

Who Will Survive? On Bodies and Boundaries after the Apocalypse

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Abstract:

Preppers and Survivalists are commonly described as people who believe in abrupt, imposing and near-in-time disasters and who are actively and practically preparing to survive this imminent apocalypse. This paper examines how the body, and the closely connected analytical categories of gender and sexuality, are used to define survivalism. In other words, how does corporeality structure survivalism – who gets to be a survivalist and who does not? In an attempt to answer these questions the paper turns to a theoretical framework that combines the notion of trans-corporeality with the performance of gender, sexuality and embodiment in virtual digital space. To bring focus the paper specifically concentrates on a recent online discussion about “if, how, and to what extent one, as a survivalist, should or would help a woman with small children alone in a forest with no survival equipment after TEOTWAWKI (The End Of The World As We Know It)” (Swedish Survivalist Forum, 2013). This particular discussion is relevant since it, as we shall see, puts analytical categories, such as gender and sexuality up front, pointing to their retained importance as objects of study. The results show a desire to protect the body from change – change that often emanates from other bodies. As such, the desire to remain bodily untouched or unaffected emerges as a foundation for survivalism.

1 Preppers and Survivalists are commonly described as people who believe in abrupt, imposing and near-in-time disasters and who are actively and practically preparing to survive this imminent apocalypse. Preparing to survive, in this context, usually focuses on collecting gadgets for defence, safety and food (‘bullets, bandages and beans’), but also on social, physical and mental preparedness. Importantly, with the internet, online discussion forums have become a central part of prepping and survivalism. In these social arenas, survivalists and preppers, who want to remain (relatively) anonymous, can engage in discussions on practices and scenarios. In combination this creates a socio-material practice where the personal body comes to the centre. The body and its capacities are co-constructed with tactics and tools in order to prepare it for the upcoming trials. In this process, the internet is used both as a source of information, but also as a way to engage with peers. Consequently, for this paper, I want to explore in more detail how preconceptions of the body affect the socio-material practice of prepping. To bring focus to the paper I will specifically concentrate on a recent online discussion about ‘if, how, and to what extent one, as a survivalist, should or would help a woman with small children alone in a forest with no survival equipment after TEOTWAWKI (The End Of The World As We Know It)’ (*Swedish Survivalist Forum, 2007-2011*). This particular discussion is relevant since it, as we shall see, puts analytical categories, such as gender and sexuality up front, pointing to their retained importance as objects of study.

2 There is very little written about survivalism and prepping in general. The only major study to surface this far is on survivalist culture in the USA. In short, this study describes survivalists as being mostly about ‘talk’ (rather than ‘action’). Again this points to the importance of online discussion forums as an arena where survivalists can co-create imagined futures and scenarios where their own preparedness will prove useful. In many ways this is a play with alternative futures. However, these futures are limited in that they always result in the necessity for survivalist skills (i.e. a preparedness for TEOTWAWKI). In a way, this becomes a kind of hypothetical justification for their current way of life. Mitchell Jr. (30) describes this as a situation where desires are efficiently balanced against both current capacities and the material objects at hand. As such, it is clear that survivalists, while perhaps mostly engaging in speculative prophesying, do not see ‘business as usual’ or ‘carrying on and keeping calm’¹ as sustainable ways forward. Arguably then, survivalism can be viewed as a norm-critical way of organizing everyday life. Their views of the future clearly go against a neo-liberal vision of a prosperous society of limitless growth. Nevertheless, the question is what norms are challenged and what norms are left in place? For this paper, I am specifically interested in examining how the body, and the closely connected analytical categories of gender and sexuality, are used to define survivalism. In other words, how does corporeality structure survivalism – who gets to be a survivalist and who does not? In an attempt to answer these questions I will firstly turn to a theoretical framework where I combine trans-corporeality with the performance of gender, sexuality and embodiment in virtual digital space. I will then go on to briefly describe the method used for collecting and analysing the empirical material (the online discussion), moving on to the more elaborated discussion of the findings.

3 Survivalism and prepping can be described as a social movement, which is also, somewhat contradictory, extremely individualized. To actively prepare for imminent catastrophes becomes a way of life for many, and a way of conduct within, what may be referred to as, a risk society. The general idea of the term risk society is that modern societies are organized in response to risks – risks that often emerge out of increased societal complexity. This complexity also produces a sense of risk for individuals, where a measure of scientific knowledge (or pseudo-knowledge) is required to both assess risks as well as understand oneself and one’s own position and ‘horizon of agency’. As such risk becomes central to survivalism as it, as a movement, deals with a growing societal complexity through

¹ KEEP CALM and CARRY ON was the slogan of a motivational poster produced by the British Government before WW2. The poster is nowadays popular in various parodies such as internet memes.

considered future scenarios. At the same time, there is also individual risk to consider for survivalists, as they constantly have to balance personal safety against (foreseen) collective agendas. For example, the constant concern with being anonymous and not revealing important strategic locations, as well as the fear of being stigmatized and met with scorn, produce a social dilemma where the interests of (survivalist) individuals and (general) collectives may collide. At the centre of this risk-orientation stands the body. It becomes a nodal point for the entanglement of theoretical discussions and physical preparations. Consequently, much like Lisa Blackman, I want to stress how bodies can be seen as ‘enacted materialities’:

Biology is socialized or enacted: it is both *real* and *made* and requires a more complex relational approach to understand its entanglement. (Blackman 130)

In line with this statement, Alaimo (20) goes on to develop the notion of trans-corporeality, which highlights how the body is never a strictly delineated autonomous object, but always sensitive to the flows of the environment that surrounds it. As such, trans-corporeality includes, for example, industrial environmental factors, as well as various social and economical forces. Humans are always entangled with an unpredictable material world. Trans-corporeality then can be understood as a way to read corporeality as constantly crossing borders and constantly shaping and being shaped by social, technical and economical forces. In this force field, characterized by emerging and enactive phenomena, Alaimo draws on theorists Tuana and Barad to propose that these forces engage in a complex interaction best explained through the concepts of “intra-action” and “viscous porosity” (Tuana 188). In brief, Barad’s theory on agential realism explains intra-action as a mutually transforming interplay between discourse and materiality involving both human and non-human actors.

Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; rather the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. (Barad 152)

Viscous porosity on the other hand is more focused on how the mediating membranes, which may be symbolic and/or material, are also intra-active in the performance of phenomena (in this case, the body). While these concepts have different analytical angles and subtleties to them, what they have in common is an understanding where co-evolving, co-affecting, mutually transforming relations between phenomena, cause boundaries to be continuously reworked. Thus, I want to use the concept of trans-corporeality as an analytical tool which can acknowledge the socio-material complexity of survivalism. Because, even if survivalists

conceptualize themselves as detached autonomous individuals, their stories are filled with border-crossing accounts relating to other people's bodies, technology and the surrounding environment. To rephrase, I want to trace how trans-corporeality is performed in survivalist practices and analyse

particular moments of confusion and contestation that occur when individuals and collectives must contend not only with the materiality of their very selves but with the often invisibly hazardous landscapes of risk society, which require scientific mediation. (Alaimo 17)

4 In a similarly trans-corporeal line of reasoning van Doorn asks "Where does the human body end and technology begin?" (536). As mentioned, the 'online' is no longer easily separated from the 'offline' (if it ever were). Several such dichotomies are now, being questioned. For example, 'the virtual' provides a history relating to an imagined reality, cyberspace and other 'informational environments' where the body was separated from the mind via (computer) mediation. The virtual implied that the mind went into cyberspace whilst the body was left behind, dispirited in front of the computer. Virtual reality was conceptualized as a *different* reality, with other laws and possibilities than the physical 'real' world. Even though many studies have shown that 'virtual life' on the internet is not disembodied nor decontextualized, the image of the virtual as separated from the material conditions of everyday life, is lingering. Van Doorn, drawing on Katherine Hayles, means that virtual practices are simultaneously materially real, socially determined and discursively constructed. The virtual can be understood as an immaterial potential that inhabits the same room as corporeal agency in everyday practices. Importantly, the virtual also envelops our memories, emotions and hopes, which influences and co-creates our situation even though they are immaterial. Thus, the virtual is not the opposite of the real, but the virtual is a constant part of the real. In digital spaces, the potential of the virtual can be actualized in the form of digital objects (e.g. text, illustrations, film clips). While users are not physically present in the forum, their virtual presence takes on a different, but material, form in the shape of the texts and pictures that are 'supported' (or delineated) by the digital-material architecture. The performative practices that constitute the social network of Swedish survivalists are made possible by technology. At the same time, these socio-technical assemblages are impossible without corporeality. The body, the networked self and the immediate surroundings (in the below quote exemplified by 'the city') intra-act:

the body/city metaphors have turned concrete and literal. Embedded within a vast structure of nested boundaries and ramifying networks, my muscular and skeletal, physiological and nervous systems have been artificially augmented and expanded.

My reach extends indefinitely and interacts with the similarly extended reaches of others to produce a global system of transfer, actuation, sensing and control. My biological body mashes with the city; the city itself has become not only the domain of my networked cognitive system, but also – and crucially – the spatial and material embodiment of that system. (Mitchell 19)

Conclusively, it seems clear that there is a concurrence in theories emanating from different disciplines in acknowledging how material and discursive objects and milieus are co-constructing each other. Echoing the quote by Lisa Blackman in the beginning of this section, I would argue that trans-corporeality is a concept that takes a step towards “a more complex relational approach” (35) between the body and its surroundings. When applied to online discussions, the entanglement of discourse and materiality, body and environment, becomes perhaps even more pertinent.

5 With the advent of the internet individuals engaged and interested in survivalism has been provided with new possibilities to interact and share information with each other. Before the popularization of the internet, these practices were likely even more isolated (and thereby also even harder to study). As such, the web sites and discussion fora set up by, and attracting, survivalists and preppers, provide researchers with new sources of data regarding these ‘clandestine’ practices. I have chosen to focus on one particular discussion in a survivalist internet forum. The forum is part of a larger website, which functions as a social network for people with an interest in survivalism and prepping. The website was set up in 2007 by a private person and is non-profit. To this date, the forum, which is the core of the site, holds over 70,000 posts in more than 4,000 discussion threads. It has just short of 1,500 members of which two thirds can be seen as active discussants. Membership is free and admittance is limited to creating a unique user identity. Most members of the forum have chosen to be anonymous and anonymity, or OPSEC (operation security) as it is referred to in the forum, is strongly advocated. Anonymity is regarded as very important as many survivalists experience that non-survivalists remain puzzled by their practices, but also because it is of practical importance not to reveal your BOL (Bug-Out Location) to SHEEPLE (a blend of people and sheep – i.e. the larger masses who do not prep, but rely on authorities for their post-apocalyptic safety) or other survivalist for that matter. As such, the forum is an arena where ‘secret’ and somewhat stigmatized (and thereby individualized) practices and practitioners can find common ground and share ideas, conceptualizations and scenarios. Further, the forum also becomes a ‘middle-ground’ where material and virtual practices meet and entangle. As mentioned, I am for this paper primarily interested in how ideas, conceptualizations and scenarios that relate to the body come to structure survivalism,

both materially and socially. Because of the limited scope of this article, I will only describe the method very briefly. I used basic forum data collection focused on a specific discussion. In practice this meant copying and saving every post to the chosen thread in a text file. The analysis followed a thematic approach, which implies a qualitatively oriented approach to identify, analyse and report on emerging patterns (themes). The method is characterised by an openness towards the empirical material where themes relevant to the research question are the most pertinent. A relevant theme captures something important in relation to the research question, something that is regarded as a meaningful pattern within the data material. An important part of sound research ethics is to protect informants from harm. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) suggests that 'harm' should be understood contextually and ethical considerations should be grounded in an inductive approach. Put simply, ethical considerations state that the more sensitive the information, the more rigorous the ethical decisions. The forum I have chosen to study is publicly accessible for anyone with internet access (public and private is, however, increasingly tricky to determine). Thus, because I have regarded the risk for harm as relatively small, I have chosen to be fairly open about the choice of forum. However, informed consent is notoriously difficult to collect in online contexts. Consequently, all data have been anonymized. Also, new technology (i.e. search engines) makes it so that verbatim citations can be easily traced, why I have also chosen to paraphrase quotes, titles of threads and other potentially identifying headlines (as well as translating them from Swedish to English).

6 While digital virtual spaces open up to the possibility of transgressing the social categories of your physical body (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability), many studies show that we rarely make much use of that potential. On the contrary, our online selves are (these days) analogous to our offline selves (also because the separation between offline and online is increasingly hard to make distinct) (Davis and Kennedy). Digital practices also tend to perpetuate and even augment already dominant ideologies and class hierarchies. Consequently, instead of separating the digital from the corporeal, it may be useful to understand how material and digital virtual practices intra-act – that is how they co-construct each other. As mentioned, the discussion I have chosen to analyse begins with the question if, and to what extent, you would, in a post-catastrophic future, help a woman stranger with two children. The exact question is:

So, the shit hit the fan, you grabbed your BOB [bug-out-bag] and left. On your third day of walking, when camping in the middle of the woods, a woman with two children approaches your fire. They are dressed in city-clothes and regular shoes and their equipment consists of one backpack with two empty half-litre bottles of mineral

water, some jewellery, a passport and some other valuable papers. They are obviously hungry, tired and freezing. What do you do?

The question in itself contains (the potential for) many assumptions and generalizations about what it entails to be a survivalist. For example, by specifying the encountered persons as a woman with children, a distance between the general survivalist (a man) and others (women and children) are made. Also, by specifying their (limited and impractical) equipment, further distance is made between ‘proper’ survivalists (men with proper gear) and others (women and children without proper equipment). As such, there is a very heteronormative undertone to the question. Over a time period of four years, 29 different forum members discuss this question resulting in a total of 51 posts and replies.

7 The larger part of the posts reply that they would help the woman and children, but put their own survival in the first room, not risking their own bodies. Possibly they would also require something in exchange for their help (e.g. jewellery or sex). Some respondents are quick to emphasize that one should wait until the children are asleep before ‘seducing’ the woman. Others reply that they would not take advantage of a female in that position. Replying to this, yet others argue that trading sex for shelter and food is not “to take advantage of” and to “shy away from the fact that the selling of sex will be an asset for women in a post-apocalyptic world is just stupid”. At this point a new argument is made about how the woman should be reprimanded for being so naive as to approach the man and the fire at all (as other men may not be as friendly as they themselves are). All these replies, and the question itself, alludes to the importance of reinforcing the body by equipping it with large amounts of, for example, lighters, chocolate and other kinds of gifts or goods for trading in order to bypass any threatening interactions with other bodies. Also, interestingly, the placement of the objects on the body (chest pocket) is described as important in terms of future interactions. Sexuality, economy, and security intra-act in ways that emphasize the norm of the male heterosexual body and the materially prepared ‘proper’ survivalist.

8 The corporeality of survivalists extends virtually through for example stories of knowledge and skills as necessary for survival, but furthermore also through the feelings that certain clothing (i.e. military/forest clothing) may invoke in others (e.g. respect, threat). The type of clothing covering the body is important: BDU (Battle Dress Uniform used by the United States armed forces), Camo (Camouflage) or M90 (camouflage patterns used by the Swedish armed forces) are seen as generating different responses with the people one may encounter. Generating discussions about being seen as a friend or an enemy. In this case the clothing becomes an additional mediating membrane between the body and other

(potentially) colliding bodies. In terms of definition, the survivalist body emerges as one wearing military clothes, being loaded with at least 30 kilos of relevant equipments and armed. Other bodies are described as female, child(ish), non-survivalists (of course), criminals, foreigners (who are described as unreliable due to potential previous war traumas) and mentally ill people (who in a post-apocalyptic world purportedly can not get hold of the necessary medication to “keep *their* bodies in control”). The descriptions of ‘the others’ are consequently not a single unified account, although the making of others is in itself consistent. Interestingly, the imaginary woman in need is described primarily as helpless, but she is also portrayed as a potential threat, since “a female bear with cuds can be dangerous”. This reference to ‘natural essentialism’ as a threat underlying superficial helplessness, can be seen a call to always be prepared, since in a situation of crisis, man is described as returning to an almost non-human primate state of survival of the fittest.

9 Users who identify as female highlight the image of the female body as threatened by male bodies. They describe a post-apocalyptic world where the female body is also made resilient through weapons. The potential threats from male bodies are met with the parole “shoot first, ask questions later”. A few stories oppose an imagined heteronormative future by describing for example how they have knocked men out, or how they wield weapons with confidence (and thereby ascribe certain agency to their ‘gun-extended’ bodies). In general, the thread can be seen as an attempt to prescribe, or at best negotiate, who is a survivalist and who is not. Many question the point of solitary survival at any price, and do not see the meaning of being “the one with the most weapons and ammo”. Their argument comes to the conclusion that the future will consist of “lonely, paranoid, armed, broken men scattered around, and then silence”. A few more stories from users defining as female speak to a more openly violent future where, mainly male, bodies continuously threaten the survival of oneself, and therefore must be eliminated:

If I were to encounter a person I deem not trustworthy, I would not risk my own life for that person. I will probably have to incapacitate that person. I may come across as raw, but that is, unfortunately, the only way to survive TETOWAWKI.

Perhaps as a joke, the strategy of SGT (trans. Shoot-Dig-Shut Up) is put forward, while others point to the necessity of cooperation and empathy as being more fruitful for survival (while at the same time also describing this tactic as probably being idealistic and utopian). The female body responds to the patriarchal future by applying the same tactic of reinforcing the body through material means (in this case weapons). In the cases where alternative (e.g.

communal) hopes are expressed they are also immediately disqualified as futile in the face of male-controlled futures.

10 Digital environments are sprinkled with material traces in the form of digital-virtual objects that actualize corporeality. As such, everyday interactions become materialized in digital spaces (van Doorn). I think it is useful to understand this discussion thread as a game or strategic play, rather than a simulation. The thread is a way to actualize what survivalism is. It is a discussion that becomes materialized through the use of new media technologies. Thoughts become text, films and other media objects, which link to other texts and visualizations where gender, sexuality and embodiment are reconfigured. Disconnecting gender and sexuality from the physical and singular human body in order to reconnect them through mediating technology does not necessarily result in subversive bodily acts. Rather, this distributed agency repeats the regulating normative system due to a limited repertoire of actualizations (van Doorn). The masculinity embedded in the texts in the thread is actualized by performing stories of heterosexuality and ‘the others’ – those who are not survivalists, not (Swedish) men as well as through stories of the good masculinity: the autonomous hero; the soldier; the survivor. What is described in the thread can be seen as a form of dynamic ‘repair work’ (Persson) where masculinities are emphasized, negotiated, patched and defended. Other survivalists are seen as “comrades” identified mainly through their clothing (i.e. military). Jeff Hearn points to the strong connection between men, militarism and the military in a historical sense. It is hard to imagine a more masculinized figuration than the soldier (Hearn). The survivalist body is described as wearing military uniform. As such, it is made masculine, and resilient, through both the virtual connotations (e.g. respect, threat) as well as materially (e.g. weapons, equipment). Stories of other survivalists as comrades, as well as the thread in its entirety can be interpreted as a homosocial activity where being masculine in front of other men becomes crucial. These stories are intimately connected to heterosexuality and exclude anyone categorized as ‘other’ (Persson). The question spurring the discussion actualizes shared ideas of ‘correct’ or normative bodies and can be seen as unifying through a masculine and heterosexual norm, but also as negotiating different preferences for future cooperation or loneliness and violent solitude. The question in itself may limit the possibilities for reconfiguration by augmenting current norms rather than challenging and problematizing gender and sexuality. Even though the discussion negotiates, troubles and repairs the survivalist figuration, heterosexuality is compulsory, male homosociality is pertinent and other identity positions are marginalized. As mentioned however, certain attempts are made at punching holes in the dominant heteronormative stories, making them

‘leak’ in a different ways (Shildrick). These leakages emanate from non-men who de-heterosexualize the feminized body by equipping it with weapons and pointing to its capacity for violence (against men). Somewhat paradoxically, these stories also place themselves within a future based on cooperation and empathy. Stories of the feminized body prepared for violence can be read as a resistance towards stories where the female body is sexualized, commoditized and described as *something other* than a survivalist. This can be read as a resistance against a masculinized and heterosexualized imagination of a future of controlling and accessing helpless female bodies. It can also be read as stories of being a prepper first-hand, and of camaraderie that could span gender and identity positions.

11 It would seem that survivalism acknowledges a trans-corporeal world, but consistently falls back on ‘cis-corporeal’ solutions. That is, the interplay with the flows of the environment and other bodies is seen as a source of threats. At the same time, this porosity of borders is what is being addressed in solutions. On a final note, this virtual actualization of bodies, gender and sexuality is materialized as archives (of memories). The thread I have been discussing in this article is part of the archive of the forum. The discussion in this thread has been going on for four years (so far) and it is part of the user-generated content that is the forum. Because of this, it could be said that this virtual play with imagined futures plays a constitutive role in the materialization of gender and sexuality in both digital and physical environments, but also opens up for possible future work of change. Survivalists seem to subscribe to the idea that bodies are like billiard balls bouncing off of each other, and the importance of being prepared circles around making the skin of the body as tough and impervious as possible. A trans-corporeal perspective acknowledges that the mediating membranes (of the body and everything else) are porous. By invoking trans-corporeality as an analytical term, I point to both the (futile?) desires to keep the personal body safe and secure as well as to the necessity to consider the sociomaterial flows that traverse bodies, technologies and environments (in order to be resilient).

If the material environment is a realm of often incalculable, interconnected agencies, then we must somehow make political, regulatory, and even personal decision within an ever-changing landscape of continuous interplay, intra-action, emergence, and risk. (Alaimo 21)

In conclusion, this creates an odd contradiction where adapting (adjusting to the situation) becomes a desire to protect the body from change. As such, the desire to remain corporeally unchanged or unaffected emerges as a foundation for survivalism.

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