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WSQ: Survival Editor's Note

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Editors' Note

In recent decades, professional organizations representing the Earth sciences have debated adoption of the term *Anthropocene* as a new geological epoch—and when such an epoch may have commenced. Most broadly, some argue that the term should pertain to an era of intensified human impact on the environment since the development of agriculture, some twelve thousand or so years ago, thus replacing the currently used term *Holocene*. Others suggest that we need a new term to mark the intensification of that impact since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century. Still others date the Anthropocene to the nuclear bomb tests that preceded the U.S. atomic attack on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, and there are also arguments for dates including 1492, 1610, and 1964.¹

In geological terms, this degree of unsettledness regarding the precise date of a new epoch may constitute historical hairsplitting. But one thing is certain—despite persistent political posturing and willful ignorance of established science, predominately among the American right wing—one of the outcomes of human activities including the use of fossil fuels is a cycle of global warming, rising sea levels, and extreme weather caused by the release of carbon dioxide and other so-called greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. As a result, acidifying oceans, desertification, and other stressors render many species' habitats newly hostile. Accordingly, many observers recognize that we are now in the midst of a “sixth extinction” that may rob the Earth of many currently extant species by the end of the twenty-first century (Kolbert 2014).

It is not only nonhuman animals that are at risk. Current trends raise

real questions about the foreseeable survival of not only some plant and animal species—and not only our most cognate species, the chimpanzee, gorilla, and orangutan, all of which are endangered—but also the human animal itself. Fears and fantasies of pending apocalypse play out in masculinist fantasies of heroicism and abjection found in novels, films, and TV series including *Left Behind*, *The Leftovers*, *The Road*, *28 Days Later*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Armageddon*, *This Is the End*, *The Last Man on Earth*, and *The Walking Dead*. In short, in our fictional and dramatic culture, we appear to be obsessed with our own demise and the damage we inflict on ourselves, other species, the planet on which we live, and its atmosphere. In our daily lives, aggregating as social behavior, we appear to be alternatively oblivious, in denial, indifferent, or inured to prospects of our own inviability—and, occasionally, willing to engage in random (but important) acts of damage control, such as voluntary recycling or the “Paris Agreement” reached at the United Nations Climate Change Conference late in 2015. Though the Agreement was widely hailed as a global step forward in containing global warming, critics of the accord have voiced concern that the pledge to “[hold] the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” is too little, too late, too vague, or too unenforceable (Davenport 2015; Gillis 2015; Geden 2015; Goodman 2015).

According to a United Nations report gauging the impact of climate change on food security, biodiversity, water resources, and human health, women suffer disproportionately from diminishing resources and surging infectious diseases, such as those transmitted by mosquitoes that prosper in warming climates and expanding flood zones. Comprising the majority of the world’s poor, women face rising labor required to obtain potable water, fuel, and foodstuffs when these resources become increasingly scarce or expensive (UN WomenWatch 2009). These global trends are measured by scientists and policy makers at macro levels, parsing changes occurring across millennia and globally sourced big data.

In contrast, this issue of *WSQ* approaches survival at micro levels, tracing the risky business of survival among individual bodies, resistant subjects, and intimate, sometimes audacious acts. Nevertheless, the specter of large-scale, world-historical survival is never, and never can be, entirely out of the picture. For their contributions to this volume—which are, throughout, both provocative and evocative—we thank the authors of both the essays and book reviews gathered here: Katherine Brewer Ball, Tiffany Johnson Bidler, Jih-Fei Cheng, Omer Aijazi, Elien Arckens, Amy

L. Brandzel, Golnar Nabizadeh, Rebecca A. Adelman, Wendy Kozol, Cynthia Barounis, Laura Shackelford, Abigail Simon, Breanne Fahs, Mairead Sullivan, Ahuva Cohen, Sarah Kessler, Lisa Poggiali, and Bethany Doane. We also extend our appreciation to the artist Marina Zurkow, whose work appears within this issue. And we thank the issue editors who proposed the theme and shepherded it so thoughtfully: Frances Bartkowski, Taylor Black, and, especially, *WSQ* Editorial Board Member Elena Glasberg.

We also offer our admiration and gratitude to those who contributed to additional sections of the journal that complete this issue. For *Survival*, *WSQ*'s fiction, prose, and creative nonfiction editor has selected two short prose pieces: "Hearing Voices" by Sokunthary Svay and "Where We'll Leave This for Now" by Jessica Estep. Svay's first-person narrator, whose parents were refugees from the Khmer Rouge, reveals how thoroughly haunted the second generation may be by parental trauma and by silence about their suffering. She searches for pathways to her own survival, eventually finding a kind of overcoming in voice lessons. Estep sutures the reader into her unpacking of a woman's decision regarding a pregnancy through both use of the second-person address and her sharp eye for the quotidian backdrop for life choices that she presents as forks in the road with irrevocable consequences. In these stories, intergenerational ties both threaten—and make possible—survival itself.

The rich poetry of *Survival* echoes with women's strong, conflicting, and sometimes silent voices as it contests facile representation at every turn. In "A Conversation with My Mother," Miriam Pilonen portrays a mother and daughter's phone call as a struggle to speak and, simultaneously, silence the other, the woman each loves most. In contrast to this call, the reverberations of nature on "a tall wheat eve" in Erica Tom's "my own chimeras" blur the aural and the tactile, creating something hybrid. A darker hybrid, the sinister myth of woman-as-monster appears in Georgia Pearle's "Next Witness," and her "Sunset Limited" likewise depicts a woman disclaiming the deadly metaphor of the "train wreck" used to dehumanize her. Unsettling familiar religious and classical allusions, Jen DeGregorio's poem "Nuts" contemplates the meaning of an aimless, distracted divinity, while her intertextual "Cold Pastoral" reincarnates Keats's urn, turning the poet's "*unravish'd bride*" into a woman now "ravaged by *eternity*." Locating her poem, "Rana Plaza," at a site of recent historical disaster, Erin Murphy looks through the eyes of women and girl workers who one morning are compelled to walk into a factory that will soon collapse upon them, a building that "sounded like someone chewing uncooked rice." Threats

to women's bodies appear, not surprisingly, in several poems in *Survival*. Christine Larusso's "Dear Alison" epistles portray women as physically yanked, surveilled, and driven. Deirdre Daly's poem, "Sex Ed," delineates the multiple lessons—frightful, dangerous, liberating—that girls learn about their bodies and desires. Amber Moore's "Anecdotes, an Aphorism from Billy Bob Thornton" extends this theme of instruction as a father teaches his children lessons about how to survive the dangers of the world by wearing seatbelts, using appropriate words, and acting with self-awareness and agency.

This issue concludes with the Alerts and Provocations section, featuring "The Queer Art of Survival" by Lana Lin and accompanying photo collages by Lin + Lam. We are thrilled to include this work, and thank Lana for her generously personal essay, which is incisively analytical in regard to what is sometimes called "the cancer industry," and, at times, wryly humorous in describing the writer's relationship to that establishment's expectations of survivors. We thank Lana and H. Lan Thao Lam for gorgeous images, which draw on Audre Lorde's memoir *The Cancer Journals* (1980). They recall, in robust defiance, Lorde's famous claim: "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (2007, 137).

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Notes

1. See Lewis and Martin 2015; Hamilton 2015; Butzer 2015. For a glimpse of how the humanities and social sciences are grappling with the concept of the Anthropocene, see also Latour 2014; Povinelli 2014.

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