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The Man-pocalypse: *Doomsday Preppers* and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood

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Abstract

This essay argues that recent male performances of disaster preparedness in reality television reiterate a preindustrial model of hegemonic masculinity by staging the plausible “real world” conditions under which manly skills appear necessary for collective survival. Representations of masculinity in uncertain times intensify the masculinity-in-crisis motif to cultivate anticipation of an apocalyptic event that promises a final resolution to male alienation. An examination of Nat Geo’s *Doomsday Preppers* illustrates how these staged performances of everyday life cultivate a dangerous vision of apocalyptic manhood that consummates a fantasy of national virility in the demise of feminine society.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, masculinity crisis, reality TV, apocalyptic rhetoric, *Doomsday Preppers*

Martin Colvill considers himself a warrior. In head-to-toe military camouflage, automatic rifle at his side, Martin tells a *National Geographic* camera crew: “My name Martin means ‘warrior’ or ‘war-like’ individual. I try to fight for what’s right. I don’t like bullies. My greatest fear upon a total economic societal collapse is that I won’t be able to protect my wife.” Displaced by the 2008 mortgage crisis, Martin and his wife Sarah reside in the cab of an open-road truck. But Martin is not of interest to *National Geographic* because of his adaptive post-recessionary lifestyle, rather because he counts himself among the approximately three million Americans who self-identify as “doomsday preppers” (Eells). Martin is, in his words, “preparing to survive the next great depression caused by economic collapse.” Like others who adopt the label, Martin spends his time cultivating food and weapon

atches, learning self-defense, and simulating doomsday scenarios. Martin's apocalyptic performances engender the hypermasculine ethos of contemporary doomsday television. In this emerging brand of reality programming (*Doomsday Preppers*, *Doomsday Castle*, *Apocalypse Preppers*, and *Meet the Preppers*) predominantly white men, such as Martin, are provided a theatrical space to perform their feelings of rage and victimhood, deliver monologues about the collapse of civilization, model their armaments, rehearse paramilitary battles with post-apocalyptic marauders, and exhibit their masculine know-how.

One overarching lesson of doomsday programming is that the future is indefinite, but hegemonic masculinity—aggression, self-reliance, stoicism, competitiveness—remain necessary (Connell, "Masculinities," "Gender and Power"; Connell and Messerschmidt; Hanke; Trujillo). In Martin's grave divinations, the recuperation of traditional manly skill-sets will rebuild America after disaster. While American television audiences are accustomed to seeing their world eviscerated on screen, outlived by small bands of male-led survivors (Gunn), the apocalyptic turn in reality television (RTV) gives viewers purportedly unmediated access to the masculinized survival rituals performed by ordinary Americans. Nat Geo's *Doomsday Preppers* promises to take viewers "into lives of . . . committed preppers who have devised extensive plans, gone to great lengths, and made huge personal sacrifices to guarantee their very survival." Each episode's participants are "ordinary Americans from all walks of life" who are "taking whatever measures necessary to prepare and protect themselves from what they perceive as the fast approaching end of the world as we know it." Unlike spectacular disaster films, *Doomsday Preppers* portrays the manly art of survival as a sensible ritual already practiced by millions of Americans. Drawing from the educational ethos of the Nat Geo brand (Kelly, "Neocolonialism"; Kelly, "Strange/Familiar"), *Doomsday Preppers* invites audiences to emulate "real life" performances of manly survival skills against the background of an uncertain future.

This essay argues that doomsday RTV recuperates hegemonic masculinity by restaging the plausible real world conditions under which the performance of manly labor appears instrumental to collective survival. By hegemonic masculinity I mean the normative attributes that constitute acceptable ways of being a man in American culture, and which position men as dominant and women as subordinate (Connell, *Gender and Power*). Masculinity scholars observes the centrality of cycles of crisis and resolution to the maintenance of male primacy (Hearn; Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia"; Modleski; Robinson). Crises in masculinity are responses to the perceived loss of male privilege where, nonetheless, structural inequalities continue to disadvantage women. Extending these insights, I argue that theatrical performances of masculinity in popular culture have intensified the crisis motif to cultivate anticipation of an apocalyptic event that promises a final resolution to white male alienation. Once a fringe rituals amongst survivalist and white supremacists (Ferber; Mitchell; Lamy), *apocalyptic manhood* is now constituted through mediated performances that confirm the necessity of masculine skills as modern society meets its demise. RTV imbues these everyday life performances with authenticity and reframes apocalyptic manhood as a reasonable expression of contemporary masculinity. I examine Nat Geo's *Doomsday Preppers* to show how the staged performances of everyday life in RTV cultivates a version of apocalyptic manhood that purportedly resolves anomic cycles of crisis. Through

repeated displays of manly preparedness rituals in machine shops, gun ranges, and wilderness, *Doomsday Preppers* constructs hegemonic masculinity as a set of survival tools, an antidote for a crumbling and emasculated society. In a broader context, this analysis also explains how apocalyptic paranoia has contributed to a surge in hypermasculine mass violence in American culture—from the Bundy militia in Oregon to the Planned Parenthood shooting in Colorado Spring—where feelings of male alienation translate into militaristic preparations for an uncertain future.

Performing apocalyptic manhood

The notion that masculinity is a performance is well documented (Ashcraft and Flores; Gilbert; Giesler; Gingrich-Philbrook; Hatfield; Ryalls; Walsh). Working from Butler's concept of gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*) Gingrich-Philbrook writes that manhood consists of "stylized repetitive acts," thus, "an account of repetition will necessarily also account for the necessity for repetition" (22, 26). Masculinity is neither an innate feature nor biological fact but an arrangement of traits and behaviors enacted through embodied repetitions, identifiable in cisgender male bodies (Halberstam). As Hatfield suggests, masculinity gains power through "a cyclical pattern in which bodies become gendered over a period of time" (527). As a specific iteration of contemporary masculinity-in-crisis, apocalyptic manhood is enacted through the adoption of paramilitary aesthetics (camouflage, open-carrying fire arms), use of vernacular language (phrases like "bugging out"), and performative behaviors (stockpiling, training, simulation).

The masculinity crisis thesis suggests that male primacy is sustained by cycles of destabilization/restabilization (Hearn; Modleski; Robinson). The theory proposes that representations of manhood in decline compel men to recuperate conceptions of manliness that contain the threat of feminine power. While "crisis" implies that there are moments at which hegemonic masculinity is open to revision (Connell, "Big Picture"), the cycle is premised on the social fiction that men have been deprived of social status by advances of women, queer communities, and racial minorities (Kellner). While representations of masculinity in jeopardy follow advancements in social equality, men's relative level of gender privilege remains unthreatened. For instance, Rodino-Colochino observes a cacophony of press coverage decrying the embattled status of men despite the continued feminization and racialization of structural poverty. But as Kimmel suggests, crisis is a pretense, "a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves" ("Masculinity as Homophobia," 149). Crisis, then, is less a sign of real material disadvantage than a strategic performance of victimhood.

Although the crisis thesis explains how representations of wounded-ness perpetuate male primacy, the theoretical perspective can be extended to account for masculine performances that attempt to escape cycles of alienation and amelioration. Though men are responsive to threats to temporarily fixed models of manhood, there are contemporary performances that hint at something permanent outside of the crisis cycle. Take for instance what Gibson and Kellner call "warriorism," a post-Vietnam masculinity shared by men who believed they were embattled by secularization, feminism, and multiculturalism.

As Kellner argues, many “men sought compensation for loss of power in warrior fantasies, nurtured by media culture and a whole subculture of pulp literature, guns, conventions, weekend survivalist camps, and an exotic profusion of paramilitary culture” (97). Consummated by apocalyptic fantasies and survivalist rituals, warriorism is an embodied concept of manhood seeking permanent relief from “feminized” society.

Warriorism illuminates how masculinity crisis can be—as Gunn and Beard observe of postmodern apocalyptic rhetoric—both *imminent* and/or *immanent*. Whereas *immanent* crises exist within the masculine subject, *imminent* crises are characterized by external projections of impending male doom. Where the former is a state of unending anomie, the latter posits a telos to the social struggles over gender hierarchies. This distinction is important because different models of masculinity respond to crisis in immanent and/or imminent terms. For instance, the mythopoetic manhood found in Robert Bly’s *Iron John* focuses on the immanent crisis of male selfhood, locating a therapeutic corrective in ancient archetypes and communion with nature (Gingrich-Philbrook; Kimmel, *Manhood*). Mythopoesis stands in contrast to the white male identity politics embodied in warriorism. This more reactionary ideology is premised on the belief that the feminization of society will make traditional masculine skills more necessary as crises accumulate toward imminent destruction. Whereas the former finds resolution within, the latter seeks resolution without. It is, therefore, helpful to distinguish between what type of crisis are addressed by masculine representations.

An attention to types of crises invites a critique and analysis of emerging performances of apocalyptic manhood, an embodied model of masculinity that seeks a permanent resolution to immanent crises of the male self in the imminent collapse of feminized society. Apocalyptic manhood exhibits a hyperawareness of the masculinity crisis motif and finds comfort in rehearsing the apocalypse. The sudden visibility of the doomsday prepper in American popular culture evinces this curious millennial turn in masculinity, an extension of the “take back our country” ethos of warriorism to the premodern return fantasy of apocalyptic culture. Once considered a radical fringe, apocalyptic manhood has become infused into the mainstream of American culture. Right-wing political commentators with millions of followers, including Alex Jones, Glen Beck, and Sean Hannity, all advocate doomsday prepping to their audience (Richardson). Thousands make annual pilgrimages to prepper conventions, theatrical stages where men can enact their apocalyptic fantasies through conspicuous consumption of guns, dehydrated foodstuffs, and underground bunkers (Murphy). Doomsday prepping is a \$500 million a year industry, driven by fears of terrorism, economic collapse, pandemics, natural disasters, and World War III (Feuer).

American popular culture stokes male prepper fantasies in an array of doomsday reality programs, as well as in dozens of shows about extreme survival trials (*Alone, Dual Survival, Man vs. Wild, Naked and Afraid, Survivor Man, The Alaska Experiment*) and scripted television about post-apocalyptic survivalism (*Jericho, Revolution, The Walking Dead*). Although apocalyptic theology has a long history in American political thought (Brummett; O’Leary), the recent intensification of apocalypticism in news, film, and television has cultivated widespread anticipation of world’s end (Chernus). A recent poll found that one in seven Americans believe they will witness the end of the world in their lifetime (Michaud). A *National*

Geographic survey found that 41% of respondents believed that preparing for doomsday was a smarter investment than contributing to retirement (“Doomsday Prepper Survey”).

Though men and women alike share in apocalyptic dread, doomsday prepping is by-and-large a masculinist culture. Preppers lambast the effeminacy of entitlement culture, valorizing in contrast the self-made man of pre/industrial civilization as the only gender modality that guarantees survival. Indeed, the rhetoric of “feminine dependency” is one of the key ways that conservative men performatively enact their identities. Gibson and Heyes argue that conservatives frame liberal support for community building as feminine in order to lay claim to hegemony masculinity. Hence, celebrating independence from government is a “conservative masculinist script that denigrates liberal agents and ideas through their feminization” (237). Prepper culture is consummated through masculine performances of self-sufficiency and paramilitary violence, including preparedness simulations, complete with props and costumes such as camouflage and military weapons. Prepper discourse encourages the development of masculine-coded abilities, including mechanical labor, wilderness training, and weapons proficiency. Preppers are animated by calls to “remasculinize” America, a discourse premised on the assumption that since the 1960s, society has become increasingly feminized and dependent on government (Jeffords, *Remasculinization*). Protest against the feminization of society advances the misconceptions that relative gains in social equality have made the nation “soft,” less animated by authority, competition, and aggression. Ducat contends that right-wing movements capitalize on fear of the “mommy” state, an overly sentimental and bureaucratic society that personifies weakness (231).

What is novel about this current iteration of apocalyptic manhood is that it has been translated into a form of entertainment media that is constructed to communicate authenticity. While RTV is a carefully crafted simulation of reality, it is a format designed to present everyday lives as if the camera were not present (Carroll; Clarkson). Hence, doomsday prepping and other extreme performances of manhood benefit from being presented in a medium that belabors to look genuine. First, Nat Geo imports the authoritative documentary techniques of ethnographic filmmaking into RTV to provide “realistic” portrait of people as they live (Kelly, “Strange/Familiar”; Murray). *Doomsday Preppers* derives its sincerity from a combination of first-person interviews, camera observation, authoritative narration, stock footage of natural disasters, and expert assessments. The mixture of techniques offers the audience multiple access points to the subjects’ reality, to see not only how they live but also how world appears from their viewpoint. Hence, Rademacher and Kelly argue that RTV has evolved into a powerful platform for authentic male performances. This claim builds from Oullette and Hay’s observation that RTV emphasizes neoliberal values such as self-reliance, self-help, and small government. Indeed, the genre’s focus on the labor of ordinary men provides “realistic” models for performing hegemonic masculinity in uncertain circumstances.

Second, RTV imparts the illusion that participants are *not* performing, that the camera is documenting organic “everyday life performances” (Goffman, *Everyday Life*, 70). This presumption of authenticity elides the fact that participants are actors in a setting arranged like a theatrical stage. Fox observes how “producers use editing to construct tales and characters, and, in the midst of participation, reality TV personalities edit themselves” (192).

Similar to Goffman's discussion of everyday life performances, some RTV participant's behaviors are constructed as "real" or otherwise natural. Conversely, contrived performances are those that seem transparently constructed wherein the subject is conspicuously acting for the camera. In Dubrofsky and Ryall's terms those who "perform not performing" are conferred more legitimacy within the structure of RTV (396). RTV scholars contend that the normalization of surveillance through RTV accounts for what kinds of performances count as genuine (Andrejevic; Couldry, Dubrofsky and Hardy). Dubrofsky and Hardy write that realness "is acting as if you are not under surveillance when you are actually being observed, performing is attributed to those who cannot" (375). While all participants perform, those behaviors that reveal the contrived nature of RTV are constructed as "mere" performances.

This theorization of surveillance explains how masculine performances on *Doomsday Preppers* appear authentic. In particular, scholars who have examined race in RTV argue that performances of white male identity are often constructed as more authentic than racial minorities because whiteness itself operates with seeming naturalness (Boylorn; Dubrofsky, "Harem"; Dubrofsky and Hardy). Like the ideal identity of RTV participants, whiteness is enacted through effortless performances from the privileged subject position of being unmarked by identity (Hopson). The normativity that characterizes white identity is reflected in the presumed realness of white participants acting natural while under surveillance. The authenticity of the program's male subjects is enhanced by how well their performances align with constructed qualities of white masculinity. The whiteness of the program's participants builds on the implicit credibility afforded to those without explicit racial signifiers. For example, Boylorn contends that whereas white participants identity need not be identified, black women in RTV have to actively labor for authenticity and speak through the stereotypes that discipline their identities. Similarly, I suggest that *Doomsday Preppers* builds authenticity by featuring subjects whose white male identity imbues their on camera performances with the same "realness" afforded to them by virtue of their privileged subject position. RTV projects "an imagined reality" that makes "narrative arguments about socio-cultural ideas" (Edwards 227). RTV makes conjectures about what kinds of identity performances are afforded the presumption of authenticity. With its lack of race and gender diversity, *Doomsday Preppers* frames the performance of prepping as a legitimate expression of white male rage.

Finally, RTV helps promulgate apocalyptic manhood because it purports to offer multiple access points to everyday life performances. This level of access cultivates a sense of intimacy with the participants, drawing from what TV scholars have noted is the feminine coding of the in-home screen (Spigel). With soft close-ups of emotional confessions and detailed portraits of domestic life, the program coopts the feminine intimacy of television to build rapport between participants and viewers. Yet, the program subtly recodes the television as masculine by importing the conventions of action film that hail a male spectator. The introduction to each episode includes action-style zoom-close ups, a blockbuster soundtrack of loud drums, and dramatic glitch aesthetics wherein the screen flickers and digitizes to simulate the impending failure of technology. These action-movie aesthetics maintain the maleness of the big screen as it coopts the feminine intimacy of the small

screen. Of course, as Corner warns, scholars should mind the distinctions between everyday life and screen performances; however, RTV routinely blurs these performative boundaries, particularly when programs remove the host and interviewer from the screen to make interactions feel intimate. Educational RTV re-presents staged performances as if they were all “not-performed.”

The real men of *Doomsday Preppers*

Doomsday Preppers is an hour-long documentary-style RTV program that chronicles individuals who devote a significant portion of their life to disaster preparedness. Each program is divided between two to four different participants. The program relies on male “voice-of-God narration,” or verbal commentary that directly addresses the spectator, and on-screen textual prompts to provide background information on each subject (Nichols, 37). Though participants address the camera to explain their apocalyptic preparations, the interviewer remains silent and off-screen. Each segment begins by explaining the participant’s everyday rituals, followed by discussion and simulations of their particular vision of the apocalypse. Stock footage of mass violence and natural disasters are integrated to help audiences visualize global disasters. Next, episodes document the subjects’ “preps,” including food pantries, weapons, and security. The camera follows the participants into simulated tests of their preparedness, military training exercises, attacks on the participant’s home, and escapes to safe locations. The producers employ Practical Preppers, a disaster preparedness firm, to grade the subject’s level of readiness. Finally, each case concludes with a brief expert assessment of the likelihood of each apocalyptic scenario.

Since 2011, *Doomsday Preppers* has become the centerpiece of Nat Geo’s apocalyptic re-branding (Lactis). Although Nat Geo continues to employ the slogan “inspiring people to care about the planet since 1888,” the network’s most popular programming simulates the planet’s destruction (*Apocalypse 101*, *American Blackout*, *Doomsday Castle*, *Forecast: Disaster*, and *How to Survive the End of the World*). *Doomsday Preppers* has emerged as one of Nat Geo’s most successful and highly rated series. About 1.3 million viewers watched the Season 2 premier, the highest rated premier in the network’s history. The show is particularly popular with men (60%) with an average age of 44 (Lactis). The executive producers contend that 9/11, Hurricane Sandy, and the Japanese tsunami account for the public’s fascination with the program (Passy). *Doomsday Preppers* also benefits from the historic credibility of the National Geographic Society (NGS), its magazine and television network. The NGS has also long-played a role in constructing national manhood. Bloom argues the NGS rose to prominence because its rhetoric consummated Theodore Roosevelt’s vision of the sporting man/adventurer who promised to recuperate the virile national manhood of preindustrial America. *Doomsday Preppers* returns the network to NGS’s roots by simulating the importance of rugged manhood.

I analyze masculine performances throughout the first two seasons wherein tropes are established and elaborated. I attend to the interplay between dialogue, narration, simulations, mise-en-scène, and on-camera performances to show how apocalyptic manhood emerges as a sensible ideal. I organize the analysis around how the program constructs the performance of male labor, fatherly know-how, manly rituals, and feminine domesticity.

Each of these elements is bolstered by the show's construction of the participants as performing as they would even if the cameras were not present. Authenticity is constructed through "unconscious production of observable trustworthiness and earnestness of character" that develops from RTV characters "acting" natural while being observed (Dubrofsky and Hardy, 396). The presentation of participants "performing not performing" not only invites audience identification with their extreme fantasies but also provides an instructional model for enacting hegemonic masculinity. When participants play out apocalyptic scenarios, the program's realistic veneer gives the male participant's "imagined realities" the presumption of realness.

The value of male labor

The show responds to the decline in masculine labor by showing images of men putting their skills back to work; putatively "real men" who toil in the real world. If, as Boylorn suggests, "reality television offers a supposed lens into the everyday experiences, thoughts, and actions in the lives of participants," glimpses of participants reclaiming masculine labor in their homes and workplaces provides a convincing portrait of how authentic manliness is performed (423). In episodes that feature male-headed households, the camera displays male artifice in traditionally masculine spaces: the home garage, machine shop, and primitive wilderness. Male characters show off their working-class skills: welding, automotive repair, mechanical engineering, construction, woodwork, farming, fishing, weapons manufacturing, hunting, among others. The program's male participants show off their homemade gadgets and ingenious methods of cultivating self-sufficiency. After displaying their pre/industrial skills, participants conduct tests that confirm the durability of their "preps." Here, I analyze the various stages for manly performances, illustrating how the program constructs (1) the male-headed household as a model for economic self-sufficiency, (2) the garage as a laboratory of masculinity, and (3) the wilderness as a male proving grounds.

First, the show depicts the household of the future as a site of production where men lead and delegate physical tasks. The intimacy of each family home or business is essential to the program's construction of authentic manliness. As Goffman notes, everyday life performances always take place against a background, "furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, with, or upon it" (22). The working home of the post-apocalyptic future creates the ideal context for performing manly labor. For instance, Dennis Evers (S1, E2) is introduced to the audience through a montage of gun shooting, wood chopping, lathe work, and welding. He tells the camera:

Everyone has a job and an assignment and they know how to do it. My oldest son Tim is in charge of hunting and security, my daughter Jenny and her husband Pat are in charge of fuel, Nate and Betsy deal with communications, Ricky knows how to weld and helps me with the engineering side of things, John is currently training to be an emergency responder. The importance of delegating labor when it hits the fan is no person can do everything, I can only be in one place at one time.

Dennis oversees an efficient system of economic production based on a fantasy of complete self-sufficiency. The Evers' family is depicted as an exemplar of a gendered division of labor closely associated with the preindustrial American family. Whereas the women of the family are shown in the pantry and kitchen, or gathering supplies, the men are shown manufacturing weapons, building security systems, and inventing gadgets in the home garage. The camera peers over Dennis's shoulder as he labors in his machine shop, capturing what appears to be the unrehearsed daily routine of the male prepper. The camera closes in on his face to capture his intense concentration and engineering acumen. Dennis's machine shop is a stage, a backdrop for him to perform the valuable role of men in the working household of the future.

Like all other participants, Dennis directly addresses the camera only during interview segments. The remainder of the program documents his everyday activities, as they would supposedly transpire without the camera. Hence, the audience is treated to two distinct performances: the day-in-a-life and the confessional. In the former, Dennis shows the audience what it's like for him to manage the household labor. The camera is attentive to his gestures, movements, and dialogue as he works in the machine shop and assesses the value of his children's work. As Dennis critiques his son's bow-and-arrow design, the audience is invited to vicariously experience what it is like to manage a prepper household. The intimacy of witnessing "organic" family encounters helps convey the relatability of the participant's extreme lifestyle. The latter performance builds sincerity by providing the subjects space to explain their performances. Dennis's interview takes place in the machine shop, his tools the manly props of his one-man act. His workshop stage corroborates his monologue on the importance of delegating family labor. Both performances build audience identification and attest to the subject's sincerity. The episode concludes with scenes of a commonplace everyday dinner. Like the image of the traditional nuclear family, Dennis heads the table and evaluates the group's daily chores, delegating tasks for the next morning. As the episode concludes, Dennis explains that to survive "we need to come together as a family." This portrait of the laboring household not only sutures working-class labor to the success of the family but also reframes prepping as a natural expression of fatherly duty.

Next, the program portrays suburban garages as laboratories of masculine ingenuity. Here, the program relies on masculine stereotypes about the inherent value of physical labor to render the participant's performances authentic. Tim Ralston (S1, E3) is depicted in his two-car garage happily testing improvised weapons and assembling "bug out" bags. Pat Brabble's (S1, E3) interviews also take place in his garage, where a display of ammunition, tools, foodstuffs, and the American flag frame the shot. Brabble, too, is routinely depicted modifying weapons and making ammunition. Jim D (S2, E11) is shown pouring sweat over his perfect escape vehicle ("the behemoth"). Jim's garage is arranged as an automotive laboratory where he enacts his road warrior fantasy. Other participants have converted their businesses into prepping factories. Riley Cook (S1, E6) is introduced through a montage that switches between interactions with his daughters and intense manual labor at his welding business. Riley discloses:

In most aspects I'm a very typical American. I have a full-time job. I'm married and have children. We go to work and get our paycheck at the end of the week. We look forward to a vacation. But one of my primary concerns as a father and a husband is will our America Dream be there in the near future for our children, for ourselves?

Folded into American Dream mythology, Riley's monologue reframes male labor as a fatherly responsibility. His fatherly motivations now self-evident, repeated images of Riley welding infer a strong connection between the laboring male body and the survival of the nuclear family. This motif recurs throughout the series. For example, the narrator declares that Glen Rogers (S2, E7) has acquired skills such as making gunpowder because he "hopes this skill will protect his family." Another subject calling himself "Mr. Wayne" (S1, E11) is filmed in his workshop where he "spends hours tinkering," making bullets and bombs to protect his family from a Chinese invasion. His physical skills are framed as fatherly assets, well suited to the task of family survival. Indeed, none of these activities appear extraordinary because they are only extensions of appropriate everyday life performances for working-class men. What might otherwise seem to be extreme preparations transform into natural extensions of male identity.

Finally, the program's male subjects perform their physical skills in wildlife settings. These episodes use nature as a proving ground for male skills, a vital backdrop for the performance of Nat Geo's frontier manhood. For instance, the narrator praises Christopher Nyerges (S1, E1) for his botanical skills as he is filmed foraging for food among the local flora and fauna of Los Angeles. His performance is made more convincing by his willingness to eat a meal composed of found items. Allen and Franco (S2, E5) are portrayed as caring fathers because they have harmonized with nature to feed their family. Meanwhile, the program's experts compliment John Major (S1, E9) for teaching his children to survive by consuming insects. Doug (S2, E13) proves himself to Practical Preppers by using boulders to protect his doomsday bunker. Michael James Patrick Douglas (S1, E5) demonstrates his fatherly credentials by taking his children on survival retreats into the Maine wilderness. Doug Huffman (S1, E7) teaches children at a survival school, using his collection of camouflage to blend into the natural environment. Bryan Smith (S2, E8) is commended as the ultimate frontiersman for his display of wilderness ingenuity on his large estate. As Bryan declares: "I've hunted wild boar, I've wrestled alligators, and I've lived in the jungles of Costa Rica. And once I've had to shoot a man in self-defense."

The program's authenticity is belied by the fact that Nat Geo producers sometimes coax participants to perform acts that conform to their extreme impressions of wilderness survival. One participant (Chris Petrovich) refused to appear on the show after the producers asked him to eat an iguana (Kamph). Craig Compeau (S2, E14), who admitted that he agreed to be on the program to promote his shelter company, complained that the producers staged their Alaskan wilderness hunts to give the impression that he was an extremist (Black). These experiences point to the contrived character of these "authentic" wilderness encounters and how the producers coach subjects to perform. Here, what Goffman calls "frame slippage" reveals how the producers belabor "reality" to fit their preconceived assumptions (Frame Analysis). Slippages highlight how these performances are crafted to look as

if the camera is not present. The program coaches, teases, and edits performances of masculinity to craft a particular narrative. The program's ability to convey that its male participants are "performing not performing" communicates that doomsday prepping is a natural expression contemporary manhood.

Father knows best

The program provides men with the opportunity to perform fatherly know-how. The concept of personal responsibility unfolds when the subjects address the camera in one-on-one interviews. These interviews give the participant's an opportunity to narrate their everyday life, hence, corroborating the performances analyzed in the previous section. The participant's direct address of the camera helps confirm that their commitment to prepping as a fatherly duty is sincere. The interview contextualizes their performances as the fulfillment of their paternal responsibility rather than extreme behaviors coaxed by producers. Here, I pay attention to how the program's male participants engage in *show* and *tell* to communicate fatherly know-how. Fathers both ritualistically simulate tests of their advanced preparations as well as directly address the camera to explain the importance of fatherhood.

One recurring claim is that prepping represents a primal male instinct to protect the family. Jules Dervaes (S1 E3) explains, "in the years to come I don't want my family to turn around and say 'Dad: why didn't you do something?'" Larry Hall (S1, E4) asserts "when you become a parent, suddenly you are not the most important thing anymore. It makes me feel responsible to prepare." Snake Blocker (S2, E9) adds "I need to be a responsible husband . . . I, too, must be strong for the people around me." Paul Haswell (S1, E1) concurs, "I think you need to be responsible for yourself and your family. To do anything less is a criminal act." These examples illustrate how prepping is portrayed as a sensible commitment when it is performed as parental instinct. These personal confessions often give way to a series of aggressive declarations of paternal rights and direct questioning of the audience's commitment. Pat Brabble asserts: "You should be able to protect your family with your hand guns." Similarly, John Major asserts, "I'd protect my family by all means possible, and I don't feel I need permission from anyone to do that." Mike Mester (S1, E6) takes a more aggressive approach, interrogating the viewer: "Are you going to sit back and wait for the cavalry? They may never come. So, what are you going to do about it? Why don't you start to prepare? Because it's your personal responsibility." Barry (S1, E10), too, addresses the audience: "Who's gonna take care of your family if you can't?" Ron Hubbard (S2, E8) also asks emphatically "How would YOU protect your family?! Do you have a plan?" The repetition of forceful declarations of the right to self-defense ostensibly berates the male spectator to pursue aggressive measures to protect loved ones. Moreover, these declarations transform the participants into educators whose lives are models of how parental responsibility can be performatively enacted.

Throughout the interview segment, "dependency" on others is considered weakness. Jules contends, "everyone else seems to be looking to be dependent. Dependent on government, dependent on corporations, dependent on banks, dependent on others. But we are fighting for ourselves." Kevin O'Brien (S1, E4) agrees, "we're all a little too dependent on our government, too dependent on our local grocery store." Bryan Smith brags, "I was

raised to not rely on anybody. Don't rely on your government, don't rely on your neighbors, you count on yourself first." Tim Ralston adds, "Anyone who does not take their self-preservation to heart is doomed for failure. I refuse to be a victim." Repeated ad nauseam, dependency develops into a discursive shorthand for naiveté, effeminacy, irresponsibility, and child-like vulnerability. These participants use their apocalyptic expectations as a metaphor for what they perceive to be the end of hegemonic masculinity, and, consequently, the necessity of its return.

Note how these male subjects attribute the coming collapse of society to the adoption of so-called feminine traits. They describe civilization as "weak," "dependent," and "thin." Jay Blevins calmly asserts, "There is a very thin fabric that holds together a civilized society." Jason Day (S1, E11) also assumes, "Every great nation has always come to an end. America is just the same way." John Major presumes that "when law of the jungle reigns, that's when every individual will be responsible for their own security." In each of these comments, the end of the world is taken for granted because civilization (weak, fragile, dependent) cannot contain humanity's primal instincts (aggression, competition, violence). Lindsay (S2, E11) makes this distinction clear when she explains, "back in the day everyone was prepared; they weren't dependent on others. Preppers today are like our ancestors used to be." Her husband Larry agrees, "there is so much fragility in our system and it could collapse at any time." These participants anticipate a disastrous end to society's experiment with feminine values. Their certainty in an apocalypse event is hopeful in as much as it means that fathers will return to preeminence.

After the interview, the participants are provided space to show how fatherly authority is embodied. The portrait of Jay Blevins is an exemplary case-in-point. This episode begins with a medium shot of Jay standing in front of his family and suburban home, dressed in a police-issue black uniform, brandishing a menacing AR-15 assault rifle—his costume and props. He declares: "We're preparing for the breakdown of social order following an economic collapse." The episode depicts Jay performing a variety of masculine roles that confirm his fatherly authority. In one scene, Jay performs a priestly role by leading a Bible study in his living room. Next, Jay absconds to the garage where he adopts a soldier persona, mimicking military-style attacks directly at the camera. This scene is followed by shots of Jay leading a neighborhood prepping organization in strategic home fortifications. He explains in fatherly terms: "I love my kids so much, I love my wife so much, I never want to see them hurt or to go without, so if a crowd were to ever come to my house, I want to defend my family." The "day in the life" portrait of Jay demonstrates a recurring pattern marked by the camera's sole emphasis on the priorities of the male head of household.

While Jay protects the suburban enclave, Brent's (S2, E9) "doomsday castle" consummates a paternal fantasy of feudal domestic life. In the narrator's words, Brent's planning to "get medieval" when the world ends. Brent has begun construction of a fortress in the Carolina Mountains that he hopes to bequeath to a male heir contingent upon a series of tests. This particular episode emphasizes intergenerational masculinity, or the imperative to pass on male survival skills to the heirs of post-apocalyptic society. Dressed in camouflage, Brent is shown putting his adult children through a series of extreme challenges to prove their loyalty. Embracing the medieval motif, the program positions Brent as a "king"

choosing his successor. The episode has a particular lightheartedness, as many of his children possess none of their father's physical skills. He emasculates his sons for their lack of outdoor skills and weapons training, while chiding his daughters for being "more primpers than preppers." The lesson is that Brent's children must unlearn their civilized femininity and seek tutelage in dark age-era survivalism. As Brent's children endure extreme survival trials, the audience is invited to see archaic masculine virtues as a repository of doomsday ingenuity.

Here, Brent's authenticity is bolstered by how the show portrays the reluctant skepticism and inexperience of his children. Whereas Brett performs his sincerity by dressing in military fatigues, conducting survival tests, and testifying to his certainty in Armageddon, his family's performances appear contrived for the sake of the program. That is, Brent's children express reluctance to both Brent's lifestyle and taking part in a program that requires them to demonstrate survival skills they clearly do not possess. For instance, Brent berates his oldest son (Brent Jr.) to prove his proficiency with an assault rifle despite his expressed reticence. After scoffing at his father's demands he recklessly fires the weapon, almost injuring others. Brent's advanced skills, along with his displays of sincerity, contrast with his son's contrived effort to play along with the show's premises. Meanwhile, his daughters Ashley, Lindsey, and Dawn-Marie spend more time attending to their appearance than completing their chores. Yet, their reluctant participation, and sometimes defiance, contributes to Brent's ability to "perform not performing" by showing the difference between committed preppers and naïve skeptics. Through juxtaposition, his children's clumsy and unenthusiastic performances illuminate Brent's more sincere commitment to his post-apocalyptic kingdom. The differences in their levels of sincerity create another frame slippage, where acts expose performance as performance. Nonetheless, frame slippage contributes to the authenticity of Brent's performance by providing audiences with a framework for evaluating what RTV constructs as an authentic performance. In the process, Brent's displays of hypercompetitive machismo become conflated with seriousness and hard work.

In other episodes, the program's participants simulate survival rituals to demonstrate the importance of fathers. This is most exemplified by rugged frontiersman Michael James Patrick Douglas. Though Michael tests his daughter's preparedness in the home, he subjects his youngest son to a series of trials in the surrounding forest. When his son completes the trials, Michael explains to him:

You're entering a new stage of your life. You're no longer a little kid anymore. You're turning into a young man. This is your umbilical cord. It represents your attachment to me and mom. But today you proved that you're a survivor and that you're ready to take the next step.

He invites his son to cast his preserved umbilical cord into the fire to confirm his induction into the cult of apocalyptic manhood. Reminiscent of Bly's mythopoetic manhood, Michael and his son perform the ritual behaviors required to locate archaic male archetypes. This portrayal of ritual frames survivalism as the embodiment of the kind of independence that

accompanies adulthood. Like Michael's son, the audience is encouraged to "grow up" and develop the manly skills required to survive.

To this end, the program also valorizes primitive rites of passage, such as hunting and animal sacrifice. These rituals are premised on many of the participant's insistence that the post-collapse world will return to a hunter-gatherer society. The inference is that men will be charged with the primal task of hunting game. For example, after commanding his son to kill one of the family's goats, Tom Perez boasts to Steven M. Vanasse (S2, E4) that his child is now a man because he made "his first kill." The kill is ritualistically staged for the camera. Tom's son is compelled to kill and butcher a goat for the camera with little detail spared. Similar to Michael's wilderness trials, Steven and Tom's insistence that their children hunt and kill animals provides visual confirmation that prepping is a primal rite of passage through which boys become men.

In summary, these episodes begin with a beleaguered father/husband's confession of his apocalyptic anxiety, followed by scenes of everyday life during which participants move fluidly between masculine archetypes (father, husband, laborer, soldier, and priest), and conclude with a series of staged preparedness rituals. These performances enact the fears expressed in the one-on-one interviews, providing audiences with examples of how to translate apocalyptic fears into productive models of self-made manhood. Lest the audience believe their performances are acted for the camera, the one-on-one interviews provide participants with the opportunity to prove their sincerity.

Stand by your man

Female participants typically move from reluctant to sincere performances of support for men. To this extent, women are relegated menial tasks. Whereas young men are subjected to specific rites of passage that fortify their skills, young women must be trained to accept their roles. Men are responsible for making sure women are prepared to support their fathers and husbands. For instance, Jason Day (S1, E10) is shown routinely forcing his daughters to conduct gas-mask drills, John Major enlists his daughters in preparing the house for a terrorist attack, and Braxton Southwick (S2, E1) involves his daughters in regular escape simulations to their rural cabin. In one of the most extreme cases, Johnny O (S2, E2) conditions his wife and sister-in-law to prepare for an attack on their home, calling his efforts "not really tests we run as much as it's games we play." Though women are involved in the prepping, the episodes tend to foreground men's need for ritual. Episodes featuring women portray their preparedness training as either fulfillments of wifely duties or manifestations of obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Often expressing initial skepticism, wives and daughters are encouraged to recant and acquiesce to the importance of disaster preparedness. This transformation invites the incredulous female viewer to be more open-minded to the manly arts of preparedness. In these episodes, women often begin by complaining that prepping is a waste of time; however, conclude with concessions to their husband's wisdom. Tim Ralston observes his wife's initial resistance yet insists that she finally conceded to his wisdom. He explains, "in the beginning my wife was not on the same page as I was," but "the more information I gave to her it opened her eyes to the potential threats that are out there." Mr. Wayne brags, "because of the popularity of your series, my wife has come around and supports what I

do." Although Bob Kay's (S2, E6) wife routinely questions his extreme spending on preparedness, their episode concludes with his insistence that "she does appreciate that being prepared is important." In some cases, the narrator declares their support. For instance, the voiceover declares that Jason Day's wife, Tanya, "supports his passion but it's meant some adjustments." Jason, like Bradford Franks (S1, E7) and Bob Kay, puts his wife through extreme simulations despite her visible discomfort. In other episodes, reluctant wives seem to freely confess their ultimate support their husband's efforts. Franco's wife admits that she is otherwise helpless, therefore, "I'm glad I have a husband that's doing that for us." After some resistance, Snake Blocker's wife Sarah admits, "I've realized the importance of being prepared." Despite some hesitation, Jeremy's (S1, E8) wife Kelly divulges "As long as I've got my son in lap and my husband in the driver seat that's all I need." The series depicts men as natural teachers who must help women understand the importance of preparedness.

To the extent that women are active participants, it is either in fulfillment of traditionally feminine domesticity or as an obsessive extension of motherly instincts. Constructed as the domestic caretakers of the post-apocalyptic home, women's roles are heavily circumscribed. In a segment featuring Colleen Bishop (S1, E2), the voiceover explains that she is "a Utah housewife who believes a catastrophic economic collapse will cause food shortages and unleash panic across the country. But can she use her passion for cooking and her stockpiles of food to survive doomsday?" Although the episode references a variety of other skills she has developed, a large portion is devoted to her pantry skills. Meanwhile, her husband is depicted performing his fighting skills and elaborate plans for home security. In Kathy Harrison's (S1, E2) case, the narrator observes that "on her picturesque farm you are more likely to find herbs than guns," suggesting that female preppers prioritize feminine care labor over masculine violence. Women are often interviewed in front of pantries and kitchens, whereas men are more likely to be pictured in front of the household gun collection.

In other episodes, female prepping is portrayed as a hysterical manifestation of feminine instincts. Janet Spencer (S1, E9) is shown frantically stockpiling food while her husband is out of the house. Meanwhile, Donna Nash (S1, E4) is shown hoarding medical supplies and obsessively scrubbing her house for germs in preparation for a pandemic. Likewise, Laura Kunzie (S1, E10) is depicted irritating her family with quarantine drills and rants about germs. Other female motivations for prepping extend to the irrational, as only women express supernatural beliefs and prophetic visions. Amanda Bobbin (S2, E11) suggests that she takes direction from a ghost name Greta, and Dianne Rogers (S1, E7) preps because of a recurring apocalyptic nightmare she believes to be a premonition. Thus, the program ostensibly contrasts male rationality with female hysteria. Men are sensibly concerned with the family's safety, women are obsessive and overbearing.

In these segments, *Doomsday Preppers* relies on the archetype of the hysterical woman that is common throughout RTV. Hysteria is a cultural construction that disciplines women who diverge from normative performances of gender identity.¹ As Meyer, Fallah, and Wood explain, hysterical women in RTV are constructed as irrational, out-of-control, and mentally distressed. They argue, "this framing is distinctly gendered, as madness is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine, even when experienced by men"

(219). Attributing women's transgressive behavior to madness is a way of dismissing and, ultimately, disciplining their behavior. This theorization of hysteria also accounts for why male preppers are constructed as sincere, whereas women have irrational obsessions with cleanliness. The recurring lesson is that "men who surrender to their desires and passions become geniuses; women become subjects of their own self-destruction, eliciting at best pity and sympathy" (220).

Indeed, many of *Doomsday Preppers* female participants are portrayed as obsessive germophobes. The narrator introduces Donna Nash's segment by quipping "Like many suburban moms, Donna likes to keep a clean house, but it's not because she's expecting company." The camera cuts to scenes of Donna repeatedly disinfecting her kitchen counters and vacuuming her pristine carpet. Ostensibly, Donna should be attending to her normal motherly duties instead of stockpiling disaster kits and forcing her children to endure quarantine drills. Similarly, Laura Kunzie simulates a quarantine in which she forces her visibly reluctant son to shower outside, stay in a barricaded bedroom, and remain home from school. The producer's selection of female germophobes contributes to a portrait of women who prepare as overly concerned, smothering, and compulsive. Though male prepping is portrayed as a natural extension of manly duty, female prepping is a transgressive gender performance.

In other case, the program reduces women to survival accessories or resourceful accompaniments for the single male survivalist. In Brian Murdoch's case (S2, E3), the narrator tells viewers "the one prep he needed most of all was a wife" and "he believes that his new bride Tatania will be the perfect prepper wife." The episode depicts Tatania's arrival in the United States from Colombia, followed by her difficult adjustment to prepping. Brian puts Tatania through an apocalyptic simulation to assess her weaknesses. Despite her obvious discomfort, she submits to Brian's wishes. He laments, "Tatiana's got a little learning to do, but soon we'll be married and I know we'll be happier." In Jeff Flaningham's segment (S2, E13) the audience is witness to the prepper's travails in online dating. Jeff brings a date back to his decommissioned missile silo but is ultimately unsuccessful in securing his ideal prepping partner. Though more lighthearted, Jeff's dates are presented as auditions for a part in his apocalyptic drama more than a genuine search for romance. The quasi-romantic valence of these episodes reduces women to little more than their domestic labor value.

There are exceptions. Three episodes feature single women with varying commitment to prepping. While a counterpoint to the hypermasculine image of survivalism, these episodes ultimately confirm that the apocalypse will make women's independence extraordinarily difficult. Meagan Hurwitt (S1, E1) is constructed as a "young independent urban woman" who "loves cocktails with friends" but also someone who must abandon her frivolous lifestyle, including fashion and nightlife, to survive. The episode contrasts carefree images of Meagan swinging on homemade stripper pole with shots of weapons training and fitness regimens. Meagan's survival as a single woman hinges on her ability to adapt masculine skill sets. But, in the post-apocalyptic world, women's independence is a liability. Margaret Ling (S2, E7) corroborates this perspective when she asserts, "women are the most likely to be victimized." These examples could be read as expressions of women's empowerment; however, in the context of the program where a vast majority of the women

acquiesce to their natural roles of feminine, these participants appear anomalous. Moreover, their independence is presented as much more of a challenge than an asset.

Are you prepared?

This essay offers two important contributions to performance studies, masculinity, and RTV. First, I illustrate how layering of “authentic” performances in RTV formats provides natural portraits of how men adapt to an uncertain future. The performativity of RTV draws from and mirrors the performativity of gender itself, of which Butler argues, is “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (“Performative” 531). Doomsday RTV is a “meta-performance” of hypermasculine subjectivity that consummates apocalyptic fantasies of permanent male primacy by locating subjects who live the imaginary as their reality (Ashcraft and Flores). Second, this essay extends the crisis/resolution model of masculine performativity. The apocalyptic turn in masculine representations purports to offer the ultimate fortification against threats to hegemonic masculinity. While in one sense the apocalyptic turn is responsive to the decline in traditionally masculine professions, in another it is the byproduct of an accumulation of (perceived) white male injuries wherein all challenges to men are framed as assaults on gender entitlement. I have argued that apocalyptic manhood constructs *imminent* disasters as solutions to *immanent* crisis, or seemingly permanent answers to the recurring crisis of the male self that persist without resolution. Performances of apocalyptic manhood are an illusory attempt to fix the meaning masculinity against a background of disorientation.

Doomsday Preppers offers a vision of the future survived by white men who embody rugged national virility. Apocalyptic manhood requires labor, ultimately consummated through ritual performances that visibly demonstrate the male subject’s preparedness to return to pre/industrial America. Doomsday RTV authenticates the apocalyptic turn in hegemonic masculinity, the notion that the recuperation of manhood will be found in the inevitable demise of civilization. Apocalyptic manhood is the fantasy that beneath modernity exists an essential, timeless, and sustainable version of manhood. The looming threat of the world’s end produces not only anxiety but also opportunity. Previously, men had to “wander through anthropological literature like postmodern tourists” to find premodern archetypes of authentic manhood (Kimmel “Manhood” 319). But in RTV culture, old archetypes are “lived” and imbued with the qualities of everyday life performances. Audiences are invited, temporarily, to welcome the apocalypse as social vision of masculine necessity.

Yet, the vision of the end in doomsday RTV is an inadequate and dangerous response to the “masculinity crisis.” Seeking relief in imminent destruction does little to ameliorate the anomic crisis of the male self. There is no permanent or sustainable version of manhood that escapes the slippery instability of the subject in late modernity. The salve of a future without women challenging male primacy elides the inherent instability of hegemonic masculinity itself. The myth that there is a pre-performative gender identity found, ironically, in the rituals of the self-made man, masks the fluidity of masculinity.

There are broader political implications that require urgent attention. Unfortunately, men act on the fantasies cultivated in popular media. Hypermasculine warriors perform

their identity through aggressive performances, from adopting the paramilitary aesthetics of the open-carry movement to the wild-west mentality of the Bundy clan at their armed siege of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. The proliferation of white men enacting their warrior fantasies through spectacular acts of mass violence points to the real dangers of this millennial turn in masculinity. A boiling cauldron of white rage, apocalyptic manhood has the potential to legitimize extreme acts of masculine violence. For instance, on November 30, 2015, Robert Dear killed a police officer and two civilians at a Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood clinic. During his arraignment he declared himself a “warrior for the babies.” Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza was immersed in survivalist culture, his family stockpiling food and arms in preparation for catastrophe. And Charleston shooter Dylan Roof legitimized his actions as a hypermasculine response to the sexual threat posed by people of color. Roof is a chilling embodiment of apocalyptic manhood. He announced his intention to induce a racialized doomsday event that would restore white men to their proper place in the race/gender hierarchy. Popular culture’s fascination with the hypermasculine male prepper fans the flames of male discontent. It is imperative to produce alternative models of masculinity that approach the performative nature of manhood as an opportunity to eradicate racial and gendered violence rather than anathema to the imminent destruction of liberal society.

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Note

1. By “hysterical” I mean the clinical sense of a subject who becomes the object of desire s/he believes the other desires, sometimes characterized by emotional excess or attention-seeking behavior. Historically wielded against women by the psychiatric establishment, the construction of hysteria is profoundly gendered and used to medicalize and discipline the feminine (Meyer, Fallah, and Wood).

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