

The storm before the storm

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Abstract

This essay follows the incursion of far-right groups into post-disaster zones in the United States, including communities struck in fall 2024 by Hurricane Helene, where they work to undermine state agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency and recruit white folks to their cause through mutual aid campaigns. Even when the groups in question are not “ecofascist” in the classic sense, our work suggests that they do pledge to protect white folks from an environment that has allegedly been weaponized by enemies. They do portray the sky as a terrain of political struggle. They do seize on increasingly strange weather to advance Manichean narratives and foment a sense of racial threat. And in this sense, they are seeding an emergent ecofascism that can and will be taken up by others.

Keywords

Ecofascism, disaster nationalism, conspiracy, white nationalism, far-right ecologies

Fifteen days after the storm drowned Asheville, North Carolina, the taps there still ran dry (Howe, 2024). Many struggled to get by without the basics: shelter, power, calories, and water. Let alone the news.

Hurricanes aren’t supposed to hit this inland Appalachian town, but Helene did, releasing more than 20 inches of rain—six times the monthly average—in 2 days (Ducroquet et al., 2024; and see Figure 1). Mudslides blocked the streets, rivers carried homes downstream, and dozens lost their lives. One local said the tempest left behind “a post-apocalyptic landscape” marked by “fallen trees,” “roads turned into creek beds,” “power lines down everywhere,” and “bridges torn apart” (Nilsen, 2024).

Footage of aid workers captures fragments of the devastation: first, roadside debris; then, streets cracked in half; then, demolished houses. When the road turns into river, one worker stops his truck and walks a shoddy metal plank to reach a holler.¹ He unloads bread, bottled water, propane, breakfast bars, and more. He bids farewell, and then heads out to help the next. Over and over, he empties out his army pack to provision those in need.

But he’s not from the government.

This footage comes from Patriot Front (see Figure 2), a white nationalist group formed in the wake of the “Unite the Right” rally in 2017 (ISD, 2023). Its members seek—in their own words—to

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Figure 1. This photo—taken by Asheville, North Carolina, resident Bill McMannis on 27 September 2024—shows one small glimpse of Hurricane Helene’s devastation. Accessed via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 2. This photo depicts Patriot Front members engaged in cleanup efforts in Western North Carolina after the storm and was published by the group on Telegram on 26 October 2024, as part of a broader publicity campaign. Faces were blurred by Patriot Front—not the authors—to protect participants from doxxing.

“reclaim America” for Americans, an identity rooted in “pan-European...blood” and realized on the frontier, now put at risk by “tyrants” who have come to “occupy” the government. For years, Patriot Front has advanced an agenda “for the nation [but] against the state,” and used disasters to expand their

influence, showing up to provide aid where they claim “the feds” have either failed or actively betrayed white citizens. The claims hit home in Appalachia which, per patriots, has been hollowed out by corporate capital and “stomped upon” for generations by a “venal” US state that treats it as a “mere source of production.”²

That part is true—the country *has* abandoned Appalachia—but rumors spread after the storm proposed fantastic variations on the theme (ISD, 2024). Like that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was withholding aid from Republican zip codes to depress the vote, or was too broke to help because they had used disaster funds to house “illegals.”³ Or that FEMA aid is *actually* a loan, which enables them to “seize your property.” Before long, armed militias had dispatched themselves to go out “hunting FEMA” (Rahman, 2024), which led some responders to evacuate, which only gave the rumors greater grist. Messages spread on social media announced that, “while FEMA is nowhere to be found, Patriot Front is boots on the ground” (quoted in Hobbs et al., 2024) All the talk of failing democratic institutions had produced a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Then there were the rumors that the storm had been a weapon conceived to target rural white Americans, produced by “frequency machines” tucked high above the clouds and controlled by Democrats or Jews, or simply “they,” depending on the rumormonger (Hawkinson, 2024; and see Figure 3). What else could explain a hurricane of this force touching ground on mountainous terrain? And why? Why else but to dispossess folks of their land and mine the lithium stored underneath (Ferris, 2024; and see Figure 4)?⁴ Right-wing politicians, influencers, activists, and precarious survivors of the storm all traded bits and pieces of a narrative that added up to this: If “they” weaponize the sky against the people and get away with it today, then “they” will “dominate the world” tomorrow.⁵

Rumors are common in the wake of disasters, when facts are spare and nerves are high (Ali, 2020; Sturn and Albrecht, 2021). As “rich reserves of vernacular theory” deployed in contexts of uncertainty, they can communicate deep truths—again, the US *has* abandoned Appalachia, which *is* a site of longue durée extraction, which *does* contribute to strange weather—and they can lend bemusing worlds a sense of structure (Ahmann, 2023: 305; Lepselter, 2016; Maqsood, 2019; Samuels, 2015; White, 2000). But they also have material effects (Luna, 2018) and, in a present rife with social media influencers who have made conspiracy a business, they often amplify extremist movements (Khalil, 2021; Klein, 2023). We saw this during Covid-19 (Snyder and Fischer, 2022) and again after Helene, whose rumor-worlds advanced a “craven politicization” of the storm that served to undermine the state and boost its challengers (researcher quoted in Sacks et al., 2024)—Patriot Front among them.

When set against a crooked state that had, at best, abandoned victims, their aid work made for rousing propaganda. On top of this, there was a *lot* of content. By late October, snapshots of grateful Appalachians served by “virtuous m[e]n of American stock willing to bear any privation” for their folk had been viewed more than one million times on social media, which helped legitimize the group and grow its ranks. This was the point, and leaders said as much.⁶

If Patriot Front hijacked Helene to swell its influence, they were not the first to make this kind of move. Elites have long seized the “shock” power of storms to gut the public sphere and advance their business interests (Klein, 2007). States have likewise used disaster management to expand surveillance, demand allegiance, and equip their armies (Carnaghi, 2022; Collier and Lakoff, 2015; Masco, 2014; Theriault, 2020). After all, disasters are traumatic and often beget desires for improved preparedness, which in turn beget new “technologies of [state] control” (Choi, 2015a: 289). In the face of unrelenting threats to order and stability, “disaster nationalism” promises storm victims both (Choi, 2025b). It also proffers “unity. It says...the people and the state are one” (Seymour, 2024: 18).

Patriot Front practices disaster nationalism. On this point they are explicit and defiant, vowing—despite “ongoing slander”—to pursue “good deeds in service of the nation’s cause.” But theirs is a (white) nation set *against* a “crumbling” state and a (white) nationalism meant to undermine existing institutions, antagonistic with the concept as it stands in extant theory-worlds but in lock-step with a white power movement that has for decades “made the [US] state its target” (Belew, 2018: 3). Seeking



Figure 3. Georgia Congressperson Marjorie Taylor Green was among the many right-wing figures flocking to social media in the wake of the storm to attribute it to a mysterious “they” who “can control the weather.”

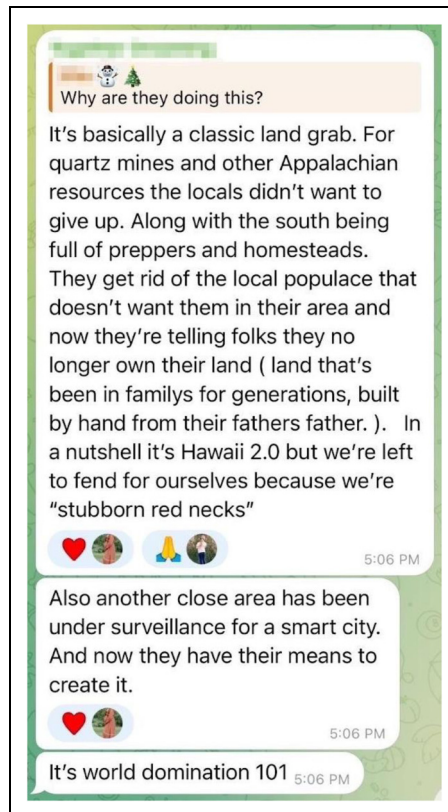


Figure 4. These excerpts from an extended discussion of Hurricane Helene from one far-right Telegram channel capture some of the conspiratorial discourse that circulated in its wake.

“ethnic unity in times of peril,” Patriots urge white victims of the storm to incarnate its afflictions, blaming neither climate change nor the capitalisms that produced it for the hurricane, but a so-called deep state that would use the weather to “replace” white people with their Others (ISD, 2024).⁷ Never mind that disaster relief in the United States *already* privileges white subjects, whose premature deaths

it grasps as problems rather than as norms (Alagraa, 2021; Anderson et al., 2020; Sharpe, 2016). Never mind that it is racialized Americans who have historically been “replaced” by “rebuilding” after storms (Adams et al., 2009; Caverly, 2018; Jackson, 2011; Trivedi, 2020). Never mind all this because “where real crises abound,” fascism chases crises of its own imagination (Seymour, 2024: 191). It craves those sublime, world-shattering events that enable it to swoop in and play hero, and those events are coming faster at this juncture.

To be clear, groups like Patriot Front have fascist tendencies, but are not “ecofascist” in the classic sense: their members do not yet claim to protect the environment for specific people or from the “polluting” force of racialized outsiders; they do not yet propose eugenic solutions to environmental problems (Anson and Banerjee, 2023; Bhan and Govindraj, 2024; Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1999; Menrisky, 2025; Taylor, 2019).⁸ But they *do* pledge to protect white folks from an environment that has been weaponized by enemies. They *do* portray the sky as a terrain of political struggle. They *do* seize on increasingly strange weather to advance Manichean narratives and foment a sense of a racial threat.⁹ And in this sense they are seeding an emergent ecofascism that can and will be taken up by others.¹⁰

In alt-right parlance, “the storm” is shorthand for that fateful day when right-wing champions will cleanse the country of its enemies within: pedophiles, immigrants, antifa, the Jews, the Democrats, and so on. What Hurricane Helene makes clear is that the right is using storms to recruit fighters who might hasten this epochal event, that this strategy is gaining traction, and that we can expect it to intensify as the rough weather does.

Contrary to rumor, there is no quick fix for storms—no magical machine through which we might control their strength, speed, or direction. Stopping an emergent threat before it becomes a full-force adversary will be arduous. We might begin by addressing the material conditions that enable far-right groups to torque the sky into a “conversion machine” (Seymour, 2024: 67) and transform people’s deep distrust into authoritarian desire.

If we fail, we will have still improved real people’s lives. But if we succeed in stopping one storm at its source, we might be better poised to calm the other.

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Notes

- 1 “Hollers” are what Appalachians call homes and towns tucked into the hollow spaces between mountains. They are isolated in the best of times—those spaces “on the side of the road” famously mythologized by Kathleen Stewart (1996)—and even more so in the worst.
- 2 Patriot Front-produced content referenced here was sourced in late fall 2024 from their Gab page (post from 13 October 2025), their founding “manifesto” (available via the organization’s website), their Gab page (post from 3 April 2024), the since-defunct disaster relief section of their website, their Gab page (post from 9 October 2024), and (again) their “manifesto”—in that order. Here and elsewhere, we cite evidence from far-right groups in notes, rather than include it on our reference page, to separate those texts we critically examine from those texts we learn from in the course of that examination.

- 3 As NPR reported at the time, “Former President Donald Trump claimed without evidence that Democrats were withholding aid from Republican areas. Trump also falsely claimed that Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp had not been able to speak to Biden, even though both confirmed they had spoken to one another” (Jingnan 2024). Notably, Trump himself has threatened more than once to withhold disaster relief from states that “challenge” him, as part of his overt “revenge agenda” (Wigglesworth 2024).
- 4 The quoted content comes from a public Facebook post (from 29 September 2024) pointing out the lithium beneath Asheville and asserting that the hurricane was “the outcome of a well orchestrated man-made disaster, weather modification and geoengineering.” Setting aside charges of malintent, there are indeed lithium (and quartz, and gem) mines in and around Asheville, and Appalachians are used to being exploited by those who seek to profit from resources in the mountains (Sapp 2024).
- 5 This last line comes from a discussion of the storm in October 2024 among users on a Telegram chat called “Raw Milk Racism.”
- 6 Patriot Front-produced content referenced here was sourced in late fall 2024 from the since-defunct disaster relief section of their website.
- 7 Patriot Front-produced content referenced here was sourced in late fall 2025 from the organization’s Telegram channel (post from 1 October 2024), the since-defunct disaster relief section of their website, and the organization’s Telegram channel (post from 14 November 2024)—in that order.
- 8 Patriot Front does, however, highlight its members’ affection for the natural world: they post on their website and Gab page about hiking, camping, and cleaning up litter; they lambast the U.S. state for its extractive legacies; and they couch their goals in the language of “natural law.”
- 9 Beyond Patriot Front, the American far right has largely succeeded in taking over “a denialist apparatus built and later abandoned by fossil capital, and to its traditionally pro-capitalist ideology added the animating idea of racial threat,” drawing on age-old anti-Semitic tropes to proffer the theory that climate change is an excuse to transfer resources from the Global North to Global South under purview of a one-world government (Seymour 2024: 194).
- 10 There is precedent for this kind of emergence, for example, in eugenics: a “gentleman’s” science of making “better babies” that within decades came to countenance mass murder (Stern 2005). Or take the kindred role of fertility studies within (eco)fascist projects. While hardly fascist in and of themselves, they help give grist to “the ecofascist commonsense that some lives are environmental goods while other lives pose existential threats” (Ahmann and Oguz, this issue), especially when paired with concerns about “carrying capacity.” Consider the mass shooter in Christchurch, New Zealand, who self-identified as ecofascist and framed his rampage against Muslims as responsive to the “racial” threat posed by “the Great Replacement,” or the shooter in El Paso, Texas, who pitched his ghastly act as a preemptive strike against the ravages of climate change, drawing on Malthusian logics.

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