production and adapted to a film in 2009; both forms were widely popular within the Prepper community.¹⁷⁸ Users in online prepper forums described it as “my favorite book of all time” and “too awesome for words.”¹⁷⁹ After watching the film, Possenti2264 posted on a Prepper forum:

Saw the movie last night. Gotta say, I was depressed at the end. I was depressed the entire movie. We don’t talk much about cannibals on TSP [The Survival Podcast] Forums. We joke about zombies, but cannibal stuff freaks me out. Good movie, but scared the crap out of me. Anywho, had to watch an episode of Psych after to get my mind right.¹⁸⁰

Despite the dark nature of the film, Possenti2264 did not reject McCarthy’s vision of the apocalyptic frontier. In particular, Possenti found the cannibalism particularly disturbing. She is referencing a scene where the father and son come across what appears to be a vacant home. While scavenging, they stumble upon people who have been confined in the basement, for purposes of consumption by the people who are living at the property. Possenti accepts the cannibalistic nature of this frontier as a dark reality.

¹⁷⁷ Oprah’s Book Club Collection, “Your Reader’s Guide to The Road,” *Oprah*, 2011, <http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Readers-Guide-to-The-Road-by-Cormac-McCarthy>.

¹⁷⁸ John Hillcoat, *The Road* (United States: Dimension Films, 2009).

¹⁷⁹ KYdoomer, “The Road,” *The Survival Podcast (Blog)*, 2009, <http://thesurvivalpodcast.com/forum/index.php?topic=5638.msg105012#msg105012>; PistolWhipped, “The Road,” *The Survival Podcast (Blog)*, 2009, <http://thesurvivalpodcast.com/forum/index.php?topic=5638.msg55854#msg55854>.

¹⁸⁰ Possenti2264, “The Road,” *The Survival Podcast (Blog)*, 2010, <http://thesurvivalpodcast.com/forum/index.php?topic=5638.msg203987#msg203987>.

This frontier is so dark that it is challenging to process it without some level of humor to alleviate the anxiety. Humor serves an important function in prepper culture. It makes the end-of-the-world pill easier to swallow. Watching an episode of *Psych*, a detective comedy show, helps Possenti remember that the apocalyptic frontier is not yet a reality and the comforts offered by modern society can still be enjoyed.

Not all preppers liked the film, however. Some Preppers felt that the film failed to follow the law of the frontier. Silent Prepper gave a more critical review of the film at PrepperCentral.com:

Here is what I was really disappointed in. There needed to be more “good guys” in the story. I know this was a movie, but things needed to be a little evened out. Will good folks be holed up somewhere? Yes; but they will also venture out to protect and forage. The father did everything he could to provide security for his son. I just have to remember he wasn’t a Prepper before the incident.¹⁸¹

Silent Prepper sees the apocalyptic frontier as a place where “good guys” will fulfill the role of the hero of the Western genre. The frontier is a place of performance, where the Preppers who are prepared to fulfill their role of helping the broader community rebuild. The prepper “errand” of today is to prepare for tomorrow. The “errand” of tomorrow is to rebuild and take on the wilderness. The apocalyptic wilderness will be dangerous. Silent Prepper did not reject the dark nature of the film but rather the absence of preppers. The frontier is not only a place to venture out and explore but also a place of conflict, where good has the opportunity to overcome evil.

¹⁸¹ Silent Prepper, “Movie Review: The Road,” *Prepper Central (Blog)*, 2011, <http://preppercentral.com/?p=255>.

The father's death in the film's final scene was appropriate because he was not a prepper. If the father were a prepper, *Silent Prepper* suggests that things would have turned out differently. Without recognizing it, *Silent Prepper* has assumed the father was not a prepper: nowhere does the film suggest he was or was not a prepper. There are flashbacks throughout the film, but none of them takes place before the apocalypse, and therefore, there is no reference to whether or not he stockpiled food or supplies. *Silent Prepper* engages the father with a formulaic framework: he does not thrive in the apocalypse but struggles; therefore, he cannot be a prepper. For many preppers, the father's inability to properly interact with the apocalyptic frontier is too difficult to embrace. The father allowed the frontier to destroy not only his life but also his family. Scrappy felt the wilderness was not dangerous enough; he posted:

The father utterly failed [to] guide his family. He didn't demonstrate the leadership and courage that is the responsibility of every husband and father. He commiserated with his wife, rather than giving her support and strength. He did nothing to bring out the best in his son. The son was a pathetic wimp who would never survive such a situation. And look—I've got nothing against pathetic wimps, per se. It's just that this is not the right venue for being a pathetic wimp. If you want to be a pathetic wimp, find a chick flick to be in. That, or get properly killed in the movie, to provide some degree of realism. The "hopeful" end of the movie is befitting the child's weakness, but he'd never have made it that far in real life.¹⁸²

The father failed on his "errand" into the wilderness. As a husband, he failed to master his masculinity, and as a result, his wife commits suicide. As a father, he failed to "bring out the best in his son," and his son grew up a feminine wimp, belonging in a

¹⁸² Scrappy, "The Road," *The Survival Podcast (Blog)*, 2010, <http://thesurvivalpodcast.com/forum/index.php?topic=5638.msg206276#msg206276>.

chick flick and not in the apocalyptic frontier. The purging elements of the frontier are quite clear: the son should not have survived that long and should have been “properly killed.”

Before criticizing Preppers for their zealous appeal to suffering, we must first examine their approach to the frontier. Preppers have dedicated their lives to preparing for the apocalypse. If a “pathetic wimp” could survive the frontier, then the prepper lifestyle is useless. There is little reason to prepare if a little boy and his father can stumble through the wilderness.

[The New Errand in the Wilderness](#)

The suffering of the frontier exists for the prepper. Scrappy is not necessarily “against pathetic wimps,” but they should exist in the proper context of romantic films. The appeal of prepping for Scrappy is that he denies the lifestyle that the majority of society has accepted. The modern lifestyle enabled through capitalism, globalization, and industrialization has made humanity weak. The “errand” of prepping helps preppers resist the homogenous nature of global capitalism. The apocalyptic frontier must be a place where these elements are systematically eliminated, as it connects the form and function of the frontier in its anti-modern approach.

The Western is not gone but reborn in the apocalypse. Tompkins argued the popularity of the Western was due to the growing influence of women’s culture in the

public discourse between 1880 and 1920.¹⁸³ A century later, as illustrated most startlingly in the dramatic political rise of Donald Trump as well as many other far-right politicians, a significant number of white men in the United States perceive themselves as victimized by the culture of racialized and gendered others. The frontier deconstructs the systems that they see as marginalizing them while simultaneously returning them to a position of rightful authority and strength. This happens along various political lines; femininity (and therefore feminism) cannot survive in the apocalypse; only masculinity can endure. In the wilderness, the gun-control activist will wish he or she could find a gun, while the National Rifle Association member will boldly protect his or her neighborhood.

Within their interpretive framework, preppers see themselves as having good intentions and as participating in the restoration of morality and civilization to the earth following the destruction of the apocalypse. And this sense of good intentions is certainly bolstered within the community by the frequently supportive and generous interactions between preppers. For example, while at Prepper Camp in Tennessee, I slept in the overflow camping area called “Tent City.” It was dusty and dry, but the older couple in the next site, whose children had grown up and moved out, offered me everything from food to company. As an ethnographically minded scholar who seeks to be sensitive to the dignity of the people I study, the experiences of kindness and camaraderie I have experienced at prepper events make it difficult to address the more strident elements in the prepper community as well as the pronounced strain of racism that undergirds a great deal of prepper discourse. It is important to remember that, as with many vernacular

¹⁸³ Ibid., 44.

communities, preppers are a diverse group and may participate in and understand the construction of the virtual ekklesia in many different ways.

[The Online Prepper Response to the Baltimore Riots](#)

The prepper response to the death of Freddie Grey and the riots that followed in Baltimore served as an illustration of the prevalence of race in the ritual deliberations of preppers in digital spaces as well as how preppers can articulate different perspectives within this discourse. The Grey case, in which an African American man died of injuries sustained while in police custody, and the rioting that followed it became a key set of images within the ritual deliberations of preppers in this period. The Baltimore riots, largely perceived by Preppers to be the work of African Americans in the city, provided a continuous stream of images on prepper websites and social media that could be situated within the interpretive framework of the apocalyptic prepper wilderness. In these vernacular spaces, the “Nada’s glasses” of prepper discourse allowed them to see the reality without the ideology of mainstream television. Within the preppers’ divine framework, the more institutional the source of information is, the less reliable it becomes. The largest prepper website, American Preppers Network, saw a flurry of activity in a new post, labeled “Baltimore.” The website gave preppers a platform on which to package the crisis as a microcosm of the racial inferiority of African Americans and the many problems associated with urban areas. Preppers constructed the wilderness out of the Baltimore riots by “poaching” from news sources, from film and television texts, and from their own racialized narratives. In doing so, they reinforced the prepper errand: to prepare for the collapse of the comfortable, multicultural, liberal society.

Responses were often politically conservative. “Blondie” saw the figure of the welfare queen: “Come Friday the 1st of the month, everyone gets their check, they stamps, hit the liquor store, it’ll get quiet then.”¹⁸⁴ Worse than white sheeple, who make a living and engage in comfortable consumerism, Blondie sees urban African Americans as directly reliant on the government for handouts. “ReadyMom” disagreed that the welfare machine would quiet the urban poor: “Things are going to get worse, before better. Tonight has the potential to be ugly ... The economy is not as good as ‘they’ want you to think. Morality is waaaaaay down. Police are afraid to police the way they are supposed to. Not a good mix for this happening in Baltimore.”¹⁸⁵ ReadyMom used the event to reinforce her beliefs in the immorality of the city and that the only way for white officers to police as they are “supposed to” is through racial profiling.

Preppers use the term “they,” as ReadyMom did, as a broad term for what they perceive to be a set of political, social, cultural, and economic institutions and leaders who control American society. Through their divine framework, preppers view any conspiracy theory that helps to contest conventional wisdom as acceptable. As a result, the inconsistencies of culture make it difficult to systematically categorize or understand the role of conspiracies in prepper discourse. In a presentation at Prepper Con IV, Ted Fletcher read the headline: “Bigger earthquakes double in 2014.” “Now we’re not talking

¹⁸⁴ Blondie, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015,
<http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881#p469402>

¹⁸⁵ ReadyMom, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015,
<http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881#p469408>

about the zombie apocalypse here,” he continued. “We’re not talking about the Mayan prophecy okay? We’re not talking about conspiracy theories. This is stuff that is actually happening right now.”¹⁸⁶ The crowd laughed. It was an opportunity for Fletcher to make himself seem grounded and distanced from the fringe ideas that emerge in the virtual “ekklesia.” Formally, the American Preppers Network website does not “promote or support Conspiracy Theories,” but regardless, conspiracy posts are made.¹⁸⁷ Although theories on zombies and Mayans are not popular conspiracies among preppers, it is easy to find preppers who believed Obama would refuse to leave office. One user suggested the Baltimore riots were “orchestrated” by the Jewish-Hungarian American executive George Soros.¹⁸⁸ The conflicting approaches of preppers to conspiracies may seem muddled, but importantly, their lack of agreement is also evidence of the openness and vernacular authority of the virtual ekklesia.

In the deliberative discourse of vernacular prepper culture, the city, in this case, Baltimore, represents the perfect metaphor for what they see as a central problem with the contemporary United States: consumption. Urban areas survive only through consumption rather than production. Preppers see the city as a place with too many people and too few resources. If the city is the epicenter of consumption, African

¹⁸⁶ Fletcher, “Emergency Plans.”

¹⁸⁷ American Preppers Network, “About the American Preppers Network,” *American Preppers Network*, 2016, <http://americanpreppersnetwork.com/about-the-american-preppers-network>.

¹⁸⁸ Gunns, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015, <http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881&start=45#p469531>.

Americans, strongly associated in prepper discourse with urban areas, are also an exemplar of the problem. They are often perceived as both taking up resources and creating social unrest without doing useful work. As one prepper posted, “Cities with a large minority population are doomed to self-destruction.”¹⁸⁹ This urban/rural contrast dates to the Western genre, where the town was a place of temptation for the hero.¹⁹⁰ The city is a vacuum not only of morality and resources but also for whiteness.

These preppers perceive African Americans as collaborators with the establishment and so tended to interpret the riots not as a protest against the government but as one designed to get more from the government. ColoradoPrepper responded to ReadyMom asking “Why do they have to get worse before getting ‘better’? Better for who exactly? What demands do we have to give into this time before we get some temporary peace?”¹⁹¹

To emphasize the otherness of African Americans, these preppers produced images of African Americans as a transnational threat. In the same post, ColoradoPrepper asked, “What is this? Sub-Saharan Africa?” He continued, “Blacks have the highest standard of living in the world right here in the United States, and if they honestly believe that they can do better elsewhere, they know where the door is. We talk about muslim no-go zones, what about black no-go zones? Why are people too afraid of being called a

¹⁸⁹ Rebnavy1862, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015, <http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881&sid=c6a1a787cb5925f7388b1491282d4b88&start=15#p469454>.

¹⁹⁰ Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, 86.

¹⁹¹ ColoradoPrepper, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015.

racist to protect themselves and their children?”¹⁹² ColoradoPrepper’s post stood without disagreement or debate. In ColoradoPrepper’s envisioning, black people need to be contained through racial profiling but even more literally through segregation. As a transnational group discursively connected with Africa, they represent a corrupting foreign influence, one who should, in the words of another poster, go “back to some third world country (who frankly doesn’t want these animals either).”¹⁹³

Given the strong anti-government elements of prepper beliefs, it is perhaps an illustration of the racist dimensions of prepper discourse that few preppers were sympathetic to black protestors. After all, it would seem that preppers might easily connect with the class-based struggle of the urban poor against government power. Ironically, however, preppers often also strongly support the police and military, primary tools of any totalitarian government. What this perhaps suggests is that many in the prepper movement are more interested in reconstructing power in the immediate world rather than in the renewal of a possible apocalypse.

However, there were those who did connect the abuse of government power and the relationship between poor whites and blacks. When a CVS in Baltimore went up in flames, AuntBee saw the class-based solidarity that preppers share with the urban poor:

The 1% and the top .0001 have a vested interest in divide and conquer. If we, no matter what our color or religion can be kept at each other’s throats, or living in fear and suspicion, it’s not likely that the Haves will

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Stahlrosen, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015, <http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881&start=15#p469472>.

wake up one morning to find themselves being dragged off to the hangman's noose. They are the enemy, not your neighbors. Imagine if we, people of the United States found that one common cause. The "elite" wouldn't survive a day and they know it. [emphasis in original].¹⁹⁴

AuntBee's "they" are the bourgeoisie. Baltimore riots were not a race riot but a class-based revolution. With Nada's glasses, AuntBee saw the phrase: DIVIDE AND CONQUER. Her vision reframed the racial "othering" that permeates much of prepper discourse into a way to find common ground across racial lines.

PatrioticStabilist was the only user to agree but not in a way that redeems the struggle of the urban poor. The user responded with two sentences: "I so agree, there is the problem, keep people poor and fighting among themselves for peanuts. Pictures where my husband works, imagine if they had to live like this."¹⁹⁵ PatrioticStabilist posted three photographs of black people living in poverty in a developing country. They were barefoot women carrying buckets, wearing wrap skirts, and walking along dirt roads. While it does present a sense of a prepper proletariat as connected to African Americans in Baltimore, it only does so by linking all black people to a stereotyped image of impoverished communities in Africa.

In the same way, posts in this prepper forum outline similar transnational connections for many racialized others. Another strain of transnationalist discourse

¹⁹⁴ AuntBee, "Re: Baltimore," *American Preppers Network*, 2015, <http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881#p469416>

¹⁹⁵ PatrioticStabilist, "Re: Baltimore," *American Preppers Network*, 2015, <http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881#p469421>

connects black people in the United States to Muslims terrorists. As prepper Warrior posted, “The Baltimore PD has put a request into Israel for defensive missile strikes on suspected muslim positions.”¹⁹⁶ America’s problem in Baltimore is akin to Israel’s problem with Muslim militancy. There is strong support for Israel among preppers, due to not only their Judeo-Christian connections but also what they see as Israel’s ability to survive despite the odds against them.¹⁹⁷

Today, preppers are forced to live in modern society. As they see it, modernity is responsible for their frustrations. It creates a culture of domestic tranquility in which people rely upon the lethargic conveniences of capitalism. Preppers reject the world of conveniences and adopt a fatalist perspective, substituting the fear of modernization for fear of the apocalypse. The simultaneous fear and joy of preppers is that society will ultimately collapse. The apocalypse will release untold devastation upon humanity, but they and their families will thrive and rebuild. The apocalyptic frontier will not only kill the weak but also provide an opportunity for the prepper to redefine and reassert white masculinity. As of the time of this research, the frontier is yet to arrive, but preppers continue to construct and explore the frontier through their interpretation of media in the ritual deliberations that take place in both digital and physical spaces. Online communities’ Preppers “light out for the territory,” seeking the savage wasteland devoid

¹⁹⁶ Illini Warrior, “Re: Baltimore,” *American Preppers Network*, 2015, <http://www.americanpreppersnetwork.net/viewtopic.php?f=635&t=50881#p469431>.

¹⁹⁷ Melanie McAlister, “The Good Fight: Israel after Vietnam, 1972-80,” in *American Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway et al. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 246–59.

of modernization.¹⁹⁸ It is in this wilderness that the prepper community can dream of a life where they no longer have to fear a world of job losses or budget cuts. It is easier to endure the challenges of today if tomorrow could be the end.

¹⁹⁸ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Conclusion

I have always had an interest in the apocalypse. I enjoyed watching the film *The Road*, as well as the show *The Walking Dead* before I began this study. For too many hours I played the video game series *Fallout*, a game where your character emerges from a bunker following a nuclear apocalypse. I believe what draws me to this apocalypse media is the physical and human landscape. The physical landscape changes dramatically with the collapse of society as trees, bushes, and vines reclaim the world. On my coffee table rests a copy of Matthew Christopher's *Abandoned America: Dismantling the Dream*, a collection of his photography and exploration into spaces that were one magnificent testament of the wealth and power of people and now are overrun with rot and decay.¹⁹⁹ For me, these images are particularly fascinating because they remind me of the frontier reclaiming spaces that were once paragons of the human race. Complementing the natural landscape is the human landscape, as people, will no longer under the rules and order that control our behavior.

The greatest threat following a major disaster would come from people who disregard the rule of law. If you were walking about today or driving a car, you likely did not notice how people tend to behave and follow order, even when not under the direct observation of law enforcement. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, illustrated this concept with the Panopticon. The Panopticon was an 18th century building designed to psychologically control that confined inside with the perception of observation. Within the structure of the Panopticon, regardless of where an inmate was placed in a cell, the inmate was under the perception that he or she was perpetually observed. The

¹⁹⁹ Matthew Christopher, *Abandoned America: Dismantling The Dream* (Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2014).

fundamental concept of the Panopticon is the ability of a single individual, in a central point of observation, to simultaneously observe all the individuals confined inside. Like a wheel with spokes, the central hub can observe each spoke and cells located inside. In our society this translates to the actions of individuals who feel as though they are observed.²⁰⁰ A man would likely stop at a red light, even if there is not an officer present, because he perceives his actions as observable, like that of the Panopticon.

A disaster has the potential to bring a deep mist into the Panopticon, blurring the space between the overseer and the inmate, and releasing the individual from his psychological confinement. That same man may now pull up to a red light and not stop, because he perceives law enforcement to be overwhelmed with a flood, blizzard, or terrorist attack. The human landscape shifts because people are free from the Panopticon's control and can more freely choose their behavior. I believe most preppers want to show how they will be a good force in the world when the Panopticon collapses. Most preppers want to be the "good guys," but the challenge is that I came across many who see the "bad guys," as the people who are different from them.

It would be easy to walk away from this study with the perception that preppers are white, male, racist, working-class men. Although these extreme voices exist within the community, I am convinced, at heart, most preppers are less interested in the destruction of the world but want to participate in its rebirth. Preppers appear to want their bunker doors to open, like the door of Noah's ark, to a new frontier and space to

²⁰⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975).

rebuild. The prepper frontier truly is different from any other; the prepper believes the frontier will come to all of us.

As discussed, media plays a critical role in this process as preppers use it to construct the virtual boundaries of the apocalypse. Historically, the apocalypse was something to be feared, but it rested in the hands of God. The new secular apocalypse creates the same chaos and fear, but it lacks an institutional governing body to show how the apocalypse will come, what it will look like, and how to prepare. From this space preppers share their collective ideas of what the end of the world will look like. Online and offline, preppers connect and create, taking from different media, to craft a vision of the end.

The secular apocalypse presents challenges to Christian preppers. The Christian prepper wrestles with the tension between his religious faith and the secular nature of the prepper apocalypse. Christian preppers personally prepare and poach from a different source: The Bible. The Christian prepper finds hope in the stories of Joseph and Noah, who were individuals who were prepared, but the dissonance remains. Joseph and Noah were not secular preppers, there is nothing secular about God giving Joseph a dream to store up grain, or commanding Noah to build an ark. To resolve this dissonance, Joseph, Noah, and even Jesus are repackaged as secular preppers. In turn, some preppers turn toward their secular apocalypse for a new faith. Many preppers speak of the faith they have in the impending apocalypse, that it will liberate them from the work.

The prepper apocalypse creates a unique space. On the one hand, the apocalypse has yet to come and is something in the future, but on the other hand, it does exist today. The 1989 film *Field of Dreams* theme of “If you build it, they will come,” illustrates how

the preparations of preppers creates the apocalypse today and transforms spaces. I am not saying that by preparing for the apocalypse that the secular apocalypse “will come,” rather through preparation, preppers transform spaces around them into new meaning. The “trash can” transforms into a faraday cage in the basement and creates a bridge between today and the apocalypse, linking preppers to another world. When a prepper converts a shipping container into a bunker, he or she can act as both producer and consumer that can simultaneously exist in two spaces. A ritual, such as practicing “bugging out” with the family or placing a “bug out bag” at work, rejects the comfortable nature of our world and create a dualistic space for preppers.

This study into the prepper community has explored how race, class, and gender are impacted by the prepper apocalypse. The apocalypse serves as a reset button for preppers who believe that multiculturalism is a sham that will never truly become anything great. There is no need to solve the tensions between rich and poor, blacks and whites, or Republicans and Democrats, because, as many preppers believe, the apocalypse will level the playing field and allow for preppers to reign.

An issue within this research that needs to be resolved is the element of gender and how female preppers utilize the apocalypse. Female preppers appear to believe that the apocalypse will serve them well as they return to traditional pre-industrial domestic duties, but it is difficult to see how this would be an equitable place for women. I have heard women in the community talk about how they left the business world to become preppers, as they stand on a stage and advertise their businesses. Without having interviewed any women in this study, I can only listen to public comments and speculate on their thoughts, but it seems there is a disconnect for female preppers who believe they

will find redemption in a domestic dominance when they are rarely perceived as equals by their male prepper peers.

Through this journey my reflections on preppers has been impacted with each experience. I was deeply empathetic to their cause when my neighbors at prepper camp in the tent beside me invited me to eat dinner with them. They openly shared why they made the pilgrimage (my word, not theirs) to Prepper Camp in South Caroline and the value they found in meeting like-minded preppers and learning about how to better prepare for a disaster. They spoke of a feeling, an innate sense, that there was trouble on the horizon and that they needed to be ready for it, whatever will come. They wanted to know why I came to Prepper Camp and I told them about my research and my interest in the apocalypse. They did not object to my presence and offered to talk more.

There is one question that has developed through this research: if a prepper were secretly presented with an apocalyptic button, one that if pressed, would trigger an event to begin the apocalypse, would he press it? If done in secret, I would argue that preppers would press the apocalypse button because the apocalypse is not something to fear. Preppers are not anxious about their future; despite the fact they live in the dark space of the unforgiving apocalyptic frontier, they have a very positive outlook on the world and their place.

Preppers highlight how the dialogue around gun rights needs to change to move forward. For preppers, statistics around guns violence, accidental or intentional, is irrelevant. Preppers own guns because they believe in an alternate space where they will be needed for survival. When engaging in the gun control debate, preppers use a fictitious space as their greatest argument, which is not a space that conventional logic applies.

Although the circumstances of needing an assault rifle are in another time and place, it is very real for those who believe these tools will be essential to their survival. It may be easier for legislation on guns to move forward collectively if those in favor of gun control would examine the societal issues that feed into the narrative that supports the alternate future where assault weapons mean survival.

The election of Donald Trump has created a new hope for the prepper community and helped to highlight some of the core values of the community. The election was towards the end of my online and offline research and preppers clearly were hopeful that Trump would win the election. Preppers were frustrated with big government and liberalism of the Obama era and viewed Trump as part of the solution.

It should not be surprising that following the election of Donald Trump there were those who stepped into the prepper world out of fear of Trump. Trump's war on "fake news" and misrepresentation of facts has created anxiety among liberals that he will undermine our constitution and at best, take away our liberties, and at worst, refuse to leave office. I find my mind taking a calmer approach to this idea, because I heard the same themes at Prepper Camp about how Obama would refuse to leave the office when his time came. I have read claims that liberal prepping is on the rise, but this is a topic I will leave for another researcher to pick up and carry on.

Trump is popular within the prepper community, but his election has not slowed the activity of the movement. The election of Donald Trump and the overwhelming support that he has received is evidence that preppers are more anti-liberalism than they are anti-Government. Despite the concerns of Obama being a Muslim, preppers are not

concerned with Trump's Russian collusion. Trump's words and actions around issues of race and gender resonate with the prepper community.

The apocalypse will continue to survive as it serves those who need to set the world back to an earlier period. The appeal of the apocalypse will continue to grow as it provides a simple solution for a nation divided, allowing everyone who looks at it to create a vernacular world where they are no longer slaves to a system, but kings and queens of their domains.

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