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Wildfire rumours and denial in the Trump era

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In September 2020 the US West coast was on fire. Though wildfires frequent this region, they were unprecedented in their breadth, heat and destruction (Oregon Department of Forestry, 2020). The fires were not unexpected. Scientists have warned for decades that the western US would experience heightened wildfires with global warming. Numerous factors contributed to the explosive fires, including drought, higher temperatures and a history of fire suppression (Lindsey, 2020; Sickinger, 2020; see also Oregon Forest Resources Institute, n. d.).[1]

While the fires were predictable, less anticipated was the response from rural and rural-identified communities. Just southeast of Portland, rumours circulated that Antifa and Black Lives Matters (BLM) activists were deliberately setting fires and terrorizing rural residents with violence and looting. Such rumours spread rapidly and created havoc for first responders trying to evacuate imperilled communities. Building on the rumours, some locals set up illegal checkpoints, threatened journalists and 'outsiders', and refused to evacuate in order to protect their communities from the imagined invaders (Kristof, 2020).

These events illuminate the complexities of cross-cutting denial in a polarized political landscape. I argue that the rumours reflect the fusion of two forms of denial: climate denial and racial denial. Though scientists explained the fires, many rural residents embraced a false narrative linked to larger anxieties and anger, including socialist take-overs, unpatriotic anti-racists, domestic terrorists and threats to the white nation. In this chapter I explore how white nationalism informs multiple anxieties on the right, including climate change. While the right is animated by many currents, it has been fuelled by racism and white nationalism for decades (Lowndes, 2008). Moreover, at this moment the white nation is facing grave challenges, which have triggered profound rage and anxiety (Anderson, 2016; O'Connor, 2021).

The white nation is an imagined political community in which whites and whiteness are the central subjects (Thobani, 2007). Currently, the white nation fears it is being decentred and white innocence is being called into question. White innocence is the belief that whites are not responsible for the US's history of racial violence and dehumanization, including settler colonization, slavery and racial discrimination (Inwood, 2018). This obviously requires denying the structural nature of US racism and the privileged status of whiteness. Though white supremacy and its denial have varied over the centuries, overt racism resurfaced with the election of Barack Obama (2008) and Donald Trump's 2015 presidential campaign. Obama's election, as a Black president, incensed the white nation and Trump's campaign rode that racist fury. Trump's infamous declaration that Mexicans were rapists shattered any pretence of the US as a 'post-racial' society. The overt racism of Trumpism, coupled with the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, led many to see US racism as structural for the first time.

Global condemnation of Floyd's murder and widespread support of BLM brought the US close to a racial reckoning, which the right has resisted. Though antagonistic towards BLM for numerous reasons, the right fiercely opposed the movement's claim of systemic racism. To admit structural racism rather than individual racists would undermine the 'goodness' of white settlers (Hixson, 2013: 21) and question how whiteness became privileged. This has triggered a crisis for the white nation as its moral authority and very existence rest on denying structural white supremacy.

Thus, in this moment, two crises – climate change and white nationalism – converged. This convergence is not accidental but the product of threats centuries in the making. Given that they profoundly undermine both physical and social environments, they engender intense emotions, including resentment, victimization, uncertainty, rage and denial. Physical threats to homes, communities, landscapes and livelihoods are coupled with challenges to white power and its attendant values of personal freedom and resistance to 'state tyranny'. Though rage is the most visible response (Anderson, 2016; Inwood, 2019), it can mask multiple emotions and anxieties, as noted above. Because intense, collective emotions in highly politicized contexts can inspire action and societal change, they are called 'political emotions' (Olson, 2016; Antadze, 2020). The wildfire rumours are the result of political emotions triggered by an array of material and ideological threats at multiple scales.

In this chapter I first discuss the concept of denial and then outline the Oregon wildfires. I then examine the structural elements of the rumours, why this happened in Oregon and the larger political landscape. Finally, I consider how the rumours constitute entwined forms of climate and racial denial.

Denial

Stanley Cohen defines denial as 'assertions that something did not happen, did not exist, is not true or is not known' (2001: 3). Denial ensues when the truth is too disturbing or threatening to be accepted. People may repress, disavow, lie or reinterpret the truth. Climate change has triggered multiple forms of denial (van Rensburg, 2015), with Norgaard (2019) arguing for a spectrum in which apathy is one extreme and disinformation another. In the US, where climate change is deeply politicized (MacInnis and Krosnick, 2020), denial is more complex. Norgaard (2011: 181) argues that the US fossil fuel industry's campaign of 'organized denial' (Klein, 2015: ch. 1; Leonard, 2019; Mayer, 2016: ch. 8; O'Connor, 2017; Oreskes and Conway, 2010) created doubt, which led millions to embrace literal and implicatory denial as well as apathy. This is especially true for conservatives (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). This doubt, coupled with the Republican Party's power, for decades effectively blocked any meaningful effort to address climate change (Drennen and Hardin, 2021).

In contrast to apathy, doubt and disinformation, the denial articulated by rural Oregonians is more complex and warrants close investigation. Given the suddenness of the fires, the denial was certainly not premeditated. People actually *believed* they were being targeted by outsiders – despite the fact that the entire West coast was in flames. Indeed, many were willing to risk their well-being to protect their communities from BLM and Antifa.

This denial, while not entirely conscious, hardly emerged out of thin air. Rather, it illustrates the link between socio-cultural factors and climate attitudes, including values like freedom, individualism (Leiserowitz, 2006) and far-right ideologies (Forchtner, 2018a, 2018b). Traditionally, scholars believed that better information would result in people accepting the truth, but recent research argues for treating denial and conspiracies as part of the larger social formation. This includes studying the worldviews and contexts which produce denial (Fischer, 2019) and conceptualizing conspiracy theories and disinformation as forms of cultural failure (Guilhot, 2021).

I examine how one element of the social formation intersects with climate denial – white nationalism. Though rural-identified communities face economic decline and state abandonment, most white, rural Oregonians, like much of rural America, have become increasingly invested in white nationalism. Rural areas have historically been more conservative than cities, but they have energized the right, as various tendencies congealed into Trumpism (Lowndes, 2018; Marantz, 2019; O'Connor, 2021; Read, 2020b; Selsky, 2021). Trumpism exceeds the man and exists as a powerful political force that dominates the political landscape of the right. While the economic

devastation wrought by neoliberalism is often seen as the source of US rural populism and authoritarianism, this overlooks the importance of white nationalism (Roman-Alcalá et al., 2021), which can contribute to unanticipated outcomes. For example, rural areas often vote against their economic interests because they are anti-state (HoSang and Lowndes, 2019). Residents feel the state has betrayed them as it prioritizes urban elites and racial Others (Hochschild, 2016). Trump tapped into this anger, and drawing on deep reservoirs of white nationalism, repeated the Republican Party's Southern Strategy, which foregrounded racial resentment (Inwood, 2019; Lowndes, 2008). The recognition that Trumpism offers enabled rural voters to express their emotions, which was important in a time of change and precarity (Hochschild, 2016).

The contemporary right is characterized by disinformation, rumours and conspiracy theories (Marantz, 2019). Such narratives serve multiple functions, including offering paths for politicization, providing explanations in overwhelming times, relieving collective tension (Karuka, 2019: 5) and creating rigid binaries. According to Daggett, the right employs melodramatic narratives, which are a 'highly dramatic and emotive form that constructs polar opposites of good and evil' (2020: 2). Such narratives, which may not be based on facts, collectively create meta-narratives in which diverse dramas, events and processes can be understood. Hochschild (2016) calls such meta-narratives 'the deep story', reminding us how smaller narratives build on and are connected to each other. The right's deep story centres on loathing the government, racial resentment, a loss of respect and anger at those advancing, seemingly at their expense. Thus, there are similarities in the beliefs that COVID is a hoax, Trump won the 2020 election and anti-racists started wildfires – they all fit into a deep story.

The Oregon wildfires

Early September 2020 was hot and sunny in Oregon. Because of tremendous heat and high pressure east of the Cascade Mountains (Figure 3.1), an unusual hot, dry wind blew into western Oregon creating an 'east wind' event. While such winds are common in California, they are rare in western Oregon. The hot winds, dry lightning and parched forest quickly caught fire and burned a vast area.

Many on the right, including then-President Trump, argued that insufficient logging caused the fires, what Gavin (2020) calls the 'fuels narrative'. Evidence suggests, however, that much of the burned land was privately owned and had been previously clear-cut (see also Bendix, 2020). Because private forests often operate as tree plantations, they are characterized by clear cutting

3.1 Map of Oregon, USA. Created by Sophia Ford

and young saplings, both of which enabled fires to spread at rates that precluded effective firefighting. Gavin found that in the Holiday Fire west of Eugene, one of the many fires that burned in Oregon in September 2020, the timber giant, Weyerhaeuser, is the largest landowner. In this fire, over 70 per cent of the burned areas employed clear-cut rotation forestry (Gavin, 2020). In contrast, public lands, which have been managed through clear cutting, prescribed burns and regular thinning, were characterized by second-growth forests and were better able to withstand the fires.

As the fires spread, evacuation warnings were issued, and community evacuation plans implemented. Entire communities, including Talent and Phoenix, were burned. Others, such as Blue River, were partially destroyed. Hundreds lost their homes and belongings. The McKenzie River, which draws thousands every summer, was significantly damaged. The air in Oregon and Washington registered as the most polluted on the planet, and for almost two weeks residents were confined indoors. By 3 October 2020, Oregon had sustained over two thousand fires encompassing over a million acres; 40,000 people were displaced; thousands of structures destroyed; and 9 people were dead (Powell, 2020; Templeton, 2020). The fires, which were

partially caused by global warming (Buis, 2021), were a traumatic event for all Oregonians.

The wildfire rumours

The rumours first appeared on social media on 9 September and continued for approximately one week. Data was drawn from Sandy, a small town approximately 30 miles southeast of Portland (Figure 3.1). Though rumours existed throughout rural Oregon, they were most intense southeast of Portland, at the rural–urban interface. Sandy has a population of just over 12,000 and is 75 per cent white. Latinas/os/x and Asians are the primary communities of colour, with smaller Native and Black populations. As part of the Portland metro, Sandy has experienced significant growth, including a 20 per cent population increase over the past decade. Originally part of the Oregon Trail, it became a timber town and is currently characterized by a service economy. While much of rural Oregon is impoverished, Sandy has an above-average household income of $73,443 (US Census, 2019). This is due to Portland's expanding economy and its proximity to Mount Hood, a major recreational area. It is precisely because of its closeness to Portland that Sandy defines itself 'in opposition to Portland values' (Yau, 2021). Thus, Sandy is a rural-identified community rather than a rural one, reflecting its location at the rural/urban nexus.

   A university research assistant who was from Sandy joined various social media groups to access local data. Data was drawn from YouTube, Parler, Twitter and Facebook – the latter accounting for approximately 70 per cent of all postings. We counted approximately a hundred original postings, some of which were shared hundreds of times, as well as dozens of comments. Comments provided the richest data, totalling over a thousand. Original postings included photographs, videos, screen shots of text messages, and news stories which people responded to. The original postings typically offered 'evidence' of arson and other illegal activity. But because of poor quality, it was usually unclear what was happening. Alternatively, there were clear images of neutral objects, like a parked car, but accompanied by a nefarious narrative. Given heightened anxiety and an extant deep story, such images fuelled more rumours. The most common postings were second-hand accounts of threatening events, such as the following: 'I found out yesterday that my brother-in-law's friend caught someone putting a mattress in his field and pouring gasoline on it. Then our neighbours tells us her friend caught someone trying to light some taped-together m100s … in her driveway.' [2] Note how the actors are several steps removed from the person reporting.
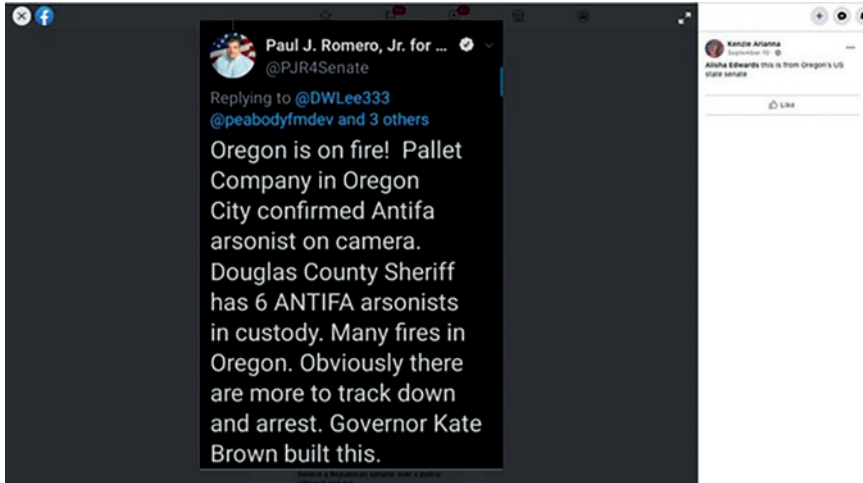
3.2 Post by Oregon political candidate Paul Romero Jr., distributed via Facebook

Most postings were from private individuals, but a sheriff, police association, conservative pundits and a political candidate also spread rumours (see Figure 3.2). Law enforcement investigated the claims, found them meritless (Palma, 2020) and sought to curb them (see Figure 3.3). Consequently, social media platforms stopped posting the rumours and removed some. Though they ceased to exist digitally, the extent of their influence is unknown. Measurable impacts include first responders answering rumour-based calls rather than protecting communities. Clackamas County, where Sandy is located, reported a 405 per cent increase in calls (Clackamas County Sheriff's Office, 2020). Moreover, because some refused to evacuate, firefighters' lives were further jeopardized.

While some impacts can be measured, the rumours themselves cannot. Besides reflecting the social formation, they reproduced a melodramatic discourse grounded in anger, resentment, fear and victimization. A close reading of the data revealed a narrative structure composed of four elements: 1) Arson is not climate change; 2) Antifa/BLM are the arsonists/terrorists; 3) There is a cover-up conspiracy; and 4) Those who don't believe this are the real denialists.

Act 1 – Arson is not climate change

The rumours were anchored by denying the fires' connection to global warming. Instead, those posting insisted that the fires were due to arson. Any suggestion that they were *not* caused by arson was angrily refuted.

3.3 Tweet by FBI Portland on misinformation, 11 September 2020

Actually, most fires are due to direct human action, such as smouldering campfires, but that is not arson. Denying the role of climate change was embedded in larger narratives and conspiracies:

> Q sent me.[3] Let's call this what it really is. This is Domestic Terrorism by paid mercenaries of the Democrat party. This is not about 'climate fires.' This is ARSON.

> Yes, these idiots have been running around setting fires and the mainstream media tries to attribute it to climate change, but we all know the truth … its extremist groups antifa/blm. Nobody is fooled by those world-class retards.

> The wildfires were no accident. Antifa Leftists are starting fires to BURN THE COUNTRY DOWN.

> Believe what you want but these fires aren't just popping up out of nowhere by chance[.] Yes, some started from power lines being down etc but this many fires at once happening this broadly is too strange.

These quotes contain features common to all the postings, including references to 'Q', condemnation of the Democratic Party and allusions to larger attacks. People saw themselves as victims of the Democratic Party and Antifa/BLM, which in turn, draws on white grievance, a political emotion central to the right.

Three components of climate denial can be identified. First, there is the physical experience of wildfires, whose unprecedented nature facilitates false explanations. Secondly, the arson narrative built on decades of climate denial by the right (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). Thus, denying climate change was a familiar practice. And lastly, there was a readily available alternative explanation, or deep story (Hochschild, 2016), which aligned with contemporary national events: anti-racists seeking to destroy the country.

Act 2 – Antifa/BLM are responsible

Assuming the fires were caused by arson, the question is, who are the arsonists? The answer: Antifa and BLM. It is important to understand the relationship between these two formations. BLM is a multiracial mass movement led by Black people which foregrounds anti-racism. Antifa is a largely white, anarchist formation that seeks to support BLM. Antifa has a larger agenda than anti-Black racism, as it is also anti-capitalist and rejects non-violence, unlike BLM (Read, 2020c). Though Antifa is far smaller than BLM, it figures prominently in the right's imaginary: it is concrete evidence of violent leftists. Consequently, many quickly extrapolated arson to shooting, looting and threatening rural white communities: 'Any truth to the rumor that these [fires] have been set? … They're reporting that "antifa" is starting fires to block exits, last report is that shots are being fired at evacuees.' Such exaggerated violence suggests an existential crisis stemming from wildfires *and* challenges to whiteness.

The Democratic Party was considered a secondary culprit as it purportedly enabled Antifa/BLM. 'As Antifa/BLM set fire to the Pacific Northwest, Joe Biden labeled President Trump a "climate arsonist." Really? What warped alternate reality are Democrats living in?' The idea of climate arson is significant as it attributes climate change to individual actors rather than larger anthropogenic forces. Moreover, it overlooks decades of 'climate defiance' (Daggett, 2020) on the part of the Republican Party, in which it has refused to act to address climate change.

The reality is there *was* a pre-existing connection between Antifa/BLM and fire. During the racial justice protests of 2020, Antifa set fires in Portland,

which BLM largely opposed (Read, 2020c). Although wildfires and protest fires are distinct, the summer protests predisposed many on the right to connect Antifa/BLM with fire. Despite over 93 per cent of BLM protests being peaceful (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 2020), media coverage highlighted looting and fires, which exacerbated the wildfire rumours. While biased coverage was important, such narratives also suggest latent, underlying anxieties.

> Who has been rioting? Who has been protesting? Who has been starting fires? … Isn't [it] Antifa and BLM who have been saying 'we are going to burn it all down.'

> Antifa has been setting fires nightly in Oregon and Washington for the past 100 days. Time to implement the death penalty for arson.

> antifa is not a group … but they sure as hell light off a lot of fires … It's not hard to connect the dots.

What evidence existed for such claims? One man was arrested for arson in the neighbouring state of Washington. Because he had been arrested at a 2014 BLM protest, he was portrayed as a member of Antifa, which was sufficient proof to many of criminality. Despite the paucity of evidence, claims of arrests abounded: 'People are getting caught left and right for Arson. (I mean in the dozens).' But, in fact, no known members of BLM/Antifa were arrested (Palma, 2020), which inspired the next part of the narrative arc.

Act 3 – It's a conspiracy

As mentioned earlier, law enforcement and the mainstream media quickly refuted rumours and admonished people to stop spreading them (Figure 3.3). Sandy residents saw such pleas as efforts to protect arsonists from blame, which in turn indicated a larger conspiracy. As claims of arson were rejected by authorities, disinformation morphed into a conspiracy in which the Oregon government, including Governor Kate Brown, the Democrats and the mainstream media, were scheming to obscure the truth. Some demanded that the Governor be tried for treason for her refusal to pursue Antifa/BLM while Oregon was under COVID restrictions. The logic was as follows:

> Sad that these people have no idea WHAT's really going on, AND WANT TO WAIT AFTER PEOPLE DIE AND THEIR HOMES ARE BURNED TO THE GROUND … WAITING TO DO SOMETHING … OH AND LET'S KEEP LAW ABIDING PEOPLE LOCKED DOWN WHILE YOU ALLOW OTHERS TO BURN, LOOT, AND MURDER IN PRIVATE … LIKE ANTIFA

WILL OBEY CURFEW … LIKE ANTIFA WILL OBEY LAWS … HAVE THEY YET?

This is an example of how multiple crises and their attendant anxieties and anger were merged into conspiracy theories.

The flip side of the conspiracy was false victimization: 'The system protects antifa and BLM terrorists. Imagine the narrative if even one Trump supporter or white supremacist was caught setting fires. We are on our own. hashtag – whitelivesmatter.' The phrase, 'we are on our own' hints at the sense of betrayal on the part of the state towards white victims. The belief that a Trump supporter would automatically be prosecuted is untrue, as most domestic terrorism is by white supremacists, who have rarely been pursued (Department of Homeland Security, 2020; Benner et al., 2021). Because such claims are demonstrably false, they emanate from larger grievances, as they reflect the deep story.

Because the right generally supports law enforcement, its rejection of arson claims was difficult to accept. Although law enforcement found no basis to support the rumours, one officer did implicate Antifa. A Clackamas County Sheriff Deputy publicly stated, 'Antifa mother fuckers are causing hell.' He was put on administrative leave and a statement refuting the comment was issued. These actions were seen as evidence of a conspiracy: the officer was punished for speaking the truth.

In contrast, dismissing the mainstream media was easy. The mainstream media has been discredited by the right due to its liberal bias, as epitomized by Trump's phrase, 'fake news'. Not only did most posts reject the mainstream media, but dissension was not tolerated. For example, the few who supported law enforcement's findings encountered pushback:

> Of course the left wing media outlets don't want people thinking it's antifa! This … page … will probably post next: 'Antifa was busy all night checking on rural communities, leaving gasoline for returning property owners in case they need it … Later in the week they plan to hand out gifts to Portland and surrounding areas. This page is losing its purpose quickly, need to change the name to 'Sandy liberal bias information.'

Ironically, BLM *did* aid fire evacuees in Portland (Davis-Cohen, 2020), but this was never acknowledged. When the Portland-based *Oregonian* announced that the arson rumours were false, someone responded, 'I don't believe *The Oregonian* for one second.'

Act 4 – Disbelief

The final arc of the story is disbelief that not everyone shared this narrative. Commentators were incredulous that some could not see what was so

obvious. Such supposed blindness precluded an effective public response, which presumably was to arrest Antifa/BLM members. 'People's blindness is what is dangerous to this community. Wake up folks[,] bad people are doing bad things.' Or, 'We know who set the fires, there's enough video and pictures all over social media to show the proof! It's the same people that have been setting fires downtown! Why is that so hard to figure out?'

In short, people chose to believe the fires were due to arson rather than climate change, they blamed anti-racist activists, fabricated conspiracies, positioned themselves as victims and condemned those who disagreed. Clearly, residents felt besieged and enraged. The question becomes, why did they feel so vulnerable and threatened by imagined terrorists? How is this connected to white supremacy? And, why is this happening in Oregon?

Political polarization and the Oregon right

Oregon, with a relatively small population (4,270,000), is considered a liberal, quirky state. Known for its environmentalism and pioneering drug-legalization, it has a long history of protest, hippies and whiteness. Besides a white population, Oregon and the Pacific Northwest loom large in the white imaginary, as seen in efforts to create a white homeland (Wright, 2020). One reason whiteness is so prominent is because the region was the last part of the continental US settled by Anglo-Americans. As part of US westward expansion, Lewis and Clark's 'Corps of Discovery' did not arrive in Oregon until 1805 and it did not achieve statehood until 1859. Subsequent to Anglo-American arrival, many Native people died from disease and survivors were forcibly relocated to reservations on the coast and eastern Oregon (Barber, 2019; Lewis and Connolly, 2019). Through treaties, massacres, wars and laws, including the Oregon Land Donation Act (Coleman, 2019), Native people were stripped of their land, homes and way of life. White racial violence was central to it all.

White supremacy enabled Indigenous removal which made land available for white settlement. Settlers decided to join the US as a free state to avoid any Black people (Thoennes and Landau, 2019). Besides outlawing Black residents, settlers also restricted Asian communities. To justify and sanitize this history, settlers created a pioneer narrative which erased racial violence (Carpenter, 2020), cultivated white innocence and celebrated Manifest Destiny (Horsman, 1981).

In recent decades Oregon has become increasingly diverse. Latinas/os/x are now 12 per cent of the population, Asians 6 per cent, and Native and

Black populations each constitute 3 per cent. While many Latinas/os/x and Native peoples are rural and live throughout the state (Sandoval and Rodine, 2020), Portland is the most diverse and liberal city in Oregon. Home to 2.5 million, the Portland area is surrounded by expansive forests and agricultural areas, which are far more conservative (Hibbard et al., 2011). Though right-wing politicians represent the vast eastern portion of Oregon, liberals represent the population centres of Portland, Salem and Eugene. Consequently, Portland has emerged as a flash point for clashing racial and political ideologies, leading some to call it a 'proxy in the culture wars' (Pereira, 2021). Sandy is deeply implicated in this geography, as it is a 'shatterbelt' where rural and urban meet. While Sandy has the economic benefits of Portland (US Census, 2019; Mechling, 2020), it embraces a rural politics.

Rural Oregon is a kaleidoscope of political ideologies and formations, including those advocating for decreased regulation (especially extractive industries), gun rights, white nationalism, religious freedom, Christianity, anti-vaxxers and accelerationists, who promote civil war. They are united, however, in their opposition to the state and urban elites, advocating for limited regulation and local control. HoSang and Lowndes (2019) note that rather than directing their ire against, say, the timber industry for abandoning the area (Schick et al., 2020), residents blame environmental regulations and the state. Anti-statism was evident in the 2016 occupation of a Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon. Led by the Bundy family and its followers, it ended in a shoot-out with federal authorities (Inwood and Bonds, 2017, but see Walker, 2018). Others, hoping to escape liberal governance, seek to create a state where rural, conservative, white, Christian values prevail (Wright, 2020).

Environmental governance reflects Oregon's rural/urban tensions, as seen in conflicts over logging, climate change and endangered species. Besides opposing state regulation, rural areas note that they are disproportionately harmed by such policies. Given their minority status, Republicans employ various strategies to assert themselves. For example, rather than voting on a climate change bill in 2018, they fled the state, thereby preventing a quorum (Leber and Breland, 2020).

Extractive industries have been instrumental in helping to organize Oregon's right. A growing political force, Timber Unity, for example, purportedly advocates for farmers, logging communities and truckers. As such, it harkens back to the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1980s. With financial support from logging interests and even Donald Trump, it helped organize the legislative walkouts and protests against climate legislation (Leber and Breland, 2020). Protests included tractors and trucks circling the capital, a powerful symbol

of the white, male, rural subject, which gained ascendency in the Trump era (Carian and Sobotka, 2018).

Racism on the right is complex. As a political movement comprising up to one-third of the US, it embodies various forms of racism. The racial violence of the 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville appalled many, prompting the right to adopt softer language and include Black, Indigenous and people of colour in their organizations (Lowndes, 2021; Ross, 2020; HoSang and Lowndes, 2019). Enrique Tarrio, for instance, an Afro-Cuban, became a leader of the Proud Boys. Increasingly, the racial rhetoric has shifted from abstract white supremacy to protecting the white nation and Western values (Marantz, 2017).

These events build on decades of growing white grievance (Inwood, 2019), economic precarity, anti-statism and increased violence. The white nation feels threatened by the 'browning of the nation' (Jardin, 2019), the election of a Black president (Williamson et al., 2011) and multiculturalism (Bartels, 2020). Such tendencies have been exacerbated by the US's War on Terror which emphasized US vulnerability to terrorism (Ackerman, 2021). The Oathkeepers, a militia group, illustrate how multiple threats combine to form an amorphous conspiracy theory (Jamin, 2018):

> We face an open, now obvious insurrection against our Constitution being waged by the American Marxist left; by the Democratic Party which the radical left has captured; by their many Deep State allies; their Muslim Brotherhood led Jihadist allies; their foreign allies such as Communist China; and globalist elites such as George Soros. All of these enemies, both foreign and domestic, are now engaged in an assault on our Republic, intent on its destruction. (Oathkeepers, 2020)

The murder of George Floyd was a precipitous event that intensified an already polarized political culture. Millions saw the murder as outrageous and began re-evaluating the nature of US racism. As a racial critique developed, Confederate and colonial statues were toppled. Although the protests occurred throughout the US, they were most pronounced in urban centres, reinforcing the urban/rural divide. This clash was palpable in Portland, which saw protests for over a hundred consecutive nights, including street fights between the right and anti-racist activists (Read, 2020a).

This is the immediate backdrop to the wildfire rumours. While they are informed by multiple issues, white rage is central. In keeping with the contemporary right, the rumours drew on coded organizing frames that were not overtly racist but were saturated with racial meaning and reproduced white supremacy (Lowndes, 2021). These frames deny structural racism and annunciate who belongs and who does not. Below I briefly review three frames: communism, 'patriots', and 'law and order.'

Organizing frames

Communism

Communism provides an overarching frame for the right's contemporary discourse. For the right, communism and socialism are existential dangers that must be resisted, with force if necessary. Despite the demise of the Soviet Union, the communist threat persists in the idea that cultural Marxism seeks to destroy Western culture (Jamin, 2018), in China's ascendancy and the 'state-overreach' associated with the pandemic. The right places BLM/Antifa in this camp because anti-racists are categorized as socialist threats intent on destroying the US. BLM is not a communist front, but there are individuals who identify as socialist, while Antifa stands for anti-fascist. Regardless, one repeatedly hears that BLM is Marxist and socialist, and therefore must be resisted.

There is a long history of connecting anti-racism and communism in the US. Communism and socialism were routinely used to delegitimize Black and Mexican-American anti-racist and labour activists (Bernstein, 2011; Kelley, 1990). Prior to the twenty-first century, charges of communism implied foreign interference, which was intolerable during the Cold War. Consequently, such charges discredited anti-racist activism. This had several implications. First, it implied that people of colour were incapable of building effective organizations and movements. Instead, it was assumed that the Soviets were behind US anti-racist campaigns (Bernstein, 2011). Secondly, dismissing anti-racism as a communist plot implies that people of colour were satisfied with their racial status. Supposedly they had no need or desire to seek change. This, in itself, is a remarkable form of denial. Today, the right sees BLM and its allies as 'unAmerican' and it is incumbent upon 'true patriots' to defend the US.

Antifa occupies a special place in the right's imagination. A loosely organized group of activists, Antifa has committed to challenging the right and fascism with physical violence if necessary. Its goal, it says, is to defend protestors. Nonetheless, it has been inflated by the right into a massive, organized armed force committed to Marxism. In reality, it is far smaller and less organized than groups like Patriot Prayer and Boogaloo Bois, which were on the offensive throughout Trump's ascent. The two are simply not comparable, but Antifa is mentioned more often than BLM by those spreading rumours (see Benner et al., 2021). Antifa is an ideal strawman. For one, it is mostly white, thus condemning Antifa avoids charges of racism. Secondly, as the only segment of the racial justice movement willing to engage in violence and that embraces an anti-fascist and leftist identity, it is the manifestation of a supposed global Marxist take-over.

Patriot

The term 'patriot' has gained increasing traction across the right and was strategically used by then-President Trump to characterize his supporters. One wildfire post by a vigilante read: 'I've been doing this every night. Stopping at all these checkpoints and meeting more and more Patriots! It's awesome!' 'Patriot' is a powerful ideological term which serves to legitimate and make respectful the right's racial terror, whether it is attacking the US capitol in January 2021 (Venkataramanan, 2021), shooting BLM protestors (Korecki and Cadelago, 2020) or creating armed checkpoints. The right discredits those who disagree with them as being 'unpatriotic'. Such persons have no legitimacy or standing in the body politic, including the millions of BLM supporters, who are seen as intent on destroying the US.

'Patriot' is a strategic and sufficiently robust term that includes diverse peoples. Indeed, the Three Percenters' (2020) webpage stated, 'patriotism is color blind'. People of colour can be patriots but anti-racist activists cannot. For people of colour to be patriots, they must accept the continued privileging of the white nation, which a minority has always been willing to do (HoSang and Lowndes, 2019). Patriots not only oppose efforts to create racial justice, but they also demonize such activists, labelling them 'UnAmerican'.

Law and order

The phrase 'law and order' builds on a long history of connecting cities, crime and people of colour. Although Portland was the site of nightly protests in support of BLM, including looting and fires, it is the right that has rammed cars into activists, shot people, used pepper spray on protestors and attacked the US capitol (Department of Homeland Security, 2020; Deveraux, 2021). Right-wing activists claimed they were needed because mayors were not controlling the protests, therefore it was up to patriots. One counter-protestor explained, 'We're just sick and tired of the lawlessness for 100-plus days in Portland. There has to be some accountability' (Biggs in Read, 2020a).

The law and order frame is deeply contradictory. First, as previously noted, anti-racist activists are not a serious threat. According to the Department of Homeland Security, 'white supremacist extremists will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland through 2021' (2020: 27). Secondly, law enforcement's negation of the rumours around the wildfires caused confusion and eroded confidence in the only segment of the state that the right trusted. One Facebook user posted, 'I'm so confused … So

are we with law enforcement or no? When we hear "defund the police," we are with them. When the sheriff tells us Antifa isn't setting the fires, they are government and not to be believed' (in Abcarian, 2020). This confusion stems from the deep connection between law enforcement and white supremacy. Whites exhibit the highest levels of support for law enforcement because of its historic role in protecting whiteness, including property, bodies and space (The Opportunity Agenda, n. d.). This support has led to the 'Back the Blue' movement in which mostly white people defend the police against BLM's claims. According to its website, 'with radical leftist protestors constantly vilifying our local heroes, it is our job to stand up and defend their honor' (Back the Blue, 2021). Because BLM's claims of systematic police brutality conflict with law enforcement's 'honor', counter-protestors actively oppose racial justice, as it undermines claims to white innocence.

Conclusion

Denial is woven throughout the wildfire rumours. Denying the racial violence and white supremacy upon which the US was built has been essential to building a viable nation, as the truth does not offer a 'useable past' (Hixson, 2013). Acknowledging the truth occurs episodically and is highly contentious, as the white nation is invested in denying it. BLM and its allies' insistence that Black lives actually matter, implies that they have not previously mattered. It requires accepting that the US has historically over-valued and privileged white lives at the expense of Black lives (Taylor, 2016), which undermines white innocence. In turn, this threatens the central narrative of the US as a land of equality, freedom and a meritocracy. This racial crisis, which has been postponed for centuries, coupled with unprecedented wildfires, produced political emotions resulting in the rumours.

The right and rural-identifying communities are not alone in denying climate change. While most Americans accept climate change, we remain apathetic and unwilling to change (Norgaard, 2011; Antadze, 2018). But the right's denial is not just inertia. Instead, it creates fabrications that draw on deep anxieties which require intense energy and imagination. The right's denial is not the path of least resistance, but is more akin to 'climate defiance' (Daggett, 2020).

Climate change poses serious threats to the right, including government intervention, globalism and elite dominance (Forchtner, 2018b; Klein, 2015). For much of the right, refusal to accept climate change is not about the science, but fear of the policy implications (van Rensburg, 2015) and challenges to its worldview (Klein, 2015). While the policy changes may

be objectionable, they also undermine cherished values, including limited government. Thus, denying climate change for rural-identified Oregonians is part of a larger worldview encompassing one's identity, community, beliefs and lifestyle. While climate denial has existed for decades and racial denial for centuries, in this particular moment they merged. As the climate crisis worsens, we can expect to see similar fusions along various lines of power and difference.

Notes

1 US policy suppressed fire on public lands for over a century, creating highly combustible forests.
2 All quotes are reprinted as in the original unless otherwise stated. M100s are firecrackers.
3 'Q' is short for Q-Anon, a conspiracy in which Donald Trump is saving the world from paedophiles and cannibalistic Democrats and global elites (Healy, 2020).

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