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Defending White America: The Apocalyptic Meta-Narrative
of White Nationalist Rhetoric

Michael Scott Walton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Defending White America: The Apocalyptic Meta-Narrative of White Nationalist Rhetoric

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Prior to attacking a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas, Patrick Crusius posted a manifesto on the notorious 8chan website in which he justified his attack as a self-defensive response to the “Hispanic invasion of Texas.” While this manifesto certainly contains the irrationality necessary to justify mass murder, it also repeats and reinforces language and worldviews present in public discourse, especially in discourse from white nationalists. Analyzing the Crusius manifesto in context of this white nationalist public discourse reveals how language used and worldviews perpetuated by white nationalists ultimately construct an apocalyptic meta-narrative that transforms immigrants and refugees into dangerous invaders. By repeatedly telling stories that frame immigrants or refugees as criminals, invaders, and terrorists, white nationalists construct a meta-narrative that subsumes localized narratives, which means that any story about an immigrant seeking refuge in the United States becomes a story of an invader and criminal. Crusius repeats and reinforces this meta-narrative in his manifesto, drawing on the foundational white-nationalist French scholar Renaud Camus, whose “Great Replacement” theory claims that non-white populations are systematically replacing white populations, leading to a “white genocide.” Ultimately, the apocalypse in this meta-narrative is not a violent, devastating end to the United States, but rather the end of a structure dominated by whiteness and Western culture. It’s this perceived apocalypse that inspires Crusius’ violent response.

Ultimately, this meta-narrative capitalizes on fear to transform genuine love of nation into a volatile xenophobia that can encourage a perceived need for violent self-defense. On the scholarly front, this research may reinforce the suggestion of scholar Dana Cloud, who claims that scholars and rhetors cannot challenge white nationalist irrationality with a rational approach, but rather with localized narratives that ground the experiences of immigrants and refugees in concrete details that foster empathy and understanding.

Keywords: white nationalism, meta-narrative, apocalypse, Renaud Camus, Patrick Crusius

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Introduction

On August 3rd, 2019, Patrick Crusius entered a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas, wearing protective headgear and with an AK-47 in hand. In only a few minutes, Crusius killed twenty-two people, many of whom were of Hispanic descent. Prior to the attack, Crusius posted a manifesto on the notorious 8chan website similar in many ways to the manifestos by the Poway Synagogue shooter and the Christchurch Mosque shooter. Like his predecessors, Crusius uses his manifesto to describe his attack as a necessary response in which he is “defending [his] country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion” (Crusius). While much of Crusius’ manifesto reflects the irrationality necessary to carry out a brutal attack, it also, like the mass-shooter manifestos before it, reveals a dangerous truth about white nationalistic rhetoric: it constructs an apocalyptic story that capitalizes on fear to transform genuine love of nation into a volatile xenophobia that may inspire a perceived need for violent self-defense.

The white nationalist rhetoric that Crusius repeats and reinforces in his manifesto follows a tradition that was synthesized in Frenchman Renaud Camus’s book *The Great Replacement*, but that has threads weaving back through the late twentieth century. This Great Replacement theory postulates that a slow-moving white genocide is being systematically enacted across the world, allowing other races and cultures to take the place of white-dominant nations. Sometimes abortion is to blame for this genocide (Mason 79), and at other times immigrants are at fault (Coulter). White nationalist rhetoric that adheres to the Great Replacement conspiracy relies on what I call “white nationalist apocalypticism” that imagines not a physically destructive event, but rather the end of the institutions that are defined by the domination of white populations and Western culture instead of geographical boundaries. This apocalyptic rhetoric is primarily delivered through meta-narratives—generalized “master” narratives created by patterns repeated

in localized narratives that then alter how we interpret localized events—that frame outsiders as destructive threats to Western institutions of privilege.

In rhetorical studies, apocalyptic rhetoric has generally been envisioned in two categories: Christian apocalyptic rhetoric that narrativizes world events as playing a role in the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, and secular apocalyptic rhetoric that appeals to fear of “the end” without drawing on Christian elements (e.g. refusing to act on climate change will lead to the end of human civilization). While scholars have identified a distinction between Christian and secular apocalyptic rhetoric, there has been little distinction among the various types of apocalyptic rhetoric that could be called “secular” (McQueen 5, Wilson 426). However, Andrew Wilson, in his touchstone study of the *Stormfront* forum, begins making some important connections between white nationalism and apocalypticism. Wilson’s research expertly analyzes the apocalyptic responses to the Paris terrorist attacks, but he does not necessarily distinguish what makes this apocalyptic rhetoric unique from other “secular” apocalyptic rhetorics, nor does he acknowledge the important role that meta-narrative plays in white nationalist rhetoric (Wilson 412).

Rhetorical scholars studying white nationalism, on the other hand, have identified the problem of dangerous demagoguery, weaponized communication, and reactionary rhetoric, but have not yet identified how such strategies not only characterize white-nationalist rhetoric but also contribute to an apocalyptic worldview (Mercieca 266; Shorten 194-5). Through identifying the elements of white nationalist apocalypticism and analyzing such rhetoric within Patrick Crusius’ manifesto, I will explore how white nationalist rhetoric, as informed by the Great Replacement conspiracy, relies on apocalyptic language of immigrant “invasion” that imagine the end of systems of power that historically used whiteness to define the boundaries of their

institutions. These meta-narratives inspire white nationalist mass shooters to adopt the role of a hero defending an endangered structure. Through this study, I aim to synthesize discussions on modern-day apocalyptic rhetoric with those on white nationalist rhetoric to identify how white nationalists construct apocalyptic meta-narratives that transform events into apocalypses, as well as potentially how to study and respond to such communication.

First, I will identify how apocalypticism in political rhetoric has evolved beyond a primarily Christian lens of God's forces versus Satan's into a strategic narrative device for perpetuating nationalist ideologies through imagining the end of systems dominated by such ideologies. Then, with the white nationalist rhetoric discussed in *The Great Replacement* and perpetuated by political commentators like Ann Coulter and Tucker Carlson as important cultural context, I will analyze Crusius's manifesto and identify elements that unite white nationalist rhetoric with an apocalyptic worldview. This analysis both serves as an example of the meta-narrative of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric, and reveals a framework that other white nationalists use to influence everyday American citizens to react to what they perceive as an apocalyptic threat. Finally, I will discuss the implications of distinguishing white nationalist rhetoric as an apocalyptic narrative unique from other secular apocalyptic rhetoric and, ultimately, how rhetorical scholars and other rhetors may respond to such narratives by responding not only with rationality, but with localized narratives that challenge the apocalyptic worldview.

Apocalyptic Rhetoric: From Revelation to Invasion

While select rhetorical scholars have studied apocalyptic discourse, the vast majority focuses on the Christian apocalypse described in Daniel and in the Book of Revelation, as they

appear in both religious and secular contexts. Even research into secular apocalyptic rhetoric and white nationalist rhetoric has not described what distinguishes white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric. I define white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric as *communication that constructs apocalypses informed by the Great Replacement theory and deploys strategies such as weaponized communication, reactionary rhetoric, and dangerous demagoguery to reinforce a meta-narrative where non-white populations become invaders at best, systemic conspirators at worst*. According to these rhetors, these populations destroy a nation defined by the dominance of white populations and white culture, through generally non-violent means (such as immigration). That destruction is largely metaphysical, a subversive undermining of the community conceived as a “white” nation, which is accomplished by introducing diversity that white nationalist rhetors frame as replacement. This white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric constructs a worldview that encourages audiences to view minorities as threats to the white nation and to act in violent self-defense.

Constructing Apocalypse

Kenneth Burke notes how secular language frequently borrows the “supernatural” significance of religious language (*Rhetoric of Religion* 1-10). Apocalyptic rhetoric similarly borrows the kairotic flexibility and religious prestige of apocalyptic narratives to imbue otherwise irreligious situations with the same supernatural significance. While contemporary apocalyptic rhetoric seems to have moved beyond Revelation in most cases, threads of the Christian apocalypse are still present in the more secular apocalypse of white nationalist apocalypticism, and therefore this traditional conception of apocalypse is an important foundation for understanding white nationalist apocalypticism. Allison McQueen, in her book on

apocalyptic rhetoric and political realism, provides a helpful definition of apocalypse: “an imminent and cataclysmic end to the known world, along with its attendant ‘evils.’ It is a rupture in the apparent temporal continuity of history, a revelatory moment around which the past is given meaning and a radically new future is announced” (56). With attention also primarily on Christian apocalyptic rhetoric, Sharon Crowley adds that apocalyptic narratives “connect intimate experiences of life with larger questions and issues” which in turn “smooth[s] over contradictions that might give rise to dissonance or doubt” (105). For Crowley, Christian apocalypse rhetoric takes “intimate,” everyday, sometimes personal events and gives them a kind of cosmic significance. To expand these definitions beyond the Christian understanding of apocalypse, I would amend them to say that apocalypse is an event, or series of events, that a rhetor transforms into an imminent and cataclysmic end to the structures, systems, and institutions that make up an audience’s known world. The rhetor uses this apocalypse as motivation for the audience to respond to whatever the rhetor has framed as an exigence. In the case of white nationalist apocalypticism, for example, the exigence tends to be foreign, non-white populations entering a “white” nation.

Whatever the exigence, the flexibility of apocalyptic narratives enable response to virtually any rhetorical situation. As McQueen notes, “Yet because it invites interpretation, this dense symbolism [of apocalypse] guarantees that the apocalyptic text is almost infinitely flexible” (43-4). The range of interpretation of apocalyptic symbols allow rhetors to repurpose otherwise irreligious events to their own ends. They can transform the four horsemen, the Antichrist, even the devil into whatever antagonistic force will help them satisfy their objective. In doing so, the rhetor moves beyond the sacred and deploys religious vigor to otherwise secular topics. This rhetor constructs a new apocalypse for the audience in how he or she interprets a

phenomenon, thereby crafting what Kenneth Burke calls a terministic screen, a linguistic filter that alters how an audience may interpret reality (*Language as Symbolic Action* 44-5).

Specifically, an apocalyptic terministic screen encourages an audience to interpret the world as being in a constant moral and spiritual conflict, with politicians and other ideological or ethnic groups representing the forces of good and evil. The refugee is a simple refugee until a rhetor places an apocalyptic screen between the audience and that refugee, who then becomes an enemy; if not a terrorist, then an accomplice to one.

While much of McQueen's and many other scholars' work has focused on a Christian apocalypse, others have noted how rhetors blend religious apocalypticism and secular, even political rhetoric and use the flexibility of apocalypse to make secular arguments. Stephen O'Leary, for example, noted how "the politics of the early 1980s can be described as apocalyptic in a particular and restricted sense: arguments on both the left and right seemed to appeal to ultimates" (173). He then describes the conservative apocalypticism that evoked visions of an America under threat of enslavement or apocalyptic destruction at the hands of Communist dictatorships in order to spur support for nuclear weapons development, while liberals created images of nuclear devastation to persuade Americans to oppose nuclear weapons development. Both parties appealed to a fear of the end in order to encourage voters to either support or challenge the further development of nuclear weapons. But while O'Leary calls these moves apocalyptic, it's not necessarily these narratives' role in a Christian apocalyptic story that makes them apocalyptic. While the New Christian Right, as O'Leary goes on to describe, will certainly frame the conservative position as the righteous position, these rhetorical moves are apocalyptic because they encourage the audience to imagine the destruction of the systems of power from

which they benefit. On both the right and left, the result of inaction is an end to their known world, though the roads to redemption are different.

The twentieth century also saw the previously religious rhetoric of the apocalypse secularized to reinforce cultural and national boundaries. Ethnonationalists specifically have frequently constructed cataclysmic threats to their nation's well being in an attempt to justify atrocities against minorities deemed threats by those in power. Ronald Grigor Suny notes how, prior to the Armenian Genocide, the Ottoman Empire "constructed the Armenians as an existential threat to the Ottoman Empire and to the Turkish nation, what they conceived as the Turkish nation at that time" (Malinkin). The infamous Dr. Mehmed Resid also called the Armenian Christians "a mortal worry" and a "tumor requiring operation" (Kieser 133). This construction of an apocalyptic threat then carried political rhetoric as the violence against Armenians began. Stefan Ihrig has discussed in detail how the Nazis similarly constructed apocalyptic threats before and during the Holocaust by transforming the Jewish people and their culture into a mortal danger to a white-nationalist German state (299-319). In every case, rhetors constructed these apocalypses to transform how their audiences interpret events and peoples.

The Apocalyptic Meta-Narrative

In a manner troublingly similar to the ethnonationalist apocalyptic rhetoric of the twentieth century, contemporary white nationalists blend historically religious apocalyptic approaches with secular apocalyptic rhetoric to reinforce geocultural boundaries and justify political action. These rhetors construct these apocalypses primarily by subsuming events into an apocalyptic meta-narrative. As defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard, a meta-narrative is a "master" narrative created over time by individual, "localized" narratives. These master narratives can

provide a “societal legitimation” that reinforces and gives authority to certain ideas (Lyotard xxiv). Localized narratives—concrete, otherwise individual events—become subsumed by a meta-narrative. This dominating power of the meta-narrative concerned Lyotard because the legitimating capability of meta-narratives would “rigidify norms and patterns of thought” as well as “‘terrorize’ the non-normalized” (Blair 264). White nationalist apocalyptic rhetoric displays Lyotard’s concern was certainly warranted: in the white nationalist apocalyptic meta-narrative, the singular event of an immigrant family entering the nation (the localized narrative) becomes further evidence for the systematic replacement of white people (the meta-narrative). The white nationalists on *Stormfront* and abroad take the common threads in localized narratives and weave them into meta-narratives, then draw on those master narratives to transform how the audience interprets events and the participants in such events, like immigrants entering the United States.

Since Lyotard, rhetorical scholars have noted the significant role that meta-narratives play in how we interpret reality. Stephen Browne argued that we use “compelling meta-narratives” to control the “unpredictable sweep of events,” which gives “structure and social rationale to chaos” (Browne 464, Jorgensen-Earp 154). To explain events and make order out of chaos, we then repeat meta-narratives and therefore reinforce the social rationale and structure that creates such order. Some meta-narratives help us find peace in this turmoil, such as in Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp and Lori Lanzilotti’s study of how shrines and death sites reinforce a meta-narrative that “assuage[s] public grief in the past and that offers stability and meaning in the wake of violent death today” by displaying that “death is a threshold, a gateway the children crossed to wake and resume their games in a world similar to this one” (159, 163). However, the cultural meta-narrative of the invader refugee and immigrant only rationalizes violence and ostracization of the already-marginalized.

One contemporary example of this white nationalist apocalyptic meta-narrative—an instance that may directly inform the rhetoric that influenced Crusius and that he perpetuates in his manifesto—is evident in President Trump’s and some conservative media’s treatment of refugees: the Central Americans and Syrians are a vehicle, a ruse, even, for allowing ISIS or MS-13 to infiltrate (and, implied, destroy) the United States as we know it. The localized narrative of Syrians fleeing violence and devastation is swallowed by the meta-narrative where localized details are lost as they are generalized into a master story in which refugees are only vehicles for destructive foreign invaders. By repeating these meta-narratives, President Trump and others create a terministic screen through which their audience interprets future events involving refugees. In Robert Ivie’s words, that meta-narrative is “totalizing,” making this white nationalist response to refugees appear to be “common sense” (494). The meta-narrative, then, provides a “societal legitimation” that enables someone like Patrick Crusius to feel justified in attacking Hispanic individuals in a Wal-Mart, all in the name of self-defense.

Andrew Wilson’s work on the *Stormfront* website is a recent touchstone in studying white nationalist discourse that constructs apocalypses and reinforces apocalyptic meta-narratives. The *Stormfront* forum, the center of Wilson’s analysis, provided a space for the conspiratorial white nationalists otherwise ostracized to the fringes of society. Wilson’s research focused primarily on responses from both stateside and international posters to the Paris terrorist attacks of 2015. In his study, Wilson found that “The fusion of the secular with the religious and the commingling of faith, nation and conspiracy have yielded a particular iteration of white nationalism that eschews traditional markers of national identity for a wider sense of belonging to, and in the face of apocalyptic fears for, an ethnonationalist ‘spiritual homeland’” (424-5).

As Wilson's study reveals, white nationalism is relegated not only to preserving the boundaries of a predominantly white nation (like the United States, for example), but also to preserving the spiritual boundaries of nations around the world where white, Christian culture dominates. White nationalists, then, are defined more by their whiteness than their allegiance to a particular nation. More important to their rhetoric than the geopolitical boundaries of the nation is the nation as a haven for a dominant white culture. When that haven is threatened however, as Wilson states, "the secular expressions of apocalyptic belief are invariably phrased in terms of superconspiracies that situate the white nationalist community in the heroic role of countering the civilization-threatening plots of the conspirators" (426). These "superconspiracies" generally take the form of meta-narratives that transform non-white outsiders into threats to the nation and that cast members of the white nationalist community as heroes in an apocalyptic story.

Wilson's work on *Stormfront* is an important foray into the depths of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric, but it elides one of the most important influences in the construction of this white nationalist apocalyptic meta-narrative: French philosopher Renaud Camus's *The Great Replacement*. Camus's book is a manifesto of sorts that both echoes arguments of white nationalists of the past and produces apocalyptic terms that white nationalists parrot in both fringe and public discourse today. At its core, *The Great Replacement* argues that western nations are currently challenged with varying degrees of ethnic and cultural substitution. While Camus specifically talks about the prevalence of Muslims in France, he also suggests that the increasing use of Spanish and other languages in the United States is also evidence of white cultural replacement.

Camus calls this replacement a "genocide," which captures the apocalypse of this theory, even if Camus never frames Muslims as agents of the devil or white people as the servants of

God. Similar to the genocidal rhetoric used to justify horrors in the Armenian and Jewish genocides, Camus doesn't necessarily claim that Muslims will violently remove white people from these nations, but instead frames diversity as an apocalyptic threat to the dominance of white culture and white populations. His argument against diversity is that individuals can integrate with other individuals, but civilizations, cultures, and religions cannot blend (Camus). For Camus, since people cannot blend, one must replace another. This genocide, this apocalypse, is therefore not necessarily violent, but a massacre of culture and the end of one civilization. And while Camus' main concern in his own nation is the growing population of Muslim immigrants, his "great replacement" rhetoric contains one of McQueen's important features of apocalyptic rhetoric: narrative flexibility. As rhetors that parrot Camus have proven, the apocalyptic rhetoric of the great replacement can be repurposed for a variety of exigencies and a variety of external "threats."

As Thomas Williams (one of the rare individuals to give any critical attention to Camus) has noted in his study of *The Great Replacement* and its influence, white nationalists the world round have latched on to and repurposed Camus' argument against diversity and of white genocide. According to Williams, a Canadian alt-right personality named Lauren Southern posted a video promoting alt-right views titled "The Great Replacement." The video received more than 250,000 views. A website titled "great-replacement.com" has also risen since Camus' publication. The introduction to the website claims that "Of all the different races of people on this planet, only the European race is facing the possibility of extinction in a relatively near future." This website sees its mission as "spreading awareness" of the great replacement concept, which the site's anonymous author notes, is more "palatable" than using the term "white genocide" (Williams). Williams also identifies Camus' ideas permeating the Unite the Right

protests that took place on August 11th of 2017, where white-supremacists chanted “variations of Renaud Camus’s grand replacement credo: ‘You will not replace us.’” Williams then claims that “Few, if any, of these khaki-clad young men had likely heard of...Renaud Camus...They didn’t know their rhetoric had been imported from France, like some dusty wine. But they didn’t need to. All they had to do was pick up the tiki torches and light them” (Williams). This is likely true of the many contemporary echoes of Camus’ theory: this apocalyptic rhetoric, this meta-narrative that evokes the end of the white race at the hands of POC-foreigners, has woven into white-nationalist circles without many of them knowing its source. However, white-nationalist mass shooters, who have accomplished the most violent responses to Camus’ rhetoric, seem to be intimately familiar with this source of the “you will not replace us” credo. After all, the Christchurch mosque shooter named his manifesto “The Great Replacement,” and Cruisus directly references the influence of Camus’ book in his own manifesto. Each repetition of the Great Replacement theory only reinforces the apocalyptic meta-narrative of the dangerous immigrant.

Here, then, is what distinguishes white nationalist apocalyptic rhetoric from other secular apocalypticism. While Donald Trump, Lauren Southern, anonymous website admins, and other current populists and nationalists may not be suggesting that “satanic Jews” are behind ISIS, immigrant “gangs,” and corrupt governments, these rhetors are transforming minorities in similar ways and encouraging visions of systemic apocalypse as a result of an outside threat. Such rhetoric is more dangerous than that of *Stormfront*’s posters precisely because it may not as easily flag itself as marginal or on the fringes of society. And yet, like the apocalyptic rhetoric of *Stormfront*, Trump and others’ apocalyptic rhetoric dehumanizes non-white, non-American

populations; further reinforces the otherhood of non-whites; and encourages significant political, and even violent, action based in an apocalyptic worldview.

Weaponized Communication and Dangerous Demagoguery

White nationalist apocalypse rhetoric, however, is identifiable not only in the broader meta-narratives that we can construct from various rhetorical artifacts, but also in the more isolated communication that reinforces this meta-narrative and that's on display more frequently in common discourse. These isolated rhetorical strategies should alert us that white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric may both be an underlying assumption of the communication and constructing a white-nationalist apocalyptic worldview. Many scholars on white nationalist rhetoric have thoroughly identified some of the rhetorical strategies used by white nationalist rhetors, but have not explored how those strategies indicate an apocalyptic worldview. Jennifer Mercieca, for example, draws on an experience with far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones as well as communication from President Trump to define her concept of "weaponized communication," which distinguishes whom she calls "dangerous demagogues." For Mercieca, dangerous demagogues are "those like Jones [and Trump] who refuse to be held accountable for their words and actions" (266). Specifically, white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric allows rhetors like Trump and others to avoid accountability by framing nationalist rhetoric and policy decisions as self-defense. From the view of these rhetors—or at least the projected view—they are not aggressors in any sense, but are rather acting in response to a threat to the nation, which, for them, enables them to resist accountability for otherwise racist and xenophobic communication.

Mercieca then identifies weaponized communication as the specific rhetorical strategy that “prevents institutions and citizens from holding dangerous demagogues accountable for their words and actions” (277). Weaponized communication enables this dangerous demagoguery because such tactics “do not seek to persuade, which requires consent and mutual openness to persuasion, but to force compliance which is acquiescence,” and such communication does so through “coercion and intimidation to gain compliance” (270-1). Despite the implications of its name, weaponized communication may not be obviously violent, but “since these tactics are used strategically to shortcut critical thinking, their goal is to deny audiences the opportunity to give their consent” (Mercieca 272). Weaponized communication, then, can be used to reinforce white nationalist, apocalyptic worldviews by using fear and generalization to elicit a poignant emotional reaction that circumvents rational thought. Casting immigrants as an invasion force, for example, intimidates a populace into supporting dangerous demagogues that frame themselves as the hero of this meta-narrative, despite those white-nationalist rhetors being the true originators of that fear. This special brand of intimidation and fearmongering causes an audience to shortcut the critical thinking that would otherwise help them recognize a rhetor as a demagogue because they are desperate to preserve a community and culture that they perceive, thanks largely to weaponized communication, as being under apocalyptic threat.

Reactionary Rhetoric and White Nationalist Apocalypse

Weaving through white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric in league with dangerous demagoguery and weaponized communication is reactionary rhetoric. Richard Shorten, in his response to—and criticism of—Albert Hirschman’s touchstone text on reactionary rhetoric, attempts to fill a void left by Hirschman’s theories, which Shorten concludes “were once creative

but [are] since well worn” (196). Shorten brings reactionary rhetoric into a more contemporary rhetorical setting and, among a number of other updates, Shorten identifies how far-right-wing reactionary rhetoric often includes an “appeal to moral clarity, in denunciation of moral ambiguity” (194). This moral clarity, a claim as to what is definitively right or wrong, just or unjust, fair or unfair, in turn reinforces the conspiracies to which white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric is so privy. “In their conception,” Shorten says of rhetors drawing on reactionary conspiracy, “conspiracies house evil designs. In their commission, the perpetrator’s enact evil deeds” (195). An important element of conspiracy in reactionary rhetoric, as Shorten notes, is “the reactionary’s claim to privileged knowledge of a conspiracy (from the outside) as ‘testimony’” (195). Rhetors using white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric draw on such reactionary strategies when they assume that it’s morally clear that diversity in Western nations is a threat, and when they claim that a purposeful replacement or genocide is being forced upon white populations. Camus and others certainly appear to have Shorten’s “privileged knowledge” when they claim that white populations are under apocalyptic threat and that borders are dissolving where white populations are no longer dominant, despite having no evidence of this threat. In league with weaponized communication, this reactionary rhetoric is another rhetorical strategy that helps white nationalist rhetors construct an apocalyptic meta-narrative.

Synthesizing Wilson’s work on superconspiratorial white nationalist rhetoric, Camus’s approach to white genocide and replacement, and Mercieca and Shorten’s commentary on white nationalist rhetoric reveals a narratological strategy used by white nationalist rhetors, a white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric. This conception of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric informs the actions of extremists like Patrick Crusius, who fear the dissolution of what they perceive as the foundation of nations like the United States, when really the ultimate consequence of these

“invaders” is the collapse of a white majority and white culture that upholds and defends power structures where whiteness yields the greatest returns.

Contextualizing the El Paso Shooting: Contemporary Examples of White-Nationalist Apocalypticism

The El Paso shooting was not the result of an attempt to eradicate evil or to challenge the hordes of the Devil. It was instead a response to rhetoric that constructs immigration as the cause of the destruction of America as we know it. While Crusius references Camus’ *The Great Replacement* in his manifesto, claiming that his target wasn’t the “Hispanic community” until he read Camus’ book, it’s clear that the apocalyptic rhetoric echoed in his writing did not originate only in a fringe piece like *The Great Replacement*, but also parroted apocalyptic rhetoric present in the meta-narratives of public discourse. Understanding Crusius’ perceived position as a hero in the apocalypse also requires understanding the discursive context informing his justification.

“For decades,” said Donald Trump in his 2018 State of the Union address, “open borders have allowed drugs and gangs to pour into our most vulnerable communities. They have allowed millions of low-wage workers to compete for jobs and wages against the poorest Americans. Most tragically, they have caused the loss of many innocent lives” (State of the Union 2018). Here, open borders are the cause of an attack of potentially apocalyptic forces. Notice that Trump does not mention refugees or immigrants, but rather encourages his audience to imagine a metaphysical force of crime and drugs that is “pour[ing]” into America like a flood. Here is where the details of localized narratives are generalized and consumed by the meta-narrative of the criminal refugee. Not only has Mercieca named Trump a “dangerous demagogue” who sets himself as a hero against such “floods,” but she would likely also call this dehumanization of

refugees weaponized communication. Instead of focusing on the innocent immigrants looking for a better life in the United States, Trump's weaponized communication transforms individuals into a terrifying force, an appeal intended to circumvent critical thinking by inspiring fear. Vulnerable American communities are the victims of this apocalyptic evil force, both in their economies and their wellbeing. To those viewing the world through this apocalyptic interpretive screen, open borders damage American society as we know it. This weaponized communication at the 2018 State of the Union not only transforms the immigrants approaching the border into a story (a localized narrative), but it also repeats and reinforces a meta-narrative of immigrants "flooding" communities and bringing violence and drugs with them. Here Trump superimposes an apocalyptic meta-narrative on an otherwise innocent event involving immigrants entering the nation.

While Donald Trump's white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric may be the most publicized, this discourse certainly did not originate with him, though it has frequently orbited the same concern as the President, Camus, and others: immigration. For instance, in 2007, popular conservative commentator Ann Coulter criticized recent changes to immigration law, but traced the progressive movement of immigration reform back to John F. Kennedy, claiming that "With his 1965 immigration act, Kennedy embarked on entirely transforming American culture for no good reason" (Coulter). This transformation of culture has happened because of a decrease in white population; as Coulter notes: "In 1960 [prior to JFK's immigration reforms], whites were 90 percent of the country. The Census Bureau recently estimated that whites already account for less than two-thirds of the population and will be a minority by 2050. Other estimates put that day much sooner" (Coulter). Under Coulter's white nationalist lens, for culture to be American culture, it must be dominated by a white population. If immigration reduces that population, then

American culture is being “transformed,” which, in Coulter’s case, implies “destroyed.” Coulter continues: “One may assume the new majority will not be such compassionate overlords as the white majority has been. If this sort of drastic change were legally imposed on any group other than white Americans, it would be called genocide. Yet whites are called racists merely for mentioning the fact that current immigration law is intentionally designed to reduce their percentage in the population” (Coulter). Here is the apocalyptic center of Coulter’s white nationalism: immigration that could potentially lead to the end of a predominantly white America. Coulter employs conspiracy when she imagines a violent, systematic removal of white people and casts immigration efforts as a purposeful move to undermine white authority in the United States.

This apocalyptic move involves both weaponized communication and reactionary rhetoric in constructing its conspiratorial meta-narrative. Transforming immigration into a systematic attempt to replace white populations crafts a narrative that appeals to fear and attempts to distinguish a false moral clarity between the white victims and the immigrant invaders. Coulter concludes by stating that, “I don’t want to live in Mexico, Quebec or Brazil. But now I guess I have no choice, since ‘open borders’ means I can never leave” (Coulter). Again, to Coulter, America is not America if it is not dominated by white people; it’s another nation altogether. Under these assumptions, immigration may not only bring physical threats into the country, but it will destroy the very idea of America.

One of the most recent examples of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric went viral following a discussion between Fox Primetime host Tucker Carlson and guest-host and cultural commentator Mark Steyn. On Carlson’s infamous Fox Primetime show, Steyn and Carlson describe how the “flood” of immigrants destroys America on a metaphysical level. “In Arizona,

a majority of the grade school children now are Hispanic,” Steyn said. “That means Arizona’s future is as an Hispanic society. That means, in effect, the border has moved north. And the cultural transformation outweighs any economic benefits” (Carlson). According to Steyn’s comments, in order for America to be America, it must be majority-white. For Steyn and others who perpetuate this white nationalist rhetoric, the nation’s borders are not so much a geographical boundary as they are defined by where white population and white culture dominate. If that white majority is threatened, white nationalists view that threat as white genocide, and react defensively. We can identify threads of Camus’ great replacement rhetoric here: since a majority of the school children in Arizona are now Hispanic, that population is replacing the white population and destroying its culture by replacing it with Hispanic culture. The two cannot, under this worldview, co-exist or integrate, which means that white culture meets an apocalyptic end. Again, an otherwise isolated, localized event (schools in Arizona becoming majority-Hispanic) becomes subsumed into a meta-narrative of immigrant invasion where this non-white majority is transformed into a threat against white populations and a nation whose borders are defined by whiteness. Inspired by this meta-narrative, Patrick Crusius would take it upon himself to stand against this threat.

The Crusius Manifesto and Apocalyptic White Nationalist Rhetoric

In the introduction to his study of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, Kenneth Burke justified his research by calling on his audience to “consider what kind of ‘medicine’ this medicine-man [Hitler] has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America” (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 164). We have identified the “medicine” of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric, and can

now identify what effects this medicine has on those to whom it's prescribed. Patrick Crusius's manifesto can reveal how weaponized communication, dangerous demagoguery, and reactionary rhetoric can construct an apocalyptic meta-narrative that attempts to justify extreme acts of violence.

Following an introduction in which he briefly justifies his actions as self-defense against invasion, Crusius breaks his manifesto, titled "The Inconvenient Truth," (perhaps a reference to Davis Guggenheim's documentary on Al Gore's campaign to inform the public on the problems of global warming) into five sections: "Political Reasons," "Economic Reasons," "Gear," "Reaction," and "Personal Reasons and Thoughts." Crusius' basic argument is this: the Hispanic "invasion" of Texas will allow for a Democratic takeover of Texas (and perhaps the national government), increase the power of corporations, drain American resources, and, inevitably, bring about "cultural and ethnic replacement" (Crusius). Crusius begins by situating his manifesto and this argument as a continuation of the thread established by Brenton Tarrant in his lengthy manifesto justifying his attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tarrant's manifesto, titled "The Great Replacement," acted on Renaud Camus's conspiracy by purposely targeting Muslims, the aggressors of Camus's apocalypse. But while Crusius states that he "support[s] the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto," he instead claims that his attack is "a response to the *Hispanic* invasion of Texas" (Crusius, italics mine). Here Crusius displays the flexibility of apocalyptic narratives, as identified by McQueen. For Tarrant, the apocalyptic threat was Muslim worshippers; for Crusius, it was the Hispanic population, specifically immigrants. Both serve as the victim to the same apocalyptic rhetoric: these non-white populations are threats to the dominance of nations defined by white dominance. Why would Crusius choose to target an Hispanic population instead of another minority, such as the Muslims

targeted in Camus's conspiracy? Crusius points out that his target was not a Hispanic population before he read *The Great Replacement*. A glance at Camus may reveal why this is the case.

While Camus's main concern is with the Muslim population in France, he does suggest that the increased use of Spanish in the United States is a similar indicator of white replacement.

Camus's argument has only been reinforced by the meta-narrative of the dangerous immigrant circulating in the United States.

The range of Crusius' justifications against these immigrants display the "cataclysmic" qualification that McQueen places on narratives built by apocalyptic rhetoric. In one instance, Crusius argues that the increasing amount of Hispanic immigrants will lead to the domination of democrats, who will monopolize the American political system, and in another claims that a larger immigrant population will give too much power to corporations, since "procorporation = pro-immigration" (Crusius). That domination of corporations will lead to economic problems and an expansion of automation, which is already "one of the biggest issues of our time" (Crusius). More immigrants will also lead to more people using resources, which will in turn destroy the environment. Therefore, since "most of y'all are just too stubborn to change your lifestyle...the next logical step is to decrease the number of people in America using resources. If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can become more sustainable" (Crusius). While many of Crusius's reasons rely on irrational claims and faulty assumptions, they display the reach of this white nationalist apocalypse. Firstly, the white nationalist apocalypse transcends the contemporary binary of United-States politics. Where traditional, Christian apocalyptic rhetoric is regularly attributed to American conservatism, several of Crusius's reasons (i.e. environmental care, limiting corporations) reach beyond contemporary republicanism. Secondly, a greater non-white population not only threatens the white majority, and therefore the power of

white nationalism, but it affects every facet of life within the United States' structure. If Crusius does not defend his nation, he perceives that it will reach a cataclysmic end, not one necessarily characterized by physical destruction, but by large-scale social and cultural upheaval that will change the United States as he sees it.

Just as the rhetoric surrounding conservatives' push for stricter immigration laws was characterized as national self-defense against the violence brought by gangs supposedly hiding among immigrants, Crusius's justification echoes such eliding of accountability. Referring to the Hispanic "invaders," Crusius says: "They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion" (Crusius). Here is a parroting of Mercieca's "dangerous demagoguery." Crusius attempts to avoid responsibility for his mass shooting by framing it as self-defense against another instigator. This dangerous demagoguery, this avoidance of accountability, only serves to reinforce the white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric that Crusius is both drawing on and projecting in his manifesto. *How* this dangerous demagoguery manifests itself is what makes it apocalyptic: Crusius could have avoided responsibility by covering his face, by not sharing the manifesto in the first place, or by using other means to obscure his identity. However, he casts himself as the righteous soldier, the martyr, in this apocalyptic conflict that will decide the fate of the United States as a white nation.

Later in his manifesto, Crusius reinforces his place as the righteous hero defending his nation: "This is just the beginning of the fight for America and Europe. I am honored to head the fight to reclaim my country from destruction" (Crusius). For Crusius, his violent response is part of a movement, a 'righteous' movement against an apocalyptic threat that could destroy what upholds the current white-dominant structures that uphold America and other Western nations. This "honor" communicates some of the reactionary rhetoric delivered by Crusius in this

manifesto. Since white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric has framed immigrants as a wholly apocalyptic threat, they have also attempted to assuage moral ambiguity in order to establish moral certainty. This illusion of moral certainty allows Crusius to feel further justified in taking violent, supposedly self-defensive action in order to do what, to him, is morally acceptable.

In this passage, Crusius also reinforces the apocalyptic conspiracy of this phenomenon. His shooting was not an isolated event intended only to discourage immigration into the United States. Rather, Crusius views his actions as an early strike in an ongoing apocalyptic conflict. In this conflict, immigration into the United States is not simply Central and South American citizens seeking a better life in the U.S., but it is instead one strategy—perhaps the principal strategy—employed to destroy America. Here Crusius echoes Camus: immigration is part of a systematic attempt to replace white populations, which, to Crusius, means the destruction of America, since under this white nationalist worldview, America’s identity is inseparable from its whiteness. In his concern for democratic domination, Crusius also draws on an apocalyptic conspiracy that Jeniffer Mercieca has noted in the rhetoric of President Trump and other conservatives. According to Mercieca, Trump challenges trust in the Democrats by telling an “apocalyptic story of a network of agents determined to infiltrate and undermine the nation” (“Law and Order”). Of course, as has been the case throughout Crusius’s manifesto, the undermining of the nation is not a physical destruction of the geographic United States, but rather the construction of a United States that conflicts with Trump’s vision and, in Crusius’s case, the vision of white nationalists.

Perhaps here is where the most dangerous elements of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric are revealed: white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric frames what is actually a threat to its ideology, and to the systems within which that ideology can survive, as a violent threat to the

entire nation. This rhetoric, then, is designed to appeal not only to white nationalists, but also to patriotic citizens afraid of the collapse of the country they love. A citizen does not have to embrace the white nationalist ideology to spread the messages of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric, because this flexible apocalyptic meta-narrative appeals to the fear of any patriot. That appeal to fear is weaponized communication that overrides critical, rational thought that may otherwise see through the fearmongering veneer to the irrational white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric informing that fear. White nationalist apocalypse rhetoric makes targets of non-white minority groups, inspiring fearful citizens to act in self-defense of their homeland.

The Implications of White Nationalist Apocalypse Rhetoric

“All that apocalyptic rhetoric encourages is an apocalyptic politics in which it becomes acceptable to believe that desperate measures must be taken,” said Paul Glastris, a speechwriter for President Bill Clinton. “It’s not crazy to worry about that” (Glastris) Here, Glastris provides a fitting exigence to which this research responds. Apocalyptic rhetoric in general frames situations as more volatile than they may be, especially as part of a religiously charged narrative, which may not only encourage voters to support desperate measures that they would not otherwise support, but also may encourage violence borne out of a perceived desperation. In a society where such rhetoric, and its specific brand of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric, is becoming more common, along with the dangerous ideologies using such rhetoric, it’s important to understand how apocalypticism operates, and how other rhetors and rhetoricians may respond to dangerous apocalyptic rhetoric to mitigate its effects.

Dana Cloud, in her discussion on rhetoric and truth in contemporary U.S. political culture, argues that rhetors attempting to challenge manipulative rhetoric like white nationalist

apocalypse rhetoric are currently “resorting to a narrow empirical baseline,” one that focuses on facts alone, that assumes a rational baseline where much of this rhetoric is totally irrational (9). Instead, Cloud suggests that we engage in “criticism in the service of demystifying power and enabling the formation of public consciousness faithful to the insurgent knowledges of the oppressed and exploited” (Cloud 5). Rhetors and rhetorical scholars cannot always challenge white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric with rational “fact-checking” and other logical approaches. Cloud’s argument suggests that we instead challenge narrative with narrative, that we change the “public consciousness” that has been shaped by apocalyptic meta-narratives with narratives that better connect with, as Cloud later argues, the experience of an audience and that better represent the experience of a community that has been maligned through apocalyptic rhetoric. The experience of “representatives from affected communities” can then help us “assess a text’s fidelity,” that “text” being the claims, in this case, of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric (Cloud 46). These stories that represent communities targeted by white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric may not always be “rational,” but they can be “true” to an audience by resonating with that audience’s values and concerns. Apocalyptic narratives, for example, may seem utterly irrational, but under a definition of fidelity that Cloud suggests, those narratives are true to their audiences because they blend religious or moral ideals with political ideologies to speak to an audience whose religion and politics inform one another. While the narratives created by white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric may be morally questionable, we can recognize the effectiveness of such narratives (how the “medicine” functions, as Burke put it) and reclaim that narrative power to counteract the effect of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric.

Lyotard suggests how we may use narrative to combat the meta-narratives crafted by white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*,

Lyotard argues that meta-narratives lose their focus on concrete characters and events, as well as, ultimately, their objectives, as these elements are “dispersed in clouds of narrative language” (xxiv). For Lyotard, narratives could be more effective if they are localized and focused on a singular event. Focusing narratives in this way can allow rhetors to challenge the master narratives. If, for example, white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric of the immigrant invader is the meta-narrative, something lost in the ambiguous language of “invasion,” the concrete experience of an immigrant becomes a localized narrative that challenges the master.

Consider the experience of Romulo Avelica Gonzalez, as described by Hector Tobar in *National Geographic*. In February 2017, while driving his U.S.-born daughter Fatima to school in the suburbs of L.A., immigration agents stopped Gonzalez and arrested him. Fatima caught the arrest on her cell phone. She would later tell Tobar: “I was sad, and at the same time I was mad, because they were taking my dad away from me” (Tobar). For six months, Romulo’s family visited him in the immigration facility, until he was eventually released, largely thanks to the cell-phone footage of his arrest, which Fatima had posted on the internet. Speaking of her video footage, Fatima said “Now people know what the president is doing...He’s tearing families apart because he thinks they’re criminals” (Tobar). When Romulo was released, he did glorify in his victory over a system that had treated him as a criminal. Instead, according to Tobar, Romulo “returned to the Eastside and made tacos for the friends and strangers who’d fought for his release and had won” (Tobar). Where President Trump’s meta-narrative of the criminal immigrant is hindered by ambiguous language and little appeal to logic (instead leaning on fear), little Fatima responds with a concrete, individualized, “localized” narrative that captures the consequences of Trump’s meta-narrative. With this localized narrative, Fatima--and Tobar in his reporting of the event--challenges the assumptions of immigrant criminality and violence by

revealing a counter-narrative: her father is no criminal, but a contributor to the United States society, a man who drives his daughter to school and makes tacos for his family and friends. Telling these stories, these localized narratives, is an important step in challenging the lens crafted by white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric.

In Lyotard's terms, the ambiguous meta-narrative of white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric is lost in the dispersed clouds of "narrative language," while stories like Romulo's are grounded in a "localized narrative," one that challenges white nationalists' grand narrative by giving an audience something concrete to imagine (xxiv). Where white nationalist apocalypse rhetors rely on false moral clarity to encourage their audience to act and resist welcoming immigrants, other rhetors can challenge that appearance of moral clarity by presenting a competing narrative that makes present the immigrant experience and invites the audience to identify with these immigrants, therefore complicating the moral clarity of the apocalyptic rhetoric.

In their study of refugees seeking asylum in Australia in 2008, Kieren O'Doherty and Martha Augoustinos point out an important implication of nationalism at large: "we feel that it is an alarming course of events that, in a world that increasingly is being forced to become more global in its thinking, Australia is still led by a government that emphasizes differences between nations, rather than commonalities, and national interest above individual security and global cooperation" (590). In an increasingly globalized world, nationalism becomes a more selfish isolationism that prevents both national and international growth and only serves to embolden lines between same and other. White nationalist apocalypse rhetoric exacerbates this division by not only putting nation first, but by prioritizing ethnicity and by not only placing white people above other ethnicities, but also by framing these other communities as enemies, as invaders, as threats. Rhetors employing white nationalist apocalypse rhetors want what Danielle Allen calls

“oneness,” an illusion of unity created only by exclusion (16-18). Patrick Crusius and other violent white nationalists are willing to take extreme measures to preserve this illusory unity of an imagined community whose boundary is defined by whiteness. Instead, we can challenge white nationalist apocalypse rhetoric by working toward Allen’s “wholeness,” a society whose strength lies in its diversity of opinion, of culture, of experience (20).

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