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Pitcher, B.

This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in New Formations 2022 (107&108), pp. 84-100

The final definitive version is available online at:

https://doi.org/10.3898/NewF:107-8.05.2022

THE POPULAR CULTURE OF EXTINCTION AND THE RACIALISATION OF SURVIVAL

Ben Pitcher

Abstract:

Framed by an understanding of the distant human past, this article considers how species extinction has become a prominent resource in the cultural present. The environmental activism of Extinction Rebellion and the nonfiction bestseller *Sapiens* provide examples of where the theme of human survival and extinction is currently playing out in contemporary Western culture. This article goes on to give a more detailed reading of TV survival shows as sites of popular cultural meditation on *Homo sapiens's* vulnerability as a species. Survival shows explore the terms of our own survival, reflecting on the possibility of starting again and providing scenarios that consider how to live without the technologies and infrastructure on which we have come to rely.

Placing particular emphasis on the interwoven and mutually defining discourses of race and species identity, I attend to the racialisation of survival. In TV survival shows I suggest that the vulnerability of the human species comes to be animated through a kind of existential blackface: the inhabitation of environments, the simulation of experiences and the mimicry of social and cultural forms imputed to nonspecific Indigenous others. As Western culture imagines the terms of its own survival, racial and Indigenous others serve to model alternative visions of humanity pushed forwards and backwards in time, representing a forgotten but intrinsic premodern and prehistoric core, or the antecedents of a post-apocalyptic future.

Keywords: extinction, species, survival, prehistory, race, Indigenous peoples

SPECIES EXTINCTION, PREHISTORY AND RACE

How does the vastly expanded timeframe of the Anthropocene play out in Western popular culture? How are the profoundly disjunctive temporalities of natural and human history felt in regular life?[1] How are the extraordinary imperatives that necessitate a 'geological turn'[2]

expressed in the ordinary and everyday? In this article I want to explore how the threat of human species extinction provides an important conceptual horizon in popular cultural attempts to make sense of our current predicament. This is not because it is an easily comprehensible idea. Far from it. In popular culture as elsewhere, human species extinction is a 'hyperobject' that is 'almost impossible to hold in mind'.[3] Yet if disorientation and scalar confusion go with the territory, human species extinction provides some anchoring points that have, for better or worse, made it culturally dominant. For a variety of different reasons, it is becoming more and more common to engage with the human condition 'from the perspective of deep time and the possible obsolescence of the human species itself'.[4] For the purpose of this discussion I want to bracket off a summative verdict on whether thinking at the level of species is conceptually insightful, obfuscatory, or a problematic but necessary placeholder to contend with a particular moment of peril.[5] Much of the critical literature on this topic rightly draws our attention to the political problems that ensue from the application of a universal species concept to the profoundly uneven and differentiated experience of human planetary life in our current historical moment, and this key insight certainly informs the discussion that will follow. Following a brief discussion of a couple of places where species thinking has become prominent in popular culture – the environmental activism of Extinction Rebellion and the runaway success of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*[6] – this article will centre its analysis on the genre of the TV survival show. I will suggest that to make sense of the contemporary popular culture of the Anthropocene, we need to appreciate the subtextual needs and illicit satisfactions that are being worked through in culturally dominant narratives of extinction and survival.

Some of the reasons for the cultural prominence of human species extinction are obvious. Extinction is a language that has been entrenched by decades of wildlife documentaries telling elegiac and enumerative stories of natural decline.[7] The vulnerability of plant and animal species have served as a go-to precedent for envisaging the possibility of our own demise, and accounts of the anthropogenic extinctions of other species – from the dodo onwards – provide direct correlatives of our own.[8] Common knowledge of our implication in the sixth mass extinction event has meant that we have taken such ideas to heart: healthcare professionals today warn of growing 'eco-anxiety', defined as a 'chronic fear of environmental doom'.[9] Decades of environmental activism have built on the TV documentary motif of the species-under-threat, and the relative unresponsiveness of political institutions has arguably brought about a shift of emphasis from an ethics of care for other species (e.g.

polar bears), towards an ethics that emphasises care for self. Environmental activist Greta Thunberg heralds ‘catastrophic climate change’ with her prognosis that this ‘will most likely lead to the end of our civilisation as we know it’.[10] The UK’s former chief scientist warns that we have ‘a battle on our hands to preserve the future of humanity’.[11] Research centres have been established at high-profile academic institutions to study ‘risks that could lead to human extinction or civilisational collapse’, exploring ‘a small but real possibility that civilisation ends in the next century’.[12]

Human extinction is a dominant theme in contemporary culture, not just because we have increasingly come to accept the possibility that it might actually happen. There is also something about all this premediated[13] talk of the end of our species that feels like it might contribute to our salvation, the sense in which our imagination of species extinction seems to get to the nub of the matter, confronting the problems of the Anthropocene in a clear-eyed fashion, stripped of hubris and self-delusion. Climate heating is regularly framed as ‘a direct existential threat’[14] in the hope that human self-interest might resonate as a catalyst for adequate change. In the Cold War the idea of mutually assured destruction operationalised a very similar hypothesis of species survival in the face of annihilation, that beneath or beyond political differences which might otherwise be out of control there might reside within us an instinct for survival, a core humanity that cleaves to its own preservation. The notion that we might, as a species, possess some ultimate and final characteristics that will prove a match to the ultimate and final test of extinction, suggests that there is not much distance here between the eschatology of environmentalist humanism and that of the monotheistic religions. Sight of the end of human life hereby becomes a trope imbued with hopefulness, transformative rather than final, not an end but a new beginning. To speak of humanity’s expiration casts a spell to stave it off, for coming good in the end is the metanarrative of all narrative form. Like Scheherazade, all the stories we have ever told, tell that we lived to tell the tale, up to and including those stories that anticipate our own demise.

If human species extinction is, on the level of narrative form, a story about the possibility of human survival, thinking at the level of the species also points towards the resources that we might call upon to save us from ourselves. One of the neatest tricks that species thinking does, in bringing the human back to what seems like first principles, is that it appears to allow us to imagine ourselves out of the determining conditions of the present. While popular environmental opinion is divided on whether capitalism is part of the solution, it is widely

acknowledged to be part of the problem. If it has become 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'[15] then it might be said that the intimation of human extinction provides an end-of-the-world horizon where the intractable problems of capitalism might, through a process of 'world reduction',[16] be stripped away from an intrinsic human core. In the popular imagination, species thinking removes much of a seemingly external detritus of social, cultural and political life and frames the human species as defined by attributes internal to itself. Sceptical of the ability of capitalist culture to think itself out of our current mess, but in the absence of other forms of moral authority, species thinking provides us with opportunities to look inside ourselves in attempts to identify resources for our own thriving. The existential problems brought about by capitalist modernity are neatly side-stepped by removing them from a more fundamental conception of humanity.

But what makes up this 'fundamental conception of humanity'? What are the 'first principles' on which it is founded? What are the 'internal resources' that make it up? In *Back to the Stone Age*, I suggest that human species identity is given life through complex imaginative investments in the prehistoric.[17] Prehistory provides a culturally dominant way of understanding human life in deep time, taking us back to our origins to flesh out the meaning of who we are as a species. Prehistory frames the human species in biological and evolutionary terms (consonant with all those wildlife documentaries), but it also layers onto this working theories of human capacity, psychology, sociality and desire. The prehistoric is commonly understood as a repository of inherent human qualities that underpin all historically contingent forms of culture, society and politics. If capitalist modernity has led us astray from sustainable forms of human life to the extent that we are now contemplating our own species extinction, a prehistoric version of human nature or species-being (albeit a radically dehistoricised one) promises an iteration of human life that will save us from ourselves. In the absence of a future to look forward to, the 200,000 years of our species existence seem to promise harmonious or sustainable models of living that have been suppressed, ignored or derailed in the historical present. Giving clues about what could make us happier, healthier or otherwise better people, prehistory appears to provide an archive of resources from which twenty-first-century subjects might discern the outline of liveable futures, giving answers to urgent questions about who we are, where we came from and what we are like.

The elaborations that prehistory provides of our qualities as a species are not, of course, expressions of unalloyed empirical fact. The prehistoric imagination – those ways we come to think about and understand the distant human past – bears the strong imprint of contemporary culture. The unknown and unknowable character of much of human prehistory is in many ways what makes it such a flexible and widespread resource, and while it will sometimes draw upon the work of professional prehistorians, the popular life of prehistory has a significant degree of autonomy from scientific accounts. What is interesting about prehistory from a cultural studies perspective, is what it tells us about human life in the twenty-first century. By exploring what we are talking about and thinking through in our prehistoric engagements, we can begin to understand the work that prehistory does in the historical present. If prehistory furnishes the resources with which we are contemplating the threat of human species extinction, we must get to grips with how we conceive of the terms and conditions of our future existence. How do we think we stand a chance of escaping extinction? How, in practical terms, do we think the survival of the human species is going to happen?

My argument in what follows will be that the idea of race has a particular significance in the way we come to imagine our species survival, a crucial element in envisaging 'the problem of the future of the world'.[18] There are, to begin with, under-acknowledged continuities between our conception of species identity and longstanding – albeit scientifically disproven – models of racial difference. Once upon a time, there was in Western contexts no controversy in the idea that prehistoric and racial others shared the quality of being lesser in their development or sophistication. The Greeks correlated civilisation and geography so that the further away from the Mediterranean 'the more primitive and prehistoric people became'.[19] Such associations get repeated and consolidated in colonial modernity, where encounters with 'savage peoples' were said to 'recreate for us the state of our own ancestors, and the earliest history of the world'.[20] Nineteenth and twentieth-century racial science was able to make 'direct links between Paleolithic cultures and modern-day races',[21] and evolutionary ideas about the 'survival of the fittest' were called upon to legitimate European cultures of conquest.[22] While such ideas have been hurriedly forgotten in the popular anthropological discourses of postcoloniality, our conceptualisation of the human species in deep time continues to be mixed up in a multitude of different ways with the idea of race. In the most general terms, the prehistoric imagination – concerned with understanding human identity and difference in the past – remains dependent on an evaluation of human identity

and difference in the present. The diachronic language of species is made intelligible through the synchronic language of race. Race is the raw material with which we put together an understanding of prehistory, providing the lexicon and grammar in which our humanity becomes legible to us.

To begin to think about how this plays out in popular culture, consider for example the idea of the 'tribe', which sits in an uneasy zone of semantic ambiguity between prehistoric and racialised others. Tribes are a not infrequent reference point in the popular culture of the Anthropocene, naming pre-modern forms of social organisation we feel ourselves to have lost, but which are thought to persist as an underlying and intrinsically human arrangement, from which we might develop self knowledge as a species and reinvigorate archetypes of communal and political association. Until fairly recently, the slippage between prehistoric tribes (qua underlying human nature) and contemporary non-Western Indigenous hunter-gatherer cultures (as a manifestation of this) was a fairly easy one to make. Despite the fact that 'modern small-scale societies are separated from prehistoric societies by just as many generations as the rest of us', contemporary 'tribes' are still often understood as the 'remnants of past patterns' or as 'living fossils'.[23] A stadial model of evolutionary or cultural development persists in the contemporary prehistoric imagination, so that while it may now be less common to make explicit reference to Indigenous cultures to evidence a human archetype, the association continues to be implied.

Species thinking might remain a useful tool in thinking critically about the existential challenges of the present, but it needs careful handling if it is not to reinforce understandings of *Homo sapiens* that place Western modernity, even in its critique, at some kind of apex of species development. This requires us to follow the lead of thinkers like Kay Anderson and Sylvia Wynter in cultivating an understanding of species outside of a normative figure of humanity 'produced by Western European humanism, modernity and capitalism.'[24] As the threat of human extinction looms over us, demanding action and engagement, we must come to appreciate the ways in which the resources of the distant past remain indexed to, and caught up in, racialised understandings of human difference. The examples that follow will all demonstrate, in their different ways, how race looms large over Western narratives of human survival, showing how conceptions of human beings under threat of extinction simultaneously maintain and disavow racial distinction. As Western culture imagines the terms of its own survival, racial and Indigenous others serve to model alternative visions of

humanity pushed forwards and backwards in time, representing a forgotten but intrinsic premodern and prehistoric core, or the antecedents of a post-apocalyptic future. In a less optimistic vein, where the survival of humanity remains in doubt, I will suggest that racialised others comfort Western subjects with the affirmation that the unfolding of human extinction will remain socially differentiated right up to the end.

Tales of species extinction

I will start by gently shaking that universal abstraction of our species identity, our 'humanity', taking a look at what particular interests appear to be at work within it. Consider, for example, the referents of 'extinction' in the inaugural 'Declaration of Rebellion' set out by British environmental protest group Extinction Rebellion (XR), which opens with the following statement:

> This is our darkest hour. Humanity finds itself embroiled in an event unprecedented in its history. One which, unless immediately addressed, will catapult us further into the destruction of all we hold dear: this nation, its peoples, our ecosystems and the future of generations to come.[25]

This collaging together of objects of value is of course intentional. The global, ecological and species-universal describe the terrain of ecological crisis, while the national particular remains a necessary strategic focus of political activism (XR's declaration calls for the UK's 'citizens' to declare themselves in 'rebellion against our Government'). Yet even within these three opening sentences the declaration sustains an ambiguity of address: who exactly are the subjects of its plural and possessive pronouns 'we', 'us' and 'our'? In XR's intended reading, the activism of national citizens serves the wider cause of humanity, making this ambiguity both productive and necessary. But can the parochial interests of those acting 'on behalf the security and well-being of our children' and 'with ferocious love of these lands in our hearts' always be trusted to share an identity with the interests of 'humanity' as a whole?

The declaration's framing of crisis suggests at very least a tension between the species-universal and the national-particular. As noted in an open letter by 'Wretched of the Earth', a 'grassroots collective for Indigenous, black, brown and diaspora groups', XR's worries about the future ('we *will* face catastrophe') do not acknowledge how ecological violence and

suffering is for many oppressed and minoritised groups a longstanding and ongoing experience. Underplaying the centrality of capitalism and colonialism as well as existing histories of struggle, XR's description of humanity on the brink can be said to be the product of a culture that is registering, but not yet experiencing, the full effects of climate breakdown.[26] As other critics have pointed out, the declaration's warnings about 'mass migration' as a reason to act on climate change can be said to comprise a 'green nationalism' that 'reinforces white fears about poor racialised others'.[27] XR's declaration aims to encompass all of 'humanity', but its contextual framing reveals that the normative subject position of the XR activist remains privileged and white. However unintended, the cultivation of fears around 'mass migration' constructs the future of climate change 'as a problem of race', such that 'the figure of the climate migrant is a threatening, monstrous figure from the future'.[27] It is a short jump from this kind of framing to the Malthusian verdict on human overpopulation that fuels a burgeoning eco-fascism of the far right. The threat of decline and catastrophe is a shared theme connecting mainstream environmentalism and the far right, and contemporary fascisms advance a critique of modernity that draws on prehistoric referents, where 'primordial ecological unity has been mutilated by modern life'.[29] I note such correspondences not as a definitive indictment of groups like XR but as an illustration of some of the conceptual problems that accompany contemporary attempts to imagine the threat of human species extinction.

[insert figure 1 here]

Extinction is a theme that is also foregrounded in Harari's multi-million selling *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. As a book which contextualises the human species in deep time, It is useful to think about the ways in which *Sapiens* provides popular audiences with tools to navigate the environmental crisis of our current historical moment, providing a kind of self-help guide to living in the Anthropocene. From the first pages of the book we get intimations of humanity's demise. 'It is doubtful', Harari writes, 'whether *Homo sapiens* will still be around a thousand years from now'. Modern humans have become 'master of the entire planet and the terror of the ecosystem'. But as we mould the world to fit our needs, destroying habitats and causing species extinctions, we are said to 'endanger the survival of *Homo sapiens* itself'. To Harari there is not one single point at which *Homo sapiens* lost its way and fell out of step with the rest of nature; our destructiveness is characteristic of our species. We are, he writes, an 'ecological serial killer', presiding over three waves of species

extinction marked by our colonization of the planet, the spread of agriculture, and finally industrialization. Evolution has made us 'a xenophobic creature', 'the deadliest species in the annals of planet earth'. Among the victims of modern humans Harari numbers close human relatives like Neanderthals, who he speculates could have been subject to 'the first and most significant ethnic-cleansing campaign in history' (*Sapiens*, pp 7, 465, 393, 74, 218, 72, 19). As the back cover of his book puts it:

100,000 years ago, at least six human species
inhabited the earth. Today there is just one.

Us.

Homo sapiens.

This bleak framing of a species putting its own future in jeopardy might strike some as a kind of Anthropocenic realism, just the kind of environmental 'wake up call' that humanity needs. Yet the generic human subject defined by universal species narratives such as this serves to flatten out temporal differences and anachronistically project contemporary characteristics into the distant human past. Though Harari's 'serial killer' reference is clearly figurative, 'ethnic cleansing' is not, and that twentieth-century term serves to retroject the frame of racial modernity by millennia, effectively making genocide a characteristic of human species identity. If the prehistoric past is a resource to imagine the future, it becomes a problem if that future is indelibly marked by modernity's genocidal and ecocidal violence as a *fait accompli*. The conditions of human life have in history and prehistory certainly been different from how they are now, they are far from homogenous in the present, and in the future they will be different again. Harari's ahistorical species fatalism tells us by contrast that we have always been the same.

If one issue with Harari's bestselling story is that it universalises a particular account of the near-present so that it comes to stand in for all of time, his narrative also flattens out contemporary differences in human culture so that we are all equally incorporated as the legatees of the human story. As Alison Bashford points out, the telling of *Sapiens*'s species story in the language of modern science sidelines the ways in which some non-Western and Indigenous subjects will make different and competing claims to the cultural significance of

the distant human past, sometimes claiming 'to be directly connected to ancestors over deep time'. Harari's sweeping narrative universalises the reader as the inheritor of all human history so that 'the responsibilities […] and achievements […] of early *Homo sapiens* are shared equally by all'.[30] Alternative stories about and relations to the prehistoric are reduced to the status of folk tales that subsist below Harari's authoritative narrative.

So long as *Sapiens* is about the culpability of humanity as a species, it conceals from view questions of uneven responsibility, agency and economy amongst individuals, states, corporations and global institutions. In doing so it places the problems of the present into the hands of a single undifferentiated species subject, a 'monolithic, post-racial "we"'.[31] We are, Harari's story suggests, all in the same boat. The mythology of species unity, as in Roland Barthes's critique of 'The Great Family of Man', is hereby produced through a radical dehistoricisation of the human condition.[32] In *Sapiens*' final future-oriented chapter Harari presents us with a speculation about genetic engineering, cyborgs and machine learning. His book's concluding statement that '[w]e have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles' (*Sapiens*, p465) clarifies the identity of who 'we' really are. Harari's great universal species 'we' is revealed to be the technoscientific spirit of capitalist modernity, hereby naturalised in the teleology of our species journey. The ostensibly antiracist assertion of a common racial humanity conceals its underlying coloniality.

There are echoes of Harari's story in Bill Gates's *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, where the innovations of technological capitalism are framed as a neat solution to the disaster that capitalism has itself brought about, but where responsibility is likewise attributed to our species as a whole. It goes without saying that billionaire philanthropists think that capitalism is the only game in town for dealing with climate crisis; what's more telling about these narratives is the way in which ecocidal capitalism becomes a necessary and defining feature of a contemporary species identity. Despite the Western world's disproportionate consumption of planetary resources, Gates's opening statement chooses to tell us that it is 'humans' who 'need to stop adding climate gasses to the atmosphere'.[33] In an address on climate change to the UN Security Council, TV environmentalist David Attenborough states 'we are a single truly global species whose greatest threats are shared'.[34] In such language shared threats and shared responsibility risk becoming merged into one (*Climate of History*, p216).

How do we survive?

Given these problems with the premature universalisation of a common humanity, it might seem unlikely that persisting racialised inequalities would have much prominence in Western discourses of human species extinction. In a sense this is true. Though Indigenous voices remind us of the ways of life that have been brought to a final end by the swift violence of settler colonialism or the slow violence of capitalist modernity, repeated stories about genocide, apocalypse and the end of native lifeworlds [35] are rendered inadmissible in the mainstream of Western culture. Contemporary worries about the end of the world do not readily admit that 'for the native people of the Americas *the end of the world already happened* – five centuries ago'.[36] Though Indigenous languages, 'vehicles of entire cosmologies' are going silent in their thousands,[37] these are not final enough to qualify as definitive extinctions, or at least they are not the extinctions that are understood to matter. Widespread human death is factored in to even the most ambitious targets to limit global warming: the IPCC have 'high confidence' that a 1.5˚C global temperature rise above pre-industrial levels still places 'disadvantaged and vulnerable populations' including 'some indigenous peoples' at 'disproportionately higher risk of adverse consequences'.[38] And yet, though non-Western and Indigenous others may feature as acceptable collateral damage in the terrifying business of species survival, harbingers of our end rather than examples of the thing itself, they do not disappear entirely; rather they become in their very vulnerability particular objects of interest and fascination. The obscene racial subtexts of our culturally prominent concern with human species extinction remain ugly and socially unacceptable, and they are accordingly shielded from open admission in the intricate cultural dance of racial disavowal; instead they play out obliquely and at one remove. To provide a glimpse of the racial preservation that is nested down within the ostensibly humanitarian concern for species preservation, the rest of this article will explore one prominent example of the survival theme in contemporary popular culture.

While the fringes of US culture provide some of the most dramatic examples of 'prepper' lifestyles – those individuals who expend significant amounts of time and energy in preparation for the event of war, disaster or social collapse – the themes of apocalypse and survival are widespread in mainstream Western culture. 'Cli-fi' has become a prominent genre of literature, drama and film. A common concern of this genre is with the definition of attributes and qualities thought to be intrinsically human, as opposed to those which have been supplied to us by culture and civilisation. This is a question that has been enhanced by

worries about the withering of knowledge and skills that we feel we have learned to delegate to technology. What is intrinsic to us? Can we boil an egg, fix a tap or wire a plug under our own devices – that is, without our electronic devices? If we were amongst the lucky survivors of catastrophe, do we have the skills to maintain ourselves and our culture, or have we lost a fundamental contact with the materials that sustain us? In a survival scenario, might we actually get back to a better, truer or more authentic way of living? Could we somehow go forwards by going backwards? In these kinds of context, a conception of prehistory gets mobilised as an expression of human universals. We engineer scenarios to exhibit and test what we can do without the technologies or infrastructure we have come to rely on. Popular science writing asks its readers questions like '[h]ave you ever worried that you might get stranded on a desert island and have to become a hunter-gatherer to survive?'.[39]

The survival show has become a staple genre of reality TV since its invention around the turn of the millennium. The international *Survivor* franchise is the most popular version of the show, having been produced in more than forty countries. All variants of the survival show stage a retreat from present technologies, they depict some form of encounter with 'nature', and they frame survival as a kind of social experiment. Some survival shows pose the question of survival in individual terms, and audiences are encouraged to reflect on what kind of person is best equipped to thrive in adversity. Group shows tend to include a competitive dimension that animates the tension between individual and collective flourishing, between the needs and desires of the individual and those of the wider community. Hobbesian and Rousseauian themes intersect in TV experiments that stage the alternating merits of civil society and states of nature. The early UK reality TV show *Castaway 2000* placed 36 volunteers on a remote Scottish island at the turn of the millennium, promising to 'find out what happens when a cross-section of British people try to create a new society'. The more recent Channel 5/MTV show *10,000 BC* sets itself up as a 'stone age survival experiment', while the opening credits of the Channel 4 show *Eden* poses the question 'if we could start again, what kind of world would we build?' and asks whether participants will 'be able to create a better world than the one they left behind?'.[40] In *Eden* a junior doctor talks to camera about her disenchantment with work, a yoga instructor tells us 'I'm happiest when I'm out in the wilderness', and a carpenter claims:

> for too many years now, I've been saying, "I wish all the satellites would fall out the sky, I wish all the oil reserves would dry up, I'd like all of the electricity to just stop". I hanker for that simple life.

The survival genre's deep-time rewind on human culture presents us with the possibility of alternative ways of living for people alienated from the modern world. The hankering of participants for 'that simple life' does not always work out in practice, for much of the genre's dramatic tension derives from the challenges of survival, with difficulties dialled up or eased down by production crews busy optimising watchable jeopardy for dramatic effect. But even when the return to the present is embraced as a blessed relief from cold, hunger or social breakdown, 'that simple life' retains its appeal, in various forms, as a locus of contemporary desire. There is no doubt in our twenty-first-century minds that we are 'designed to be connected to the natural world' and that we are doing something good to ourselves by 'getting back to nature'.[41] We take pleasure in doing things with our hands, embracing forms of self-sufficiency and craft practices that have been made redundant by our high-tech consumer culture.[42] Such visions of the good life are indeterminately old, usually pre-industrial and pre-capitalist, but generally in abeyance to a logic that amounts to the-older-the-better: the prehistoric provides a terminal reference point for the harmony of human beings and the natural world. At the start of his solo survival show Bear Grylls time-travels in material culture with his boast that he will survive 'with only the clothes he is wearing, a knife and a flint'.[43] The postlapsarian premiss of the survival show *Naked and Afraid* dispenses with clothes altogether. In reducing participants to their bare human essentials, such shows offer a seductive escape from the present. They model ways out of the social and environmental problems of the twenty-first century in their symbolic discarding of the inessential accretions of subsequent culture. They meditate on the possibility of starting again. In their references to the prehistoric, survival shows pose the question of human persistence in species terms, dramatising that key existential question of contemporary times: what are the terms of our own survival?

Scratch a universal question and it's easy to see the hidden particularities that sustain it. The survival genre is no exception: underpinning its popular inquiry into the circumstances and conditions for the survival of human life is of course Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* a story that Western cultures have been telling repeatedly since its first publication in 1719. Journeys back in time to uncover human fundamentals are simultaneously geocultural

journeys beyond the Western world, and racial others have long served as an equivalent living embodiment of an intrinsic humanity. The original Swedish version of the *Survivor* franchise, *Expedition Robinson,* makes explicit reference to Defoe's novel, but other variants of the survival genre are assembled from the same building blocks. Whether survival shows are set on the classic tropical island of white sand and palm trees, in jungles or in the wilds of Scotland, they are all versions of the 'desert island', apparently uninhabited and belonging to nobody, the *terra nullius* that has long served as the legal justification for acts of colonial dispossession. In Defoe's novel, Crusoe is of course not as alone as he first imagines himself to be, but the visiting 'savages' or 'cannibals' (including Defoe's adopted servant Friday) do not disturb his claim to sovereignty and 'an undoubted right of dominion'.[44] The survival genre similarly persists on a colonial fantasy of possession, whereby participants' encounters with the natural world, and one another, are untroubled by the question of whose island they might actually be living on. Assuming 'an undoubted right of dominion', survival show participants may be humbled by nature, but their sovereignty is in no way restricted by the laws and conventions of a receiving culture. The only restrictions participants encounter are the rules of the TV game they have themselves freely elected to play, and the island – as in related shows like *Love Island* – serves as an abstracted fantasy space that suspends the jurisdiction of ordinary life. In the survival genre, civilisation is where participants have come from, never where they are going. In these shows a symbolic binary of past and present, culture and nature, is territorially fixed, and much play is made of the SUVs, trucks, rescue boats and helicopter drops that transport participants from one side of the binary to the other.

It is the job of participants in survival shows to test the boundaries of culture and nature to uncover their intrinsic humanity. In *Survivor,* participants are 'castaways' who transform themselves 'as they catch their own food, build their own shelter and order their own society'. Such encounters with nature are inflected by a degree of postcolonial self-consciousness: depictions of 'nature' do not usually include 'natives', and beyond an exoticised welcome, embodied racial diversity in *Survivor* is usually limited to the casting of the castaways themselves in accordance with prevailing domestic TV norms around diversity and representation. Stories that would have once have been told without any misgivings about racialised others are now framed around the prehistoric as a more available substitute, sidestepping the potential charge of 'cultural appropriation'. In spite of this, *Survivor*'s format more than adequately fills the gaps in its own colonial narrative. 'Castaways' are recruited into competing 'tribes' and debate with one another in a 'tribal council'. Within this

framing, ‘castaways’ bring their own fairly developed ideas about the type of transformative experience they are going to have. Conner, a law student on *Australian Survivor*, frames his participation as a ‘rite of passage [in]to manhood’, adding ‘I read lots of books like *Lord of the Flies* and *Robinson Crusoe*. I love this kind of adventure’.[45]

If the survival genre is, as I have argued, a popular-cultural meditation on the survival of humanity, then what is the significance of its colonial framing? It is worth reflecting that the trope of survival is a longstanding reference point in discussions about Indigenous culture in settler-colonial histories. In such accounts, survivors exist in extinction narratives as examples of ‘the last’ of their kind, facilitating ‘a spirit of tragic pathos’[46] in a transition from the violence of settler colonialism to the settler nation that replaces it. The survivor is an example of the ‘vanishing indigene’ who prevails only to symbolise the end of the line.[47] In its flight from whiteness and civilisation towards nature and tribal life, the survival genre appropriates the precariousness of Indigenous existence for the purposes of a dominant Western culture. Back in the 1980s, Indigenous rights groups first started to borrow the framing discourses of extinction and endangerment from environmentalists.[48] In the survival genre, we can see this language decontextualised and deployed to service Western culture’s own ‘eco-anxiety’. Fragility is expressed and the possibility of extinction is rehearsed through this symbolic borrowing from Indigenous cultures. The threat of environmental collapse makes us in the West worry that the terms of our survival might end up being as perilous as we have made the Indigenous cultures of the Global South. Such appropriations might be understood as a form of existential blackface, a practice in which the vulnerability of the human species is made visible through the inhabitation of environments, the simulation of experiences and the mimicry of social and cultural forms imputed to nonspecific Indigenous others.

In spite of these symbolic debts, the survival genre invariably recentres the privileged white man as the hero of its ordeal. Consider the desert island survival show *The Island* fronted by Eton-educated Bear Grylls and described as ‘a social experiment […] to see if man [sic] can recapture his [sic] primeval instincts and outlast the elements when stripped of the luxuries of twenty-first-century living’.[49] Evoking Edgar Rice Burroughs’s aristocratic *Tarzan* with his ‘mistrust of civilisation and sympathy for primitive life’,[50] it is ultimately the privileged white man, fortified by his gender, social class, military training and derring do, who is best equipped to serve as our guide on the TV journey back in time and race. The travails of the

survival genre take figures like Grylls on a long detour through cultural, racial and prehistoric otherness in search of the essence of humanity. Alpha men like Grylls are not untouched by their experiences – being tested by raw nature makes them better people – and they eventually come back to civilisation with their status assured and their privilege justified as our rightful leaders all along. These experiences mean Grylls is in high demand on the motivational speaking circuit, capable of empowering 'an entire Banking & Finance division with true-grit determination to strike out for new horizons, ready to embrace failure and become more resilient to grow and succeed in these changing and uncertain times'.[51]

In Joe Davidson's analysis, the survival genre does not really provide an escape from twenty-first-century capitalism. Rather, it displaces to the exotic wilderness the travails of contemporary neoliberal culture with 'its emphasis on precarity not security, humiliation not respect, and self-preservation not flourishing' (*Life Can Be a Little Bit Fluffy*, p477). The desert island offers a location for the playing out of familiar struggles, its departure from 'civilisation' mimicking neoliberalism's erosion of social support in the name of market efficiency. To be able to survive on a desert island is to be equipped with a mindset that will thrive in the boardrooms of *The Apprentice, Shark Tank* or *Dragon's Den*. Bear Grylls might put on a show of hunting and gathering in the primeval wilderness, but his real talent is in leveraging his brand to hunt and gather product endorsements (including Luminox watches, Revo sunglasses, Canon cameras and Land Rover cars). If survival in neoliberal culture is all about an independent, entrepreneurial reliance on one's own resources, the survival genre frames these resources as the inherent capacities of individualised bodies and minds. Survival shows tell us that we gain a competitive advantage by getting back in touch with this inner self, merging neoliberal and stone age subjectivities so that they effectively become one and the same. *Homo sapiens* becomes confirmed as *Homo economicus*. The perennial search for a human essence or human nature thus comes to an end: survival shows tell us we were neoliberals underneath all along.

As well as making neoliberal subjectivity intrinsic to the human condition, the survival genre intimates what life might be like in a tough cut-throat future without the safety net of social support or welfare states. Such conditions have a clear racial subtext, for racial subjects historically conceived as more distant from civilisation are hereby conferred a competitive edge. If the inner city is, as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five remark of life in Regan's America, 'like a jungle sometimes',[52] we are prompted to reflect on what sort of person is

likely to be able to survive and thrive there. If early hip hop underlines the racialisation of survival in the urban West, it reminds us that there are other contemporary contexts that also provide a road map for future survival. The tropical settings typical of survival shows are literally located in the Global South, and the privations, insecurities and instabilities experienced by participants might be said to be figurative reminders to Western audiences of a feared precarity to come, the further encroachment of what Achille Mbembe has called 'the tendency to universalise the Black condition'.[53] In this racialised premediation of Western futures, greater privilege confers greater vulnerability. In the survival show the colonial cordon between metropole and neo-colony has begun to break down. With parallels to narratives of 'reverse colonisation' in late Victorian popular fiction where 'the coloniser finds himself [sic] in the position of the colonised',[54] the survival show's rehearsal of colonial themes in the shadow of ecological crisis provides a confused reversal of dominance and victimhood, of power and vulnerability, a 'profoundly duplicitous fantasy of who is threatened and who is threat'.[55] Prehistoric and racial difference are once again intertwined and mutually defining in Western imaginaries of the terms and conditions of future survival.

While jeopardy is part of the format, we know that ultimately contestants on survival shows are going to be OK. Physical and psychological survival is closely monitored. Helicopters, private doctors and expensive insurance policies are always reassuringly on hand in case things get sticky. Such are audiences' minimum expectations for survival-as-entertainment. Participants in survival shows can accordingly accept superhuman risks akin to those taken by the heroes of action movies; secure in the knowledge that they are supported by multimillion-dollar safety nets, contestants undertake actions that would have life-threatening consequences in real life. Pain, cold, hunger and the effects of malnourishment and disease may be acutely felt by survival show participants, but viewing audiences understand they are a temporary spectacle for our vicarious entertainment. Starvation is never a death sentence, merely a test of participants' fortitude. We watch human beings struggling for their own existence in order to muse upon our human needs, capacities and limits, but the fact that nobody really gets hurt inevitably bolsters an unrealistic faith in our own hardiness. Survival shows tell us that if things get bad, we'll be OK in the end, and in the process we might even benefit from experiencing 'that simple life', from learning what's really important, from making friendships for life, and from all the other advantages expressed in such homilies of the genre. In the process, survival shows help to cover over the existential conditions that really do threaten human life today. Survival shows may in some sense be a displaced

attempt to understand the effects of a heating climate on humanity, but in many respects they are not well designed to dramatise it. The Tuvalu archipelago in Polynesia is a close visual match for the archetypal desert island of blue sea and white sand, but it is symbolically and geographically far distant from the industrial sites whose fossil fuel combustion has resulted in the rapid increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide that looks set to sink Tuvalu's islands beneath its rising seas. Survival shows offer a representation of pristine nature (a necessary contrast to their human subjects, who are burdened by Western culture) that paints a distortive picture of worlds as yet untouched and untroubled by disasters that are already very much underway.

Real-world conditions that test out human beings' physical and mental capacities for survival are of course not hard to come by in the societies of the Global South, but these are off-camera and persist off-camera long after survival TV shows have packed up and gone home. Less telegenic conditions of human survival can also be found a lot closer to home, but these shows tell us that survival is something that happens when you struggle to dislodge a coconut from your desert island's palm tree, not when you struggle to get a referral to your local food bank. Viewers' interest in survival in the distant wild does not translate into sympathy for abject economic survival closer to home.[56] For millions today, the survival show's existential question is a lived reality. Their unromantic and anonymous struggles to survive rarely support uncomplicated stories of catharsis and heroic overcoming. They do not reconfirm the strength of innate human capacities and make struggling subjects better people by bringing them back into touch with what really matters. In truth, the circumstances of the everyday knife-edge struggle for survival tell us more about human waste and exploitation. Pictures on social media of the black and brown refugee bodies that routinely wash up on European shores provide an obscene parody of the survival genre, life-jacketed as if for a TV challenge gone wrong. The end of the world routinely comes too soon, with scant opportunities for continuous self-improvement and without a rescue helicopter in sight. In our prevailing cultural settlement, the conditions for the thriving of a portion of our species are at best the conditions for the unheroic, degrading and bare survival of another. Survival shows, dramatising the survival of the thriving portion, remind us how comfortable we have become with this arrangement.

And in my reading, this is what survival shows are really all about. This prominent genre of reality TV dramatises the obscene subtext of the Anthropocene-era worry about species

survival. Presented as if it is a universal concern, TV survival shows make the implicit acknowledgement that when it comes to species survival we are not in the same boat at all. Wealth and privilege confer some protection, and the peoples of the Global South will be (and already are) the first to suffer. This is of course no great revelation, but it is a truism that serves a purpose in our vulnerable times. Critiques that expose the Western self-interest concealed within ideas about 'species' and 'humanity' can presume, because it is hidden, that it is the product of a distorted world view that could be subjected to some remedial corrections and reforged into a universal humanism worthy of the name. My example at least suggests something a little different. Here, Western self-interest is, intentionally or unconsciously, hard-baked into imaginaries of human survival, to the extent that it seems to be the reason survival stories are being told in the first place. North-South inequality is hidden because it is embarrassing, but everyone knows it's there. Western audiences accordingly return to stories about extinction and survival because they provide some awful satisfaction. We may not eventually 'defy the disaster that befalls the species *qua* species',[57] but TV survival shows comfort their audience with the recursive message that they are not going to be the first to die.

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