Bad Endings: American Apocalypsis

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Abstract

Apocalypticism and millennialism are the dark and light sides of a historical sensibility transfixed by the possibility of imminent catastrophe, cosmic redemption, spiritual transformation, and a new world order. This essay briefly surveys work by anthropologists and like-minded scholars that focuses directly on endtime movements. It then reviews at more length a varied literature focusing on American apocalypticisms and millennialisms. Turning to contemporary America, we survey the ways in which an apocalyptic/millennial sensibility—as a mode of attention, mode of knowing, and voice—has come to inhabit and structure modern American life across a wide range of registers.

First Things

Apocalypticism and millennialism are the dark and light sides of a historical sensibility transfixed by the possibility of imminent catastrophe, cosmic redemption, spiritual transformation, and a new world order. The apocalyptic/millennial mode of attention is fascinated by endings, overturnings, and originary moments. It is vigilant, anxious, excited, always watching for signs of the times. It is also a mode of knowing that promises, and delivers, "the truth." Its voice mixes horror and hope, nightmare and dream, destruction and creation, dystopia and utopia. Tuned into that which is inevitable if not predetermined, it is also the voice of prophecy, the voice that knows how our story, our history, ends, and how it begins anew. And, in spite of any protestations to the contrary, the voice is always somehow implicated in unfolding events. Generative, it "speaks forth" the future.

The term apocalypse (derived from the Greek *apokalupis*, meaning uncover or disclose) refers most narrowly to the revelation of John recorded in the New Testament Book of Revelation. During the Middle Ages, it came also to refer to any revelation, prophecy, or vision of the end of history and the current world order, or to the endtime events themselves (OED). The term millennium [derived from the Latin *mille* (one thousand) and *annus* (years)] refers narrowly to a 1000-year reign of Christ on

Earth some Christians believe was prophesied in Revelations 20:3. Since the nineteenth century, it has come to refer more broadly to a time of peace, harmony, prosperity, happiness, and ideal government (OED).

Eschatological, or endtime, notions regarding a final redemption from human suffering are found in other religions and cosmologies (Collins 1998, part 1). The specifically apocalyptic notion that God will suddenly intervene in history in the form of cataclysmic events on behalf of the faithful has Zoroastrian roots and was developed most fully in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scripture and writings (Cohn 1993, Collins 1998, McGinn 1998, Stein 1998a). As a genre of literature, apocalypticism first flourished between 200 BCE and CE 200, and its characteristic form is that of cryptic revelation understood only by believers. The sensibility by now also has myriad secular manifestations (Stein 1998a, part 2; Quinby 1994).

For this article, we briefly survey work by anthropologists and like-minded scholars that focuses directly on endtime movements. We then review at more length a varied literature focusing on American apocalypticisms and millennialisms. Turning to contemporary America, we survey the ways in which an apocalyptic/millennial sensibility—as mode of attention, mode of knowing, and voice—has come to inhabit and structure modern American life across a wide range of registers.

Colonial Double Visions

By far the longest and most productive lineage of anthropological writing on apocalyptic or millennial themes focuses on "cargo cults" in the South Pacific. Norris Bird first used the term cargo cult in 1945 (Lindstrom 1993:15). Bird, an Australian patrol officer in New Guinea during World War II, worried that the "Madness" described by Papuan government anthropologist Williams (1923) would repeat itself. "In all cases," according to Bird, "the 'Madness' takes the same form: A native, infected with the disorder, states that he has been visited by a relative long dead, who stated that a great number of ships loaded with 'cargo' had been sent by the ancestor of the native for the benefit of the natives of a particular village or area. But the white man, being very cunning, knows how to intercept these ships and take the 'cargo' for his own use." Williams attributed the disorder to "ill-digested religious teaching" and described its effects as native indolence and apathy "in the expectation of the magic cargo arriving." In the wake of World War II, Bird expressed fears that newly armed and trained "black soldiers," should they contract the "Madness," might not respond to it with inactivity but would instead become "armed savages" and massacre Europeans (Bird citations from Lindstrom 1993:16).

From the moment of its inception, Bird's term for the madness he foresaw—cargo cult—was thus freighted, implicitly and explicitly, with many other terms—race and racism, colonialism and terror, religion, (ir)rationality and (anti)modernity, politics and rebellion, economics, inequality, justice, and complicity (of anthropology and

colonialism)—which animated many anthropological debates in the subsequent 50 years. At the same time anthropologists mined these lodes in their writings, they protested that cargo was not the goal and cult was not the organization of the phenomena they nevertheless labeled cargo cults.

The still-expanding anthropological literature on cargo cults has complicated the term and contextualized the interpretation of phenomena so labeled. Most recently, it has produced several sustained critical readings of cargo cult as an object of both anthropological and colonialist discourse (Lattas 1992a,b, 1998; M Kaplan 1995; Lindstrom 1993). Without forsaking the study of practices that might be called cargo cults, indeed, while developing ever-more nuanced and complex ethnographic accounts, these latter anthropologists, particularly Lattas and Kaplan, have cast anthropology as one of the coproducers of cargo cults.

This quality of being coproduced—on the one hand by native, or otherwise everyday, peoples, and on the other hand by outsiders, usually with functions or privileges that endow them with superiority—is a constant feature of practices that are labeled apocalyptic or millennarian. Lattas (1998) suggests that such coproduced practices, or double-voiced logics, may emerge along culture-contact and fracture lines, where different and unequal ontological schemes scrape against each other. They are an artifact of entwined practices of strategic mistranslation on the part of peoples undergoing some manner of colonization and of strategic stigmatization on the part of the colonizing peoples. Kaplan might add that the structure of thought embodied in apocalyptic and millennial artifacts is a defining practice of the Enlightenment: "A 'cult'—a marginal, dubious, deviant activity—is brought into being in the imagination not of its practitioners (who have other understandings of what they do) but of its inquisitors, the central authorities. In the process of inquiry, criminal codification, or extirpation the new 'cult' may be refracted into the practice and categories of the colonized as well" (M Kaplan 1995:203).

Anthropologists writing about religious movements in colonial Africa have also attended to the ways in which resistance and discipline played out in apocalyptic and millennial practices (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1993; Comaroff 1985). With regard to Latin America, quite a bit has been written about Catholic colonialization of the Americas as both a millennial and apocalyptic project, and there is some discussion of indigenous and creole apocalypticisms (for reviews, see Milhou 1998, Levine 1998). A number of works focus on the late-nineteenth century millennial uprising in the Brazilian backlands (Da Cunha 1944, Diacon 1990, Levine 1992). Finally, Taussig's work on terror and violence in Latin America is preoccupied with apocalyptic themes (1980, 1987, 1997).

More generally, many works by anthropologists and like-minded scholars regarding such diverse topics as religious movements and cults, apparitions, culture contact, prophecy, colonialism, modernity, genocide, peasant revolts, rumors, and witchcraft touch apocalyptic and millennial themes (Mair 1959, Hobsbawm 1965, Obeyesekere 1992, Rafael 1993, Sahlins 1995, Christian 1984, 1996, Pemberton 1994, Florida 1995,

Hardace 1995, Ivy 1996, Kaplan & Marshall 1996, Kiernan 1996, Malkki 1995, RG Willis 1970, Perice 1997, Geschiere 1997, White 1993). Moreover, questions addressed by a now substantial body of historical and sociological works on apocalyptic and millennial movements, narrowly defined, resonate with many anthropological preoccupations (for example, Cohn 1961, Fields 1985, Hill 1972, Rotberg & Mazrui 1970, Thrupp 1970, BR Wilson 1973; see also Clay 1998, Zimdars-Swartz & Zimdars-Swartz 1998). Several edited volumes on millennial movements offer opportunities for crosscultural comparisons (Adas 1979, Trompf 1990, BR Wilson 1973, Collins 1998, McGinn 1998, Stein 1998b). Also see a recent novel by Stone for a dense vision of competing apocalypticisms in Jerusalem at the turn of the current millennium (1998).

American Futures Past

A veritable who's who of early American anthropologists wrote about a Native American millennial movement, the Ghost Dance outbreaks of 1870 and 1890. Most of this material was written before millennialist cargo cults became an object of anthropological attention in the Pacific (Mooney 1965, Kroeber 1904, Lesser 1978, Neihardt 1932, Spier 1935, DuBois 1939, Linton 1943, Lowie 1954, Herskovits 1958, Mair 1959, Aberle 1959). Those accounts and concerns—acculturation, revitalization, nativistic and prophetic movements—seem tame if not domesticating compared with the early cargo cult accounts, even though many of the same elements were present in the Ghost Dance: visionaries, ancestors returning from the dead, elimination of whites, restoration of old ways, and the acquisition of goods belonging to whites. A more recent anthropological treatment (Kehoe 1989) displays the same restraint. Other scholars and popular writers have also written extensively about the Ghost Dance (see especially, Lanterari 1963, La Barre 1972, Osterreich 1991). Lanterari's book is particularly useful insofar as he makes extensive comparisons with other Native American movements, such as the Handsome Lake movement (see Wallace 1952, 1956, 1970) and movements in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

Non-Native American millennialism and apocalypticism in the United States have never been an object of anthropological attention, although the scholarly literature on the topics is legion. Because the material has been thoroughly reviewed elsewhere (Stein 1998a), we present only a brief overview to make the point that America has always been an eschatological hotbed. Out of a sense of apocalyptic crisis and millennial hope, Puritans shaped their American colonies into "errands into the wilderness" (Miller 1956) and comparable visions inspired early AngloAmerican missions (see Smolinski 1998). Since the colonial period, hundreds of movements, revivals, communities, and institutions—short-lived and long-lasting, violent and pacific, prosaic and bizarre—have been fashioned, in part, after biblical texts and visions pertaining to endtime, imminent cataclysm, judgment, and redemption: the Shakers, the Oneida community, the Burned-Over District, the Millerite movement, Mormonism, the Je-

hovah's Witness, the Disciples of Christ, Seventh-Day Adventism, dispensationalism and the Bible prophecy movement, the Social Gospel, the Nation of Islam, the Garveyites, the Rastafarians, Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, and visions of Mary, to name a few (for sources, see Moorhead 1998; Stein 1998b; Boyer 1998b; Cross 1950; Lee 1996; Faith 1990; Walker 1990; Lieb 1998; Garvey 1998). There is also considerable literature on how millennial visions have been secularized at many moments and in many ways throughout American history, in, for example, the American Revolution, the fashioning of the republic and democracy, abolition and antiabolition, Nat Turner's insurrection, John Brown's raid, the Civil War, social reform movements, technophilia and technopobia, ideas of progress, progressivism, manifest destiny, spiritualism, foreign policy, the Cold War, politics, literature, science, philosophy, and the New Age movement (Moorhead 1998, Altizer 1998, Robinson 1998, Schoepflin 1998, Barkun 1998, PE Johnson 1978, Boyer 1985, Banks 1998, Lears 1994, FitzGerald 1985, Quinby 1994, M Brown 1997).

The distinction between religious and secular apocalypticism is a scholarly one that obscures how much traffic there has always been across the line; how many movements, moments, visions are hybrids; and how much apocalypticism is a mode of thought that transcends that boundary. Because he chose to ignore the distinction, Hofstader (1965) was able to write his provocative essay on "the paranoid style of American politics," and more recently, Quinby (1994) and Lieb (1998) have argued forcefully that religious and secular apocalypticisms are constantly converging. It is in this vein that we turn now to a review of how contemporary American public and popular culture is shaped by an apocalyptic/ millennial sensibility.

Tracking The Omnipresent: Fields and Conditions

During the 1990s, apocalypticism, and, somewhat less flamboyantly, its millennialist twin, have become a constant and unavoidable presence in everyday life. Idioms of risk, trauma, threat, catastrophe, conspiracy, victimization, surveillance; social, moral, and environmental degradation; recovery, redemption, the New Age, and the New World Order permeate the airwaves. They link disparate events and discrete registers of knowledge or experience from the body, to social movements, to science, government agencies, the economy, international conflicts, and the future of the planet itself. They fashion a totalizing, interlocked field of discourses and practices that encompasses the "center" as well as the "margins," and antipolitics as well as left-wing and right-wing politics. They have become a self-fulfilling source of anxiety and stress (Capps & Ochs 1995, Kingwell 1996, Rosenfield 1997), even to the point of producing what some have called "epidemic hysterias" (Showalter 1997, Acocella 1998) and "moral panics" (Victor 1993, deYoung 1997, Nathan & Snedeker 1995). These and other outbreaks of a pervasive apocalyptic sensibility have been attributed to the state of unease that comes with the end of an era or a century (Schwartz 1990, 1996; Showalter 1997) or

with rapid social and cultural change. Its appeal is often attributed to the seductions of a coherent and comprehensive world view that is at once ordered and charged with drama and urgency (Barkun 1998, Cubitt 1989).

Here, we take American apocalypticism to be not just a set of beliefs but a network of discourses and practices in social and political use and circulation. Foucault's genealogical method draws attention to the intricate details of such networks, tracking the "connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of force, and strategies which at any given moment establish what counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary" (1991:76). As a discursive field, contemporary American apocalypticism includes its (a) conditions of possibility, (b) histories of use, (c) symptoms, (d) precise social and institutional locales and modes of circulation, and (e) politics. Even as it is pervasive and overdetermined, it is also intensely contestatory (Quinby 1994), and in fact, it is often precisely through contest and political conflict that it has gained its charge, spread across domains, and, in some cases, taken extreme forms. As a rhetoric, it is a strategy of persuasion or coercion that interrupts routine and acquiescence with a call of alarm (Borchardt 1990:2). As a distinctive narrative, it claims to be not just a story with a beginning, middle, and end, but *the* story about *the* beginning, *the* middle and *the* end (Borchardt 1990:2). Yet its very claim to Truth incites competing, often equally totalizing, counterclaims and creates dialogics, multivocality, and multiveiling (Burdon 1997) at the heart of the apocalyptic. What is more, the very structure of any particular apocalyptic discourse is dialectical, oscillating between opposing poles of darkness and light. Quinby (1994:16) describes three main arenas in the American apocalyptic field as (a) divine apocalypse, in which the end of the world brings a heavenly home for an elect group; (b) technological apocalypse, in which technological progress brings both devastation and salvation—a heaven on earth; and (c) ironic apocalypse, the dystopian, postapocalyptic view that history has exhausted itself, coupled with a playful celebration of surface styles and reproductions.

Modernity is both a condition of possibility for the contemporary apocalyptic field and an example of its sensibility. Rapid, large-scale technological and industrial developments and the explosion of a mass consumer culture transformed the texture of experience; the phenomenal world became more chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting; sensory stimulation took on a new intensity (Schivelbusch 1979). A new sensational fascination with spectacles of catastrophe in the media developed as an aesthetic counterpart to the radical transformations of space, time, and industry, and as compensation for their alienating effects (B Singer 1995). But modernity itself is also already structured by apocalyptic-millennial vacillations between utopian and dystopian visions in which antimodern nostalgia for origins and simpler times meets dreams of enlightenment and progress, instrumental rationality meets avant-garde experimentation with form, and oppositions between the rational and the irrational, center and margin, and order and disorder become charged (Buell 1998, Ivy 1995, Lears 1994, Marx 1964). The modern world is characterized by simultaneous overstimulation and numbness, alarm and anesthesia (Berlant 1996, Buck-Morss 1995, Feldman 1994, Ivy

1993, Terkel 1988), and it is imagined in terms of dialectical extremes, of heaven and hell, or of dreamworld and catastrophe.

In the omnipresent media, world events are presented as a state of constant, tautological crisis. Talk shows suggest that social and psychological problems are everywhere, and that our job, as an audience, is to recognize them in everything we see (Mellencamp 1992:150). In movies so scripted they can only be described as mythic, superhuman (and heavily armed) heroes avert imminent social, moral, and/or environmental collapse in a final battle, leaving a budding nuclear family standing in the ashes to begin the world again (Lapham 1996). "Reality" TV shows (such as *COPS*, *911*, *America's Most Wanted*, and *Unsolved Mysteries*) take us inside the houses of the stigmatized poor and marginal for a glimpse of personal and social collapse, while shows about glamorous media stars and the lifestyles of the rich and famous present the millennial dream of a sudden twist of fate. Finally, critiques of the media, like critiques of modernity, are themselves often apocalyptic and millennial, depicting the media as conspiratorial, totalitarian, and contagious, or as a technological means of promoting universal education, common citizenship, global religious conversion, or utopian global community (Bray 1996, O'Leary 1998). The dialectic is unstable and subject to sudden shifts. In 1997, for instance, the utopian view of the internet as a teledemocracy and information superhighway gave way, for some, to darker themes of paranoia and conspiracy, with images of child pornography and sex cults trying to recruit new members online (Dean 1998:14). Mediation itself raises questions of control. Fears of cover-ups or of disinformation campaigns easily slide into full-blown conspiracy theories, and millennial hopes often turn on the dream of a return to direct action, direct, unmediated communication, and simple, authoritative truths imagined as a premodern state of being (Stewart 1999).

The transition to advanced capitalist, or neo- or post-Fordist economics (processes of deregulation, privatization, franchise, and differentiation, and a shift from a product economy to a service and information economy) has produced down-sizing, reengineering, volatile markets, corporate mergers, transformations in the relationship between governments and corporations, growing inequality of income and control, and global dependence on huge communications industries (Mellencamp 1992). The new complex, or "flexible," systems are large, diffuse, dynamic networks that are unpredictable and subject to sudden collapse or sudden shifts of control from one part of the system to another (Davis 1998, Martin 1994). Global scale means both unprecedented power and intense vulnerability to disruptions and outbreaks anywhere in the world, giving rise to fears of anarchy, terrorism, scarcity, crime, and overpopulation (R Kaplan 1994). Power and insecurity are expressed in apocalyptic and millennial idioms of breakthroughs and breakdowns, stock market crashes, and a New World Order. Contemporary "risk society" (Beck 1992, 1995) produces alarming worst-case scenarios in the very effort to calculate precise risks in order to insure against them (Buell 1998, Douglas 1985, Lupton 1993). Advertising commodifies both fear and the dream of personal, exceptional safety in selling everything from insurance to schools to cars to high-priced skin creams

such as Charles of the Ritz "Disaster Cream," Estee Lauder "Skin Defender Cream," and Golden Door "Crisis Cream" (Mellencamp 1992). A nostalgia for a simple past and the figure of a utopian future are modeled, concretely, in master-planned and gated communities. The figure of a middle class has become a norm or ideal that signals safety, while the poor have dropped out of view except as criminals, spectacular "failures" as individuals, and dangerous urban mobs. Violence and abjection are seen as a contagion, like a virus: Self-control and social containment are the only known vaccine (W Brown 1995, Davis 1998).

Brown (1995) argues further that we are seeing changes in the very conditions of democracy, including depoliticized, or naturalized, modes of domination; a state more obviously invested in particular economic interests, political ends, and social formations; the disintegration and fragmentation of forms of association other than those organized by the commodity market and the classificatory schemes of disciplinary society; an unparalleled powerlessness over the fate and direction of one's life coupled with an unrelieved individual responsibility without insulation from failure; and a politics of *ressentiment*, which takes suffering as a measure of social value. These changes challenge the presumption that there is a public that shares a notion of reality, a concept of reason, and a set of criteria by which claims to reason and rationality are judged (Dean 1998). The ideal of a central public sphere still sometimes animates the dream of a transcendent voice of reason, but it is no longer possible to deny fundamental differences between particular publics and counter-publics based on gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and myriad other identities and socialities (B Robbins 1993, Gibbs 1996). These publics vie for a more general public voice and legitimacy (Dean 1998) through claims of suffering and heroism. Death, disaster, and impending catastrophe becomes the only thing that can unite a general "public" (Martin 1994), especially when apocalyptic threat is followed by millennial amnesia in the form of dreams of love and freedom achieved and miraculous new beginnings.

Trust No One: Everything Is Connected

Paranoia has long been central to American politics, flaring up, especially, when conflicts reach a point of nonnegotiation (Hofstadter 1965). In political paranoia there are no accidents (G Johnson 1983). Everything bad that happens is part of a plot of hidden orders and secret powers exercised on the innocent and unsuspecting (Rogin 1993:14). American nationalism rests both on the millennial claim that American-style democracy and technological progress will save the world and on an apocalyptic paranoia that imagines external enemies, "thems" who are out to get "us," and internal threats in the form of authoritarian government, "special interests" conspiring behind the scenes, and demonized marginal populations (Berlant 1996; Caute 1978; Rogin 1987, 1993). The Cold War, for instance, was born out of the simultaneous terror and utopianism of the new atomic age and became an elaborate fantasy of a nation defend-

ing a world divided into the forces of light and darkness (Boyer 1985, 1998a,b; Weart 1988). It demanded absolute acquiescence to a repressive social order, massive defense spending to the detriment of social programs of all kinds, and the constant threat of nuclear annihilation itself (Lifton & Falk 1982, Nadel 1995). These and other effects of the Cold War, including revelations of government cover-ups, a huge "national sacrifice zone" in the desert, and a population of silent casualties of radiation from nuclear and chemical weapons testing including indigenous peoples, soldiers, armament workers, and "downwind" civilians (Chaloupka 1993, Davis 1993, Downey 1986, Gallagher 1993) have contributed to the proliferation of contemporary apocalypticisms that locate the enemy within Western institutions and Enlightenment ideals themselves. The horrors of modern warfare, economic depression, the Holocaust, experimentation on humans, and the atomic bomb were all, in part, precipitated by the application of rationality, science, and the offspring of science, technology, and effected in the name of liberty and equality (Schoepflin 1998).

Conspiracy theory and conspiracy itself are now as characteristic of the center as they are of marginal groups and occult knowledges (Dean 1998, Lamy 1992, Marcus 1999). The state admits to secret experimentation on unwitting citizens, for example, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments on African-American men (Wilson & Mill 1998), and builds elaborate and expensive new defense systems against "catastrophic terrorism" and "weapons of mass destruction" (F Lewis 1999). Citizens react to new threats to their rights and new constraints on the public sphere (Gutierrez-Jones 1997, Gomez-Pena 1996, Jacobs 1996), or they warn of a coming race war (Delgado 1996) or dream of a new world free from oppression and inequality (Montgomery 1996). Or they ensconce themselves in communities gated and anesthetized (McCarthy et al 1997) against urban and suburban decay; angry, abandoned underclasses, criminals, and racialized "others" (Anderson 1995, Kennedy 1996); urban riots (Baldassare 1994, Gale 1996, Gooding-Williams 1993, Salak 1993), and the rise of mass murders and serial killers (Grixti 1995, Seltzer 1998).

Millennial and apocalyptic expressions are now multiple and fragmented, appearing not only among marginal social groups and so-called cults (Bromley & Hammond 1987, JR Lewis 1995, Robbins & Palmer 1997, J Kaplan 1997), or in a revitalized fundamentalism (Boyer 1992, 1993; Harding 1994; Mojtabai 1986), but also in the content of the mass media and popular culture (Callahan 1993, Lamy 1992, Mitchell 1992), which present a diffuse yet panicky sense of embattlement—a deep worry that normality is not normal anymore, that somebody is doing something to normality, changing things, experimenting on us, doubling our every move (Morris 1997). The *X-Files* splices genres and arenas of conspiracy and horror in a repetition and reworking of national memories and amnesias of the long national nightmare that began with the Cold War and lead to Nixon's resignation: the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Commission, the Kennedy assassination, MIAs (soldiers missing in action), Watergate, IranContra, Roswell, and radiation experiments on terminal patients (Lavery et al 1996, Corso & Birnes 1997). These are moments of alienation when mass fantasy and

history conjoined and the imaginary "them" became the surreal "us" (A Graham 1996). The dual slogan of the *X-Files*—"trust no one" and "the truth is out there"—express the double bind of a system that can be felt but not known but which is, nevertheless, believed to be organized and controlled by "the powers that be" (Dean 1998). Everything is connected and out to get us, and there is nothing we can do to stop it. Reason fails to explain events or to provide means for minimal predictability, which leads to a distrust of "the reasonable" and a search for an alternative epistemology (Borchardt 1990, Dean 1998). In what Barkun (1998) calls the improvisational apocalypticism of the 1990s—a bricolage of disparate elements from religion, ideology, the occult, and bits and pieces of esoteric knowledge covering a vast area including lost continents, astrology, alchemy, unconventional medicine, UFOs, and conspiracy theories—previously marginalized and stigmatized forms of knowledge are mainstreamed and politicized as suppressed truths.

Conspiracy theories can identify absolute truths about the world while dismissing holders of power as sinister, corrupt, and deceptive (Stewart 1999); they can also resurrect agency and the sense of a privileged community "in the know," and an otherwise bleak present can become charged with purpose and focus (Borchardt 1990, Barkun 1998). A pervasive sense of powerlessness and a politics of resentment can be fashioned into a perverse pride (Pfeil 1995:123). Contemporary apocalypticisms have produced a proliferation of messianic cults, paramilitary groups, and racial separatists. The list of groups, actions, and catastrophic events is now as long as it is familiar: Jonestown, Ruby Ridge, Waco, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Unabomber, the Republic of Texas, Heaven's Gate, the Montana Freemen, the Nation of Islam, the Christian Identity movement, and a long list of survivalist groups and individuals moved to take drastic measures (Barkun 1974, 1990, 1994a,b, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998; Dyer 1997; Erard 1997; Gibson 1994; Hamm 1993, 1997; Lamy 1992, 1996; Lee 1996; JR Lewis 1994; Moore & McGee 1989; Palmer 1997; Pfeil 1995; Reavis 1995; Robbins & Palmer 1997; Serrano 1998; Tabor & Gallagher 1995; SA Wright 1995).

Right-wing conspiracy theories in particular have proliferated and come to prominent attention in the 1990s (Abanes 1996, Coates 1987, Dees 1996, J Kaplan 1996, Perlstein 1995, Stern 1996). The overarching conspiratorial conception of the New World Order was popularized by Robertson's (1991) book of that title. Already packed with a long genealogy of paranoid anti-Semitic traces (Lind 1995, Heilbrunn 1995), the New World Order quickly accumulated a script of threats, including new law enforcement formations directed against gun owners, surveillance by black helicopters and implanted microchips, concentration camps run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency for dissenters, and hundreds of thousands of UN-affiliated foreign troops on US soil to stifle armed resistance (Barkun 1998:455). Its antifederalism combines paranoia about and contempt for a government conceived to be viciously totalitarian and ridiculously incompetent in equal measure (Pfeil 1995:122). The New World Order has become a kind of apocalyptic lingua franca that cuts across political subcultures and stylistic differences. The millennium has been politicized so that people who foresee apocalypse

cannot stand outside politics but engage a political as well as a spiritual reckoning. What is more, politics has been millennialized. "That is, it ceases to be an instrument for the incremental adjustment of conflicting interests and becomes instead a 'politics of ultimacy,' where ultimate issues are at stake in a once-and-for-all confrontation" (Barkun 1998:459).

Kelly (1995) argues that the 1990s mix of conspiracy theories, or what he calls fusion paranoia, has now become so deeply ingrained in the larger political culture that it has become the cohering idea of a broad coalition plurality that draws adherents from every point on the political spectrum. The center and the margins and a variety of proliferating publics, cults, and groups form a common audience and/or network in an open-ended apocalyptic field.

The nature of a "networked" world is itself the subject of apocalyptic thinking in cyberpunk literature and in post-apocalyptic movies such as *Blade Runner*, *Brazil*, *Road Warrior*, *Repo Man*, *Alien*, and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. These are post-humanist representations in which there is no separation between human and machine, there is a high value for socially marginalized members of society, and technology provides both liberation and totalitarian control. "The matrix" is an unmappable network of information, technology, data, credit reports, corporate secrets, and encrypted government files. There are no governments, and multinational corporations traffic primarily in the commodity of information. Hackers and consol cowboys act alone, as anarchists, to outwit and avoid the system (Starrs & Huntsinger 1995). Current Y2K (year 2000) fears are an example of the paranoiac world of such a system: A seemingly simple technical problem turns into a maze of interconnected misfires impossible to map, which might (or might not) set off a domino effect of hardships and traumas, civil disturbance, and social entropy. Doomsayers predict companies will be so burdened by the expense of trying to fix Y2K computer problems that their stock prices will plummet and the world economy will be cast into recession (Schofield 1997). Some professionals, including computer specialists, have taken up the survivalist project of building self-sufficient and heavily armed communities in the wilds (Heard & Klebnikov 1998), whereas others argue that the Y2K problem is not about computer bugs and what they can do to us, but about the fear, or millennial angst, itself (Gleick 1999). Meanwhile, of course, a self-help literature has grown up around the topic (Yourdon & Yourdon 1998).

The sudden mainstreaming and commodification of UFOlogies and alien knowledges in the 1990s also indexed the extent to which a politics of suspicion and apocalyptic discourses has displaced and decentered science, the state, and rationality as sources of American common sense and national consensus regarding the Truth, what it is, and who knows it (Dean 1998). Most Americans take for granted that the federal government is covering up evidence of extraterrestrial encounters of one kind or another. Millions of Americans have seen UFOs with their own eyes; millions have had direct contact with alien beings; millions have been abducted by aliens and taken to their space stations (Dean 1998:3, 10; Kingwell 1996:244). Women have given birth to un-

known numbers of alien/human babies. Alien "walk-ins" now occupy countless human bodies, male and female (M Brown 1997:21). A vast network of secret underground chambers and tunnels centered in Dulce, New Mexico, houses thousands of alien beings, both alien grays and reptoids, engaged in genetic experiments (Hamilton 1991:107–9). And we all know that these unearthly visitors signal the beginning of the end, that cataclysm and redemption, one or the other, or both, are just around the corner.

Alien discourses are functioning as a kind of clearinghouse, or master search engine, for all sorts of idioms implicated in contemporary American millennial/apocalypticisms. Everything is aggressively and anxiously connected across the field of these discourses: high technology, information, death and life, body and spirit, science, government, reproduction, sexuality, race, immigration, colonizing and being colonized, fear and desire, trauma and hope, catastrophe and salvation, revealed truth, persecution, and cover-up. The growing secondary literature on alien knowledge (Festinger et al 1956, Curran 1985, Baird 1987, Bullard 1989, Pritchard et al 1994, Bryan 1995, JR Lewis 1995, Datlow 1996, Kingwell 1996, Hesemann & Mantel 1997, Lepselter 1997, M Brown 1997, Darlington 1997, Saler et al 1997, Showalter 1997, Zimmerman 1997, Dean 1998, Lieb 1998, O'Leary 1998) is still quite small and dwarfed by insider and complicit accounts, textual and graphic, obsessed with and possessed by their own fantastic, phantasmagoric terms. The latter form a literature that insists on being read in its own terms, but one that may also be read as an insistent and incessant critical commentary, a postmodern popular midrash on contemporary American politics, society, culture, and everyday life.

Signs of the End

In the current American apocalyptic "state of emergency" (Berlant 1996) a long list of disasters in progress or waiting to happen have become signs of the endtimes linking the political, the biophysical, the psycho-social, the global, the technological, the affective, the criminal, the environmental, and the cosmic in a totalized toxic system. There are epidemics, syndromes, disorders, and blights: HIV, chronic fatigue syndrome, Gulf War syndrome, environmental illness, chemical sensitivity, eating disorders, addictions, swine flu, Legionnaire's disease, *Escherichia coli*, deadly asthma and allergies, the greenhouse effect, stock market collapse, illness from electromagnetic fields, pesticides in our water and food, recovered memory syndrome, multiple personality disorder, mad cow disease, radioactive and toxic wastes, extreme weather (El Niño, droughts, tornadoes, floods, wildfires), and the threat of catastrophic impacts from comets and asteroids. Social symptoms appear to be signs of disorder. We hear of "epidemic" increases in everything from social conflict to hate crimes, racism, and homophobia; from cults, gangs, and militias to "deviant" sexualities and lifestyles; and from child abuse and date rape to satanic ritual abuse and children gunning down other children in

schoolyards (H Dalton 1990, Douglas & Wildavsky 1983, Johnson & Hopkins 1990, Oliver-Smith 1996, Palmer 1997, Sabatier 1988).

Signs of social and environmental degradation now implicate industry, science, medicine, state regulation, and the military either as failed safeguards or as potential causes and symptoms. Toxic events, including Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, toxic shock syndrome, or genetically engineered food that has appeared unlabeled in supermarkets, incite the suspicion of industrial negligence and governmental complicity; any sign of cover-up incites conspiracy theories (Vankin 1992). Critics say that environmental engineering, far from controlling nature, actually produces disasters such as devastating floods, hurricanes, and fires in over-built coastal regions (W Graham 1996). Some say large-scale viral epidemics, including HIV and Ebola, emerge out of the destruction of the rain forests (Garrett 1995, Preston 1994). New drug-resistant bacteria, viruses, and parasites may constitute a whole new kind of contagion. Mad cow disease may be caused by a previously unknown form of life—a prion, or particle of protein, that has mastered the knack of reproducing itself, making it the only organic self-replicating thing on the planet that does not contain DNA or RNA. It may have spread through an ordinary industrial food processing technique that produces "mechanically recovered" meat, and it is so resistant that even medical sterilization procedures do not kill it (or, in other words, it can spread through the use of sterilized surgical instruments) (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997; Lancaster 1996; Preston 1992, 1994). The Ebola outbreak in the United States actually originated in the hands of science in an animal research lab in Virginia (Preston 1992). It can become airborne, making it as contagious as the flu. Like both HIV and mad cow disease, it can jump species.

Radical environmentalists say that the earth itself in undergoing an immune system breakdown (Lee 1995, Manes 1990). AIDS provides the predominant metaphor of the times: a pathogenic agent that cripples the body's defense, making it a site of toxicity, contamination, and catastrophe (Fee & Fox 1988, Fraiberg 1991, Martin 1994, Palmer 1997). Maintenance of the body becomes central to notions of subjectivity (Lupton et al 1995), and moral judgments are inscribed on the characters of the diseased (Sontag 1978, 1989; Sturken 1997). Everything is contagious, from computer "viruses" (Lupton 1994) to stress, emotional disorders, and addictions. On the level of the social body and the body politic, there are political distinctions drawn between "clean" and "unclean" bodies (Kroker 1992). Potentially out-of-control bodies are disciplined and organized in testing and screening procedures. Self-surveillance and the surveillance of others are the order of the day (Singer et al 1993:23).

Trauma has become the idiom of citizenship, self-help groups, and liberation movements (Antze & Lambek 1996, Berlant 1997, W Brown 1995, Hacking 1995). The heroes and heroines of epidemics call themselves traumatists and UFOlogists, experiencers and abductees, survivors and survivalists (Showalter 1997:10). New publics and new kinds of political activism emerge out of a cultural milieu of disease, disaster, anxiety, and self-help (Epstein 1996, Hawkins 1993, Healy 1997, Sturken 1997). Entire

therapeutic cultures have developed in recent years to cater to the specialized needs of the victims of eating disorders, dissociative disorders, and fatigue syndromes (Micale 1995:291). Some say these disorders are themselves "contagious," or easily spread by suggestion and imitation in therapeutic settings and through the media. This has been well documented in the case of recovered memory syndrome and its spread to multiple personality disorder and accusations of satanic ritual abuse, where mass market books and movies produced prototypes that particular therapists actively suggested to their patients (Hacking 1995, Nathan & Snedeker 1995, Showalter 1997, L Wright 1994). The daycare scandals that erupted in 1983 united the emerging strands of the recovered memory movement, awareness of child abuse, and the satanism scare (Richardson et al 1991). Soon the FBI was investigating more than 300 alleged crimes by organized cults, and although no evidence was ever found, dozens of people were tried, convicted, and given long prison sentences (they have all now been released) (deYoung 1997).

On the cosmic scale, the neocatastrophic model has struck the sciences of physics and astronomy (Davis 1996b, 1998; JS Lewis 1996; Steel 1995; Verschuur 1996). In this model, the earth is not autonomous but part of a unified solar system with a common history; stars and planets owe their very existence to impacts and explosions from the Big Bang, to the comet impact that brought about the end of the age of dinosaurs, to falling asteroids that may be the cause of the tsunamis, or tidal waves, that have killed millions (Ferris 1997, JS Lewis 1996). It has recently been discovered that there are millions of comets and asteroids in the inner solar system and that their orbits are unpredictable. Apocalyptic fears include the thought that a madman or terrorist group could deflect an asteroid to hit earth; millennialist technological fixes include the idea of a global surveillance and early warning system or saving the world (and American domination of it) by blowing up a threatening asteroid with nuclear bombs (Ferris 1997). Coherent catastrophism adds the apocalyptic sense of an underlying force or cause—a posited "galactic tide"—which is causing cycles of catastrophe that correspond to significant watersheds in the history of life. Some scientists have begun to look at ancient texts as evidence that suggests the apocalypse described in the Bible may be a species-remembrance and not prophesy at all (Davis 1996a, Ferris 1997). Some secular apocalypticians, in concert with the fundamentalist sense of reaping havoc before harmony, regard worldwide devastation as a necessary step for a transformation in human consciousness (Quinby 1994:12).

Meanwhile, New Age ecological millennialists imagine a world beyond conflict, without politics, and utopian fantasy finds its outer reaches in the proliferation of theme parks and "tourist bubbles"—historical districts, entertainment precincts, malls, and other variations on theme parks—that are partitioned off from the rest of the world (Davis 1998:392). This is the utopia of built environments frozen in time and located in no particular place (Marling 1991, O'Neill 1993). It is Baudrillard's (1994) apocalyptic vision of a "maleficent ecology"—a state of survival on an artificial, miniaturized, air-conditioned clone of the earth, or what he calls a prophylactic utopia.

Last Things: Culture Wars

Finally, it is important to note that many, if not all, of these cases of apocalyptic alarm arise as rhetorics in political contestation (Brummett 1991, O'Leary 1994).

In increasingly intense confrontations between industry and environmentalism, for instance, each side adopts an apocalyptic rhetoric. Radical environmentalists talk of the "ecocidal" tendencies of civilization (Manes 1990) and may be moved to eco-terrorism as industry responds with the image of the destruction of all progress and a return to a desolate state of nature marked by famine and chaos. The dominant technological or instrumental voice of reason constructs a discourse of "environmentalist hysteria" (Killingsworth & Palmer 1995). The environmental justice movement, and the larger antitoxics campaign, which started in the late 1970s in response to Love Canal and now includes over 5000 community groups, is moved, out of a sense of powerlessness, to stronger counter-assertions of classism and racism and the rights of citizens (Buell 1998).

In the case of satanic ritual abuse accusations, a conflict between rationalist discourse and trauma discourse produced conflicting sides and moved the two sides to extremes.

In 1992, a professional couple whose daughter had experienced recovered memories of child abuse founded the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, which shifted the blame from parents to therapists and "abuse hysteria" (Hacking 1995, Kitzinger & Reilly 1997, Ofshe & Watters 1994). Multiple personality disorder (MPD) patients founded a society of their own that celebrated rather than pathologized their symptoms and turned the "disorder" into a liberation movement (Acocella 1998). They articulated the idea of "alters" with the New Age celebration of altered states of consciousness to contact spirits or to experience spiritual energy captured from other times and dimensions (M Brown 1997). Rationalist attacks sneered at the "pseudo-science" of the movement, treating it as a symptomatic disease in itself. Strands of feminism, the self-help movement, and recognition of child abuse contributed to counter-attacks in which increasingly bizarre events were recalled and skeptics were accused of being a support group for child abusers (Hacking 1995). A radical wing of the movement came to believe that many patients had been programmed by ritualistic cults and the opposing side argued that the movement itself had practices that were very much like cult initiation, including hypnosis and suggestion (Acocella 1998, Hacking 1995).

Academia does not stand outside the apocalyptic field but is subject to its conditions of possibility (Micale 1995) and is caught in its political moves and polemics, even when it adopts the voice of the skeptic (Schoepflin 1998) or attempts to take the transcendent stance of science and objectivity (Lewontin 1997, Sagan 1997, Schrempp 1998). DeJean (1996) argues that academia has been a central actor in producing and spreading the contemporary end of the millennium anxieties. The intellectual disputes over the canon that began in the 1980s, and the resulting anxieties about the mixing of categories or the transgressing of boundaries and lines of cultural authority, quickly touched a wider

public nerve and brought long-standing social tensions to the surface. In academic battles over multiculturalism, polemical lines were drawn between "the ancients," who lamented the resulting decline in civilization, and "the moderns," who defended the democratization of culture and new objects of study, including popular culture and subaltern epistemologies. These polemics repetitively replay the apocalyptic/millennial dialectic. As soon as a "progressive" position is articulated championing change, a doomsaying counter-assertion proclaims the end of order and expresses an ominous sense of decline. These positions both articulated with and helped to produce larger publics and were swept up in contemporary conflicts over rights, race, gender, and broad questions of politics and the public sphere.

The term culture wars marks these political contests that have taken on the apocalyptic discourse of ultimate stakes and final solutions, promoting hyperbole and even panic. Morris (1997) hears panic in a reaction against poststructuralism that has grown so rigid that it has become socially unrealistic. Acocella (1998) finds the same culture wars endtime logic fueling the moral panic of satanic ritual abuse. Senator Henry Hyde characterized the House impeachment and Senate trial of President Clinton as culture wars and wondered ominously, after they were over, whether there would be "an America worth fighting for."

In Berlant's analysis, politics itself has been demonized in America so that ordinary conflicts among different publics are taken as evidence of a terrible state of political emergency. Images of political life "on the street" become proof that a violent change threatens an idealized version of the nation (1996:406). Television news recasts the ordinary, everyday violence of inequality and the dismantling of social services in terms of threats of illegal immigration, race wars, and terrorism. All mundane evidence to the contrary, "crime" menaces the shored-up walls of touristic bubbles and master-planned communities.

DeJean argues that after the culture wars of the turn of seventeenth-century France—the first modern *fin de siècle*–-apocalyptic fears and accusations settled down to an unnatural calm and a search for new forms of emotionality and sentimental literature emerged. Current American apocalypses, too, show every sign of an exhausted reaction in a longing for interiority, pervasive forms of emotivity, a new, more technologically mediated sentimentalism (a virtual sentimentalism) (DeJean 1996), and, of course, the production of a dominant culture. Arguably, a stable, idealized center based on trauma and recovery is emerging: the self-help movement, privatization, cocooning, family values, and utopia walled up in theme parks and franchise culture.

There are, finally, a few anti-apocalyptic voices narrating late modern history and politics. They attempt to dedramatize its morally charged oppositions and its "fight to the death" and to insert a gap in its logic and identities with concepts of deferral, hybridity, and cyborg identity (Dellamora 1995; Derrida 1984a,b; Haraway 1989, 1997).

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