

## INTRODUCTION – UNCERTAINTY AND SURVIVANCE: WHAT REMAINS AFTER THE CRISIS?

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### Introduction

Life is not constant, and there are moments of crisis and change when a person's sense of self can be shaken, their moral judgment clouded, and their emotions thrown into disarray. Whether it is the passing of a cherished individual, the loss of physical capabilities, a crisis of faith or financial setback, displacement from one's home or homeland, these losses often lead to a similar process of disorientation and shock (Jackson 2021). We often confront uncertainty in life events and make choices that prey on our emotions and affect our decision-making processes. Uncertainty reminds us, time and again, of the pervasive interconnectedness of life events, ecologies, and cosmologies of knowledge and action. However, is uncertainty a solid consistent concept, one that is defined, felt, and acted upon in the same manner everywhere? Anthropologist Lisa Stevenson says the kinds of uncertainty that we examine in social research makes a difference (2014: 175). For example, Stevenson classified the uncertainty of her research participants from the Inuit community in Canada into epistemological and ontological types. Uncertainty at the epistemological level, Stevenson writes, is related to 'how and whether we can know things about the future' (2014: 175). On the ontological level, it is 'having to do with the inherent undecidability about what the world is or will be' (Stevenson 2014: 175).

Furthermore, Sandra Calkins's ethnographic research among Rashaida in northeastern Sudan affirms that uncertainty is experienced differently according to different contexts and

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temporalities (2016). Calkins relates human reflexivity to the kind of uncertainty experienced by people, especially during precarious times and with unmet expectations. This is manifested in questioning the taken-for-granted forms, ideals, and rules that establish a degree of predictability to life events (2016). Although both Calkins' (2016) and Stevenson's (2014) ethnographies were conducted in specific localities, where certain communities were rendered more marginalised than others and where experienced uncertainties were also the result of acts of violence, negligence, and structural impoverishment, their research participants related differently to uncertainty and deployed acts of care and resistance to bargain with uncertainty.

Amidst the cruelty of crises and wars in different parts of the world, a recent global example of uncertainty and crisis that everyone has experienced was living through the COVID-19 pandemic, in which biomedical uncertainty and public health issues influenced social, economic, and political decision-making processes. The pandemic compelled us to confront precarious, uncertain, and unforeseeable issues. This also reminds us of a lack of control over our circumstances. Our everyday lives, as we knew them, were no longer taken for granted. Previously, spontaneous acts were transformed into a negotiation process between our inner fears and thoughts, and our external environment. I draw on the two ethnographies already mentioned and the example of COVID-19 to highlight the centrality of human agencies in negotiating uncertainty. Their ethnographies show that human agency is configured in relation to how people resist and endure unpredictable events and crises through their techniques of bargaining with uncertainty. I argue that an understanding of how people live through and in the aftermath of uncertain and catastrophic events is aided by the deployment of the analytic of 'survivance' as a conceptual category in relation to coping with crises and uncertainty.

The concept of survivance is borrowed from Critical Native American Studies. Originally, it was a legal term primarily used to denote inheritance. Gerald Vizenor, a Native scholar and prolific author, repurposed this term to articulate the notion of surviving and enduring the profound traumatic and violent events and struggles within Native American history. Vizenor's conceptualisation of survivance merges the words 'survival' and 'resistance', signified by the suffix -ance in survivance. This suffix implies a quality that goes beyond mere description of survival (Vizenor, 1998) to embrace endurance and active presence. Consequently, when witnessing human experiences and narratives of overcoming crises and navigating uncertainty, Vizenor's theorisation of Native Survivance provides an inspiration that emphasises that survivance is more than mere survival because it constitutes a form of affirmative action, celebrating and affirming survival, rather than merely enduring ongoing oppression and violence. It signifies the active presence and continuity of human stories, bridging the past, present, and future (Vizenor, 1994; 2008). I argue that by theorising the negotiating of uncertainty in connection with an analytic of survivance, we can gain insight into what endures after the loss of possibilities and the experience of catastrophic and uncertain events, whether on an individual or collective scale.

## **Survivance of the Precariat**

This special issue proposes the notion of 'Survivance of the Precariat', acknowledging the shared but unequal experiences of precarity. Economist Guy Standing defined and popularised the term 'precariat' to refer to a diverse group of people who experience precarious and unstable living conditions characterised by economic insecurity, unstable employment, and a lack of access to traditional job benefits and social protections. Standing argues that the precariat is a global phenomenon that affects people from different countries, regardless of their geographical location (Standing 2011). During the development of this special issue, I became aware of the research on uncertainty and precarity conducted by some students in my cohort and other universities. I approached them to explore how the concept of survivance could be employed as an analytical framework to describe the ways in which they encountered people in their ethnographic research. This endeavour involved recognising the invisible connections between different ethnographic projects tackled by a network of colleagues who were addressing various aspects of daily life and their precarity. They indicated that uncertainty was embraced, navigated, and manoeuvred through various tactics.

Anthropologists Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta have argued for the centrality of concepts in anthropological analysis to interpret practices and elucidate reality (2021). Anthropological concepts are tools to help unpack the meaning underlying a wide array of practices and experiences in different localities and circumstances. Some of these concepts have been borrowed from the colonial archive or influenced by Christianity, as exemplified by concepts such as religion, reciprocity, and kinship. However, anthropologists have frequently encountered and adopted concepts during their fieldwork that have subsequently undergone transformation, elevation, and adaptation (Brandel and Motta 2021). David Zeitlyn (2023) emphasises the importance of languages used in anthropological analysis, the role of translating concepts, and the positive potential of creating incomplete anthropological accounts that create debates, question taken-for-granted concepts, and give space to others to complement it in order to gain insights about the human experience and diversify them. Zeitlyn argues for an 'anthropology that does not have the last word' in the name of theoretical supremacy (2023: 347), and to engage concepts that provoke debate and 'collective complementary accounts' rather than 'develop theories that win space and exclude others ... as incorrect' (Zeitlyn 2023: 347).

Therefore, this special issue is both a call and an experiment. A call to think through interdisciplinary concepts to move beyond rigid analytical frameworks. An experiment was conducted to see how to adapt the concept of survivance, expanding its applicability and utilisation in social research at the intersection of precarity, capitalism, livelihood, and survival strategies beyond victimisation and passivity. The special issue aims to encourage the debate around our theme and to indirectly recognise the diverse and multiple perspectives around understanding uncertainty, crisis, precarity, and survivance. The articles look into ways in which people navigate different forms of annihilation and precarity in different localities and issues related to health, economy, environment, labour, media, humanitarian work, mobility, and migration, and conduct anthropological research at times of uncertainty and crisis. The issue celebrates the work done in precarious conditions during the pandemic and the ways in

which anthropologists and social researchers draw inspiration, examine their positionality, and learn from, and with, the communities they engage with.

Since the advent of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism as modes of production, along with extractive financial practices, ruthless competition, blurred boundaries between the private and public spheres, and questions regarding individual and collective freedom, human adaptation and resilience have been theorised in relation to the verb 'to survive'. Although linguistically, 'survival' and 'survivance' are cognate, academic scholars have deployed them to refer to different states of existence. 'Survival' often conveys a life characterised by a fight-or-flight response, leading to a gradual erosion of existence. On the other hand, 'survivance' has attracted the attention of philosophers and literary scholars, who seek to theorise states of being that transcend the notion of mere survival. Survivance can be conceptualised as survival accompanied by resistance and endurance to affirm a certain presence and continuity in life (Vizenor 2008; 2009), or as a state of existence that lies between life and death, particularly concerning objects, concepts, stories, beliefs, and materials that are left behind (Derrida 2011; Saghafi 2015; Povinelli 2021). Furthermore, survivance encompasses the act of sustaining life against annihilation (Vizenor 2008), or what persists after and transcends death, allowing life to persist (Derrida 2011). Achieving this requires the deployment of tactics, beliefs, and practices that can withstand times of crisis and alleviate uncertainty. Importantly, Gerald Vizenor's literary theory of survivance rejects passive survival, instead emphasising the reclamation of agency and autonomy to establish an 'active presence' (Vizenor 2008).

The concept of 'survivance', as employed in Native American discussions, offers a broader perspective on resistance and a less victimising lens through which to view something beyond mere survival (Vizenor 1994; 2009). Functioning as a framework that opposes loss and erasure, violence, and retaliation, and instead emphasises reparation and the creation of thriving conditions, survivance extends its relevance beyond the Native American experience. It also establishes a common thread of connection and shared experiences among individuals who employ a range of strategies to endure, display resilience, demonstrate resourcefulness, and reject the terms imposed upon them by the prevailing power structures. The notion of survivance does not imply the resolution of a crisis or absolute safety. Instead, it signifies a continuous existence amid crisis, turbulence, transformation, anxiety, and loss. The semantic scope of the term survivance has expanded beyond merely describing survival; it now resonates with vitality and remembrance. In this issue, the concept is explored, interpreted, questioned, and reinterpreted across various research domains. It is crucial to emphasise that the research participants in the included articles did not universally employ the concept of survivance to articulate their ways of living as they were actively engaged in the actions of life itself. Instead, the concept of survivance serves as an analytical tool deployed by the authors to illustrate the enduring thread amidst life's uncertainties, ruptures, and profound acknowledgement of human resilience during and after calamities.

Survivance is deeply entangled with the contextual temporality of the event at stake. It represents not only survival at the present moment but also the capacity to persist and continue. It differs from, yet expands on, the concept of becoming (Biehl and Locke 2017), where the adaptability and incompleteness of people's ongoing transformations challenge and

go beyond established ways of understanding and engaging with the world in various uncertain and crisis-led contexts (Biehl and Locke 2017). In the anthropology of becoming, João Biehl employs the term 'becoming' to depict the ongoing transformative process of human existence. He argues that we are not static or bounded beings, but rather dynamic and ever-changing entities that are perpetually becoming new versions of ourselves. Biehl's concept of becoming is rooted in the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who posited that becoming is not a linear progression of development but rather a complex and unpredictable process of change. Deleuze believed that we are constantly becoming something other than what we are and that this process of becoming is crucial to our creativity and vitality. I argue that survivance expands on the idea of becoming as it illustrates how people navigate and persist through uncertainty and the process of their 'becoming'. Furthermore, survivance amalgamates notions of survival and resistance, capturing the ways human agency and imaginative capabilities confront life's calamities and sudden changes. Moreover, the technologies of imagination that people deploy to envision alternative practices and futures that challenge taken-for-granted subjugation and docility are themselves techniques of survivance and endurance. As Biehl argues, we can better understand human experience by focusing on the ways in which people constantly transform themselves and their surroundings. I suggest that survivance emerges as a valuable analytical framework illuminating how people transcend victimhood, defeatist modes of absence, and docility.

The special issue asks: how can we identify survivance in the ordinary moments of everyday life, in everyday events, during and after crises, and within the openings for alternative ways of shaping lives or societies? We take the concept of survivance beyond its historical context of development with Native Americans, who endured historical genocide, land dispossession, colonisation, and their enduring repercussions, to apply it to other places and with other people who are also living through the uncertain, precarious, and mundane. I argue that survivance as an analytic is not limited to extreme situations marked by silence, death, and suffering. Instead, as the articles show, survivance is woven into the fabric of everyday life, where individuals seek meaning or craft their own sense of purpose amid various forms of subjugation, chronic health issues, capital manipulation, and injustice while striving to preserve hope and humanity. In such a context, this issue extends the concept of survivance and embraces the vitality that accompanies survival, offering diverse interpretations of what survivance might entail.

An analytic of survivance embraces ambiguity and carries an underlying sense of perseverance and endurance, signifying that what remains after encountering uncertainty or catastrophe involves preserving the past and adapting to the unpredictability and uncertainty encountered in daily life, thereby making the uncertainty more familiar. This special issue sought to understand the relationship between uncertainty and survivance and how they are being conceptualised, refashioned, and acted upon in different contexts and localities. The articles included aim to examine both the challenges and opportunities that manifest the techniques of bargaining with the uncertain, and the dialectics 'between contingency and agency in situations of rupture, transformation, and scarcity' (Calkins 2016: 4). The articles delineate the techniques of survival in relation to different types of uncertainty (biomedical, economic, ecological, social, and political), especially at times of transformation and crises.

Some articles question the utilisation of survivance as an analytic, while others seek to move beyond the two themes of uncertainty and survivance to provide different perspectives that theorise human adaptability to misfortune and life's calamities. The special issue calls for animated doctoral students and early career researchers and creates a space for diverse and open discussions about the theme. Most of the research that informed the included articles was conducted during a time of crisis or during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a testimony to the survival and adaptation of the authors to unexpected changes and uncertainty. The call for a special issue asked the following questions as prompts:

- ❖ How can we understand the techniques of surviving uncertainty in relation to survivance, a concept borrowed from critical Native American studies?
- ❖ How might uncertainty and/or survivance be conceptualised according to the specific localities and temporalities of ethnographic research, and towards an anthropology of uncertainty?
- ❖ How do people who are rendered more marginalised than others navigate uncertainty, and what are the forms, ideals, and techniques they deploy?
- ❖ At times of transformation, whether at the collective or individual level or both, how do people define survivance and its emblems?

## **Overview of the articles**

As previously mentioned, this special issue aims to extend the application of Vizenor's concept of survivance beyond the context of indigenous or Native American experiences to encompass the precariat and the uncertain, transcending the indigenous perspective. and opening the space to use the concept of survivance to think through the techniques of living through and in, surviving the uncertain, the shocks of life, and the anxious present, in pursuit of an immediate future.

The special issue contains thirteen articles. In these, we find different forms of survivance revealing different tactics that enclose both rational and emotional, affective and imaginary, and tangible and intangible ways of dealing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of life events. Naomi Marshall delves into the appropriateness of applying Vizenor's concept of 'survival' beyond its Native American contexts. Specifically, she asks whether 'survival' serves as a suitable analytical tool for comprehending the actions and perspectives of individuals dealing with an unpredictable genetic condition in England and Wales. While individuals in these contexts may employ irony and creativity to resist misrepresentation and stigma, she argues that the utilisation of 'survival' as a critical term needs to be contextualised and adapted. Marshall also reflects on the broader role and adaptability of theory within the field of anthropology.

Alexia Liakounakou examines the impact of various crises confronting Greek society, shedding light on how these crises are driving individuals to adopt a heightened focus on their own bodies, resorting to cosmetic surgery to maintain a sense of active agency. Liakounakou explains that the crises create a form of personal and existential hyper-awareness, leading her

participants to become acutely conscious of how their bodies, marked by conditions such as depression, anxiety, aging, and other signs of 'decay', as they believe that the human body is one aspect of life that they can directly control. Liakounakou characterises the bodies as 'bodies-in-crisis', serving as a tangible landscape where affective negotiations for agency, transformation, and survivance unfold. Drawing from the concept of survivance, Liakounakou incorporates insights from feminist and post-feminist studies on gender and cosmetic surgery.

Molly Acheson considers the everyday challenges of raising a child with disabilities and investigates the cultural ramifications of disability and the pervasive uncertainty associated with parenting a child with disabilities. Acheson regards disability as a construct that is influenced by culture. She explores the role of the relationship with state services in shaping parents' ability to envision a hopeful and planned future for their child. Furthermore, Acheson scrutinises how parents navigate, survive, and cope with the uncertainties of examining the various expressions of confusion and apprehension resulting from deficiencies in state services, and argues that austerity measures have a disabling impact.

Wesam Hassan examines practices of games of chance in Istanbul during times of multiple crisis (economic, political, and a pandemic). Instead of solely focusing on the clinical and moral judgments typically linked with gambling, Hassan elucidates how the utilisation of games of chance paradoxically functions as a mechanism for renewing their hopes amidst prevailing uncertain social, economic, and political circumstances. Hassan proposes a conceptual framework that characterises their imaginative strategies for envisioning a more favourable future, which can be viewed as acts of survivance that defy the looming threat of annihilation and contribute to the revitalisation of their presence, enabling them to endure pervasive instability, precarity, and anxiety concerning the future.

Mariz Kelada analyses the labour dynamics involved in on-location filming in Cairo and challenges conventional dichotomies such as formal versus informal labour and exploitation versus resistance. Kelada focuses on communal interdependencies that are concurrently proliferating to provide the necessary economic support for the media industry. Kelada puts forward the concept of 'vitalist pragmatics' as a potentially versatile and comprehensive framework to encapsulate the notion of survivance to show the potential for comprehending the strategies and mechanisms employed by precarious labourers.

Freya Hope's article explains how the New Travelers, who emerged in the UK since the 1970s, employ various strategies to invest in and secure certainty about their shared future. Hope's interlocutors embark on a journey of 'alternative world making' and challenge the argument that gypsies, travellers, and other marginalised groups only have a strong focus on the present moment. As one of Hope's interlocutors says, 'There will always be Travellers', despite the enactment of new legislation criminalising their lifestyle at that time. Hope's article conceptualises New Travellers, who originated in opposition to capitalism, individualisation, and environmental degradation, as creators of a new alternative world, and explores the reasons behind their unwavering certainty that they will endure, even in the face of legal challenges.

Sanne Rotmeijer unpacks the concept of survivance and its contextualisation within the localities and temporalities of Curaçao, a Dutch Caribbean island, as observed through the lens of everyday news routines. Rotmeijer places particular emphasis on future

'orientations', which are fluid and open-ended (Bryant and Knight 2019). Rotmeijer examines how Curaçaoans respond to pervasive uncertainty through future-focused news routines. Curaçaoans engage with news practices as a means of anticipating a brighter future through activities such as participation in lottery games and faith in an inevitable future, as indicated by obituaries. Rotmeijer argues that everyday news practices related to the lottery (which symbolises life's uncertainties) demonstrate how Curaçaoans, particularly those on the margins without access to institutional public platforms, ingeniously navigate uncertainty by embracing chance, which is considered a strategy of survivance, wherein an active presence materialises within the realm of everyday life's contingencies.

Julio Rodriguez Stimson investigates the various interconnected risks faced by Galapagueño farmers in the Galapagos Islands. Rodriguez Stimson illustrates the effects of portraying the Galapagos Islands as an 'evolutionary laboratory' and the last remaining paradise on Earth on the farmers and on the archipelago. The sense of attachment to the island is threatened by various interconnected risks such as pest infestations, climate change, and the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Rodriguez Stimson's research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic). These challenges have exacerbated preexisting difficulties in the agricultural sector, giving rise to what he coins as the 'coexistential rift.' Rodriguez Stimson argues that strengthening the agricultural sector and fostering a sense of belonging could potentially address the rift and both social and environmental challenges in the Galapagos.

Akira Shah discusses the uncertainties brought about by COVID-19 and how they have served as a poignant reminder to ethnographers of the dual nature of improvisation in ethnographic research. Shah delves into the broader question of when it becomes necessary to relinquish improvisational practices in favour of preserving a researcher's emotional well-being and survivance in the field. Shah argues that improvisation is an inherent and essential element of ethnographic research, while on the other hand, it imposes limitations on the process. Shah reflects on his own experience as an ethnographer and how the pandemic has given rise to a significant increase in digital ethnographic research characterised by its highly improvised nature. Shah contemplates the nuances of success and failure in improvisational approaches during the pandemic and how to survive the uncertainties of conducting fieldwork amidst global pandemics.

Peyton Cherry examines the theme of 'gender issues' (referred to as *gendaa mondai*), which witnessed a significant increase in grassroots activism in Japan in the wake of the #MeToo Movement in 2017. Cherry focuses on activist groups such as Voice Up Japan, Chabudai Gaeshi Joshi Action, and student-led initiatives on sexual consent at universities such as Waseda, which are dedicated to addressing the issue of sexual violence not only within academic institutions but also in the broader society. Cherry demonstrates that involvement in smaller-scale community initiatives, rather than traditional forms of protest activism, is influenced by both institutional and individual narratives. The transmission of these narratives is vital for young individuals to practice 'survivance' and discover a sense of belonging within different social groups. Cherry argues that 'voicing up' in Tokyo is characterised less by overtly vocal and proud declarations or 'post-closet discourses', as described by scholars. Instead, it is shaped by localised dialogues that adapt to trending terminology and serve as an initial awareness-raising effort.

Gilda Borriello examines refugee entrepreneurship and focuses on the concept of uncertainty as a fundamental element that they face. Borriello challenges the conventional notion of entrepreneurship characterised by rationality and stability and sheds light on how refugees venture into entrepreneurship under conditions of pronounced uncertainty and adversity, stemming not only from their displacement experiences but also exacerbated by the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Borriello explains that refugees often embark on entrepreneurial endeavours out of sheer necessity and that they exhibit remarkable tenacity, resilience, and an aptitude for not only achieving success but also expanding their ventures. Borriello argues that refugees are establishing their businesses as the sole element of certainty in their lives by leveraging existing social connections or creating new ones to counteract institutional constraints and surmount adversity.

Gabrielle Masi explores the concepts of uncertainty and risk within the context of a specific aspect of human mobility: the experiences of unsuccessful return migrations from the Central Mediterranean route in Sub-Saharan Africa. Masi draws on ethnographic research conducted in Velingara, Senegal, where returnee migrants who come back empty-handed face a moment of crisis, compelling them to reassess their life trajectories. Masi explains that the returnees interpret their homecomings through the lens of locally rooted historical concepts such as shame, honour, and independence, and they engage in this process to avoid social stigma and to reevaluate the significance of their experiences. Masi examines the role of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)-Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program that works with returnees, transforming them into capable entrepreneurs who can analyse their present circumstances and future plans in terms of risk management and economic competitiveness. Masi argues that aid programs emerge as forms of governmentality aimed at addressing 'irregular migration' by shaping new neoliberal subjectivities within the economic and social marginalisation experienced by return migrants.

Chloe Wong-Mersereau writes about the impact of deploying the term 'crisis' that is frequently used to characterise the present social, political, and economic landscape. Wong-Mersereau argues that there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the concept's temporal dimensions and adopts an affective scholarship approach to address these conceptual gaps regarding crisis and temporality. Wong-Mersereau explores the construction of the crisis-imaginary, focusing on the language, affects, and images that contribute to its formation by analysing the crisis-imaginary, and examining the activities of the Canadian Red Cross (CRC) and the crisis-imaginary in its crisis-response efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wong-Mersereau argues that the disjunction between the narratives presented by the crisis-imaginary and the affective experience of crisis generates a haunting effect, and that the crisis-imaginary, as an apparatus, gives rise to specific subjectivities and temporal orientations that overshadow the lived experiences of individuals working in crisis contexts.

This special issue aspires to move beyond the binaries of crisis, stability, subjugation, and resistance to acknowledge and re-evaluate the ways in which humans make life liveable and possible. As evidenced by the articles featured in this special issue, the remarkable aspect of survivance that warrants attention here is its dual responsibility: it acknowledges both the lasting harm and anxiety inflicted upon people's lives from crises and unprecedented changes,

unpredictable events, and violence, and its determination not to depict these lives solely as reactions to uncertainty, violence, and crisis.

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