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Bugging Out: Apocalyptic Masculinity and Disaster Consumerism in *Offgrid* Magazine

POPULAR CONCEPTIONS OF SURVIVALISM in the United States typically feature the eccentric, backwoods, working-class figures found in television shows such as *Doomsday Preppers* and *Prepper Hillbillies*. *Offgrid* magazine, which first hit the stands in the summer of 2013, however, sells a compellingly bourgeois personal connection to disaster in the vein of men's self-improvement literature, wherein successful masculinity requires courage, preparedness for calamity, and the resources to shop. Each issue of *Offgrid* focuses on a "real-life" survivalist or a singular catastrophic event that is dramatically represented on the cover by a self-sufficient man decked out in gear that will allow him to survive a crash landing, escape a city devastated by an earthquake, navigate the hazards of a hacker-created blackout, or evade the destruction of an erupting volcano.¹ Filled with articles offering tips on how to prepare, self-defense strategies, profiles of survivalists, disaster scenarios, gear reviews, and advertisements, *Offgrid* mainstreams prepper culture by retooling the

The authors contributed equally to this article; the order listed is alphabetical and should not be construed as implying differing contributions.

1. The terms "survivalist" and "prepper" apply to anyone committed to honing the skills and acquiring the resources required to survive in any context, including disasters, and are used interchangeably in *Offgrid*.

face of apocalyptic survival as a regular-guy protagonist whose low-profile normalcy disguises the smoldering heroic potential that will ignite within him when disaster strikes.

In this article, drawing upon insights from the sociology of masculinity, environmental feminism, and ecocriticism, we examine the representation of gender, nature, and disaster in issues of *Offgrid*, spanning nearly three years, from June 2015 through February 2018. While vivid depictions of cataclysm might seem provocative enough to captivate the *Offgrid* reader, we argue that its principal appeal is that it gives its ninety-one-percent male audience the opportunity to engage directly in what Casey Kelly terms “apocalyptic manhood,” an emergent version of American masculinity that “confirm[s] the necessity of masculine skills as society meets its demise.”² Thus, *Offgrid* provides an occasion for readers to salvage a masculinity that feels perpetually threatened within contemporary American culture — a highly effective strategy in promoting the expansion of what we term *disaster consumerism*. We concur with ecofeminist Greta Gaard’s contention that “masculine gender identity has been constructed as so very *antiecological*, and thus its interrogation and transformation seem especially crucial” at this time of environmental crisis; this concern resonates particularly poignantly with regard to the apocalyptic imaginary.³

Marketing Disaster, Selling Masculinity

Scholars have long argued that commercial media play an important role in circulating gender ideals that are “rooted in consumer capitalism wherein profit can be produced by generating insecurity about one’s body and one’s consumer choices.”⁴ Of course, despite their influence, advertisers do not create insecurities out of whole cloth; rather, they operate within the context of shifting gender discourses and cultural anxieties. Whereas the authors of a 2005 study found that alcohol ads portrayed men as affable losers who, rejected by strong women,

2. “2018 Recoil Offgrid Media Kit,” *Recoil Offgrid*; Casey Ryan Kelly, “The Man-pocalypse: Doomsday Preppers and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, no. 2–3 (2016): 96.

3. Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017), 167 (italics in original).

4. Susan M. Alexander, “Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men’s Health Magazine*,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (2003): 551.

were driven to drink with their buddies, an analysis of Super Bowl commercials just five years later demonstrated that the tone had become “a simpler, angrier one [that was] crafted to galvanize men to buy.”⁵ The authors of the latter study suggest that the masculine aggression in the ads they analyzed reflects men’s economic insecurities, which advertisers exploit by encouraging men to feel nostalgic for and frustrated about their diminished power. Ads telling men to “wear the pants” and take a stand against women and adult responsibilities emboldened them to fight back against a culture intent on squelching their manhood. As working- and middle-class jobs disappear, men have turned to consumerism to achieve masculinity, which is now so much a part of men’s gender expression — “a new rite of passage to manhood” — that it is not considered ironic that they would fight threats to their masculinity through shopping.⁶ This development indicates a deepening precarity in American masculinity, where manhood is “hard won and easily lost” and “requires continual public demonstrations of proof.”⁷

What a man consumes factors heavily in his ability to do gender, and few products are better suited for the construction of masculinity than disaster gear, which comprises various items signifying a range of masculine competencies. Each issue of *Offgrid* opens to a two-page spread advertising either a military-style rifle or off-road tires mounted on four-wheel drive vehicles pictured conquering rugged terrain. This first impression casts more mundane supplies — water filtration systems, insect repellent, etc. — in an engaging light. Self-defense equipment such as pepper spray and the discreet Inner City Self-Defense Pencil might be considered feminine in another setting, but here, any object that can be conceived as proactive in the face of danger is worthy of the prepper’s consideration. As an article on self-defense says, “you

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5. Michael A. Messner and Jeffrey Montez de Oca, “The Male Consumer as Loser: Beer and Liquor Ads in Mega Sports Media Events,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1879–909; Kyle Green and Madison Van Oort, “‘We Wear No Pants’: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 716.
 6. Alexander, “Stylish Hard Bodies,” 535–54; Kristen Barber and Tristan Bridges, “Marketing Manhood in a ‘Post-Feminist’ Age,” *Contexts* 16, no. 2 (2017): 41.
 7. Joseph A. Vandello and Jennifer K. Bosson, “Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood,” *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 14, no. 2 (2013): 101.

should always be carrying a variety of compact self-defense weapons on your person. Concealed-carry handgun, folding knife, and the like — the more options you have, the more prepared you'll be to deal with what may come.”⁸ Especially given that *Offgrid* is published by the creators of *Recoil*, a magazine dedicated to “the firearm lifestyle,” this diversified arsenal is a notable departure from the norm in pro-gun discourses, where firearms are seen as the only reasonable response to mortal threat. In *Good Guys with Guns*, one of Stroud's respondents explains the imperative to carry a gun: “You need a fire extinguisher to put out a fire . . . a seatbelt to keep you from flying out of your car in a car wreck . . . a flashlight when it gets dark, and somebody tries to kill you, you need a gun. . . . If somebody tries to kill you and you don't have a gun, you're probably gonna die. It's pretty straightforward.”⁹ But on the pages of *Offgrid*, readers encounter an endless array of life-threatening scenarios, each requiring a specific flashlight, knife, article of clothing, etc. Moreover, the truly prepared man has (at least) one of each item for every location: fully stocked emergency “bug out bags” or “go-bags” are needed for the office, truck, and home, and he should be ready with a variety of specialized “bug out vehicles” ranging from “Shit Hits the Fan” (SHTF) mountain bikes and kayaks to accessorized RVs and pick-up trucks. Such proliferation might register as typical in today's markets, yet disaster gear carries distinctive meanings in that it anticipates a dissolution of the social order within which capitalism operates.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein explains how developers take advantage of post-disaster destruction to dismantle public services and install private, for-profit enterprises, a set of practices that she refers to as “disaster capitalism.”¹⁰ Building on Klein, we argue that in what we are calling “disaster consumerism,” such events are treated as “exciting market opportunities,” but our focus is on how neoliberal forces reach and motivate consumers.¹¹ We find that disaster consumerism, still in its nascent phase, is currently characterized by three interrelated forces:

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8. Jared Wihongi, “Get Your Jason Bourne on by Turning These Five Common Items into Self-Defense Weapons,” *Offgrid*, April 2017, 71.
 9. Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 3.
 10. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).
 11. *Ibid.*, 6.

the mainstreaming of preparedness, the proliferation of survival gear, and an emphasis on American individualism.

With its expensive matte covers, \$9.99 price tag, and availability at Barnes and Noble, *Offgrid* crafts the prepper as a figure who is at once admirable for his unique abilities and also empathetic as an average guy. This image is addressed explicitly when editor Patrick Vuong describes a conversation with someone who mocked his go-bag:

Various reality tv shows have perpetuated the stereotype that preppers are nothing more than paranoid nutjobs who've spent their life-savings on lining their homes with booby traps, canned goods, and tin foil. . . . To me a prepper is anyone who is prepared, or at least trying to be prepared. He or she has had the forethought to anticipate potential problems—from minor incidents like a flat tire to life-threatening disasters that can obliterate entire communities—and has not only the gear and the game plan, but also the mindset. And most importantly, a prepper is someone who will still thrive regardless of the equipment, or lack thereof.¹²

Significantly, the classic prepper is not just paranoid; he is poor, uneducated, easily mocked, and thus has no place in *Offgrid*, which explicitly caters to a demographic with enough expendable income to buy gear that is often expensive and may ultimately never be used. In trying to reclaim and normalize the term, Vuong places “prepper” on a spectrum, seeing his ability to change a flat tire as only degrees removed from his stopping a suicide bomber on a crowded train or surviving a bioterrorist attack. Notably, Vuong minimizes the importance of equipment so as to distance the magazine’s ethos—“we are here to help you survive by teaching you skills” (a central concern of apocalyptic masculinity)—from its primary function, to advertise products.

There is a long prepping history in the United States, dating back at least to the fallout shelter craze of the 1950s and 1960s; what distinguishes the current manifestation is that threats are conceived as coming not only from an external, foreign enemy but from any and every direction, including natural disasters, political unrest, accidents, and the actions

12. Patrick Vuong, “Don’t Laugh,” *Offgrid*, August 2015, 8.

of our own government.¹³ Thus, disaster consumerism is an extension of what Ulrich Beck terms a “risk society,” one “that is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced.”¹⁴ Risk is “the *anticipation* of catastrophe” that “produces a compulsion to act,” and in *Offgrid*, which deals entirely in such anticipation, it is clear what actions a prepared person must take: learning survival techniques and buying equipment.¹⁵ Following Beck, one can see that disaster consumerism is appealing in our risk society because capitalism breeds risks—environmental destruction, social inequality, political dysfunction—and it also sells us the solution: gear. This is exemplified by the cover of “Prepare for Economic Collapse,” on which a gear-laden man crouches high above a blacked-out rainy metropolis at night, peering down at dark buildings and scattered fires. In “On the Cover,” readers can get a closer look at each piece of equipment and discover the price tag associated with *Offgrid*’s masculinity: binoculars and a jacket, priced at \$449 each; pants for \$199; a \$295 light; \$230 shoes; a \$500 watch; a backpack for \$319; and a \$350 knife.¹⁶ In total, this survivor is modeling nearly \$3,000 worth of items, not including the contents of his bug out bag, which might be filled with the various products found throughout the magazine, including Hex Tool brass knuckles (“brass knuckles for the twenty-first century”), a portable water filtration system, flashlights, knives, and at least one firearm. On this cover, economic collapse is juxtaposed with a man who seems to sit on top of the world as mayhem unfolds below him. This beneficiary of the global economic system is presented as uniquely prepared to survive its demise.

In *Offgrid*, survival is entirely dependent on one’s own abilities and purchasing power; almost all covers feature lone heroes, and to the extent that others are mentioned in the magazine, they are usually limited to the protagonist’s immediate family. While there is the occasional reference to the importance of finding a community of like-minded survivors post-disaster, it is significant that community-based *preparations*

13. Sarah A. Lichtman, “Do-It-Yourself Security: Safety, Gender, and the Home Fallout Shelter in Cold War America,” *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 1 (2006): 39–55.

14. Ulrich Beck, “Living in the World Risk Society,” *Economy and Society* 35, no. 3 (2006): 332.

15. *Ibid.*

16. “On the Cover,” *Offgrid*, June 2015, 6–7.

are never discussed. This emphasis on individualism, which is supported by mythological notions of the “self-made man,” feeds disaster consumerism as each prepper can rely only on his own consumption.¹⁷ Thus, disaster consumerism draws from the logic of neoliberalism, an economic ideology that has justified the systematic dismantling of the public sector as “Needs formerly met by public agencies on the principle of citizen rights, or through personal relationship in communities and families, are now to be met by companies selling services in a market.”¹⁸ Whereas disaster capitalism explains the institutional political economy of privatization, disaster consumerism identifies a mechanism by which private citizens are recruited into neoliberalism at the individual level, as in prepper culture, which is “consummated through masculine performances of self-sufficiency” and involves a deep resentment of the feminizing threat of government.¹⁹ Portrayed as equal parts incompetent and malevolent, the government is not to be counted upon should disaster strike, as evidenced in “EMP Attack,” when Vuong suggests what can be done to address the vulnerability of our electrical grid: “Other than letting our elected officials know the importance of hardening our infrastructure against such an event, we should all learn how to prepare as if our government isn’t going to do a damn thing.”²⁰ Vuong’s contempt is clear, and by inspiring similar disdain in his readers, he nudges them toward self-provisioning by acquiring the goods advertised in the magazine.

Though *Offgrid* is ostensibly focused on educating readers about how to survive catastrophe, we argue that its legibility and allure reside in its reinforcement of traditional patriarchal gender norms that allow readers to envision a reinvigorated, apocalyptic manhood materializing in the context of disaster, which is achievable through intensive consumerism. This vision of masculinity stakes its hegemonic claim via engagement with militarism, control over women and children who are

17. Kelly, “The Man-pocalypse.”

18. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*; Raewyn Connell, “Understanding Neoliberalism,” in *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, ed. Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 23.

19. Kelly, “The Man-pocalypse,” 98. For an analysis of why guns are appealing in a neoliberal era, see Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

20. Patrick Vuong, “Electrifying,” *Offgrid*, June 2017, 8.

positioned as dependent victims in need of rescue, and the domination of nature. Frequently feminized and conceived as overwhelmingly powerful and out of control, nature provides the sites and circumstances for male demonstration of mastery. We turn now to analysis of these themes.

MILITARIZED MASCULINITY AND THE PREPARED MAN

One of the most rhetorically compelling means by which the masculine consumer is addressed in *Offgrid* is through its prolific use of military imagery and iconography. For example, a Tactical Night Vision Company advertisement features a split image of a white male soldier dressed for battle on one side of the page and a white man in a plaid shirt and jeans on the other. Both are carrying semi-automatic rifles and wearing tactical helmets with attached night vision binoculars; the tagline reads “From Battlefield to Homefield.”²¹ An ad for Special Operations Equipment uses the images of a scope site, an American flag, and the line “Made in the Mother Fucking USA,” while one for Blackhawk, a company whose slogan is “Honor. As a way of life,” pairs a soldier-figure sporting a military-style battle vest, tactical holster, and semi-automatic handgun with the text “Life. Liberty. And the pursuit of any maggot who threatens them.”²² Self-defense, often coded as feminine in its centering vulnerability and victimhood, is aggressively masculinized here into *offensive* belligerence that makes claims to “good guy violence” in its noble deployment: to protect “the American way of life.”²³ Through combative rhetoric and military imagery, *Offgrid* interpellates the consumer as potential soldier; any man can be associated with the characteristics typically reserved for “the few and the proud,” selfless hero, defender of freedom, etc., by buying the right gear. Readers are encouraged to import militarized masculinity “from battlefield to homefield,” to see their everyday lives as potential theaters of war in which they may perform as citizen-soldiers.

In the popular imagination, soldiers represent a masculine collective in which homosocially bonded heroic figures sacrifice themselves to protect US citizens from foreign (outside) threats. However, in *Offgrid*, the citizen-soldier protects *himself* from others *inside* this country,

21. *Offgrid*, August 2015, 59.

22. *Ibid.*, 32, 5.

23. Stroud, *Good Guys*.

thereby embodying a uniquely American ethos: a decontextualized, socially averse version of freedom that only hyper-individualism and the market can supply; this is the American “way of life” that is being defended. Thus, when an ad from Advanced Armament uses the Second Amendment as its copy, the Constitution empowers not The People as a collective but rather individuals operating against the threat of their fellow citizens.²⁴ Within an ostensibly colorblind discursive field, *Offgrid*'s investment in whiteness is discernible here: beyond the fact that the magazine's models and contributors are overwhelmingly white, the logic of *whiteness* constructs success, indeed true freedom, as only possible via individualism.²⁵ Obscuring the structural foundation on which privilege and marginalization are built, including the decimation of Indigenous communities foundational to the American conception of “The People,” allows able-bodied, white men to imagine that — if they are adequately prepared — they alone have what it takes to survive.²⁶

One of the central requirements for apocalyptic manhood is the display of control, which Michael Schwalbe calls “the defining quality of a masculine self.”²⁷ The ability to stay cool in the face of chaos is central to *Offgrid*'s value system, which is established at the beginning of each issue in the editor's letter. In “Outbreak,” Vuong writes, “The world seems like a scary place and is getting scarier by the day — but *only* if you're unprepared.”²⁸ After detailing stressful events including a car accident, the Flint lead crisis, severe weather, and a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, Vuong says, “These events might make the timid and unsuspecting even more afraid. But if anything, [they] should make you more vigilant and ever ready.”²⁹ Vuong draws on gendered discourses of emotion by invoking the specter of fear to characterize a lack of

24. *Offgrid*, August 2015, 9.

25. The notable exception to this is Patrick Vuong, who served as editor of all the issues analyzed here and who is also occasionally featured as a martial artist.

26. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

27. Michael Schwalbe, *Manhood Acts: Gender and the Practices of Domination* (New York: Paradigm, 2014), 59.

28. Patrick Vuong, “Always Been This Way,” *Offgrid*, April 2016, 8 (italics in original).

29. *Ibid.*, 8.

preparedness as unmasculine, while “real men” are “ever ready” in line with the cultural expectation that they be stoic protectors of the vulnerable. Vuong finishes the letter by contrasting the serious prepper with those who are unwilling to accept danger: “Just remember, the world’s never been all rainbows and butterflies, so there’s no reason to start feeling like a victim now. Study, practice, and observe. Remember: it’s not paranoia, it’s preparation. There’s a difference.”³⁰ Here, Vuong employs symbols of girlish innocence and the term “victim” to feminize (and infantilize) anyone who might refuse to accept that the world is inherently threatening. Thus, he rationalizes what others might consider irrational: that readers should spend their time, money, and energy focusing not on what is but on what might be, no matter how unlikely. In *Offgrid*, speculating about calamity is not only logical, it makes one superior.

As part of its project of producing hegemonic masculinity, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy,” *Offgrid* constructs an idealized manhood through contrasts with its failures, thus affirming the right of a certain kind of man to have power over others, including other men.³¹ This is clearly seen in “Surviving a Mass Shooting” when Pat McNamara writes, “Many of us have relinquished our primal survival instincts, becoming fat, flaccid, gelatinous button-pushers.”³² Adjacent to this description is an image of an extremely fit, muscular white man who looks like a paramilitary soldier in his dark sunglasses and black t-shirt bearing an American flag on the sleeve. With gritted teeth and gripping a semi-automatic handgun, he is running, presumably toward danger. McNamara describes the necessity of a plan: “If gunshots ring out or an explosion shakes the ground, running along with the rest of the ‘sheeple’ may not be the best course of action. Don’t be victimized by an ocean of people who have their heads up their asses.”³³ Whereas the out-of-shape wimp without a plan is just another faceless, “flaccid” loser in a herd, the trained, virile hero rides above the

30. Ibid.

31. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 77.

32. Pat McNamara, “Surviving a Mass Shooting,” *Offgrid*, April 2017, 34.

33. Ibid., 35.

subsuming tide of the collective “ocean.” He is the only one prepared to act, a contrast that idealizes and thus legitimizes his right to dominate.

Individual preparedness and ability are dramatically portrayed in Tim MacWelch’s regular “What If?” feature, a series of speculative narratives that take the perspective of survival experts responding to a hypothetical calamitous event. First- and second-person grammar encourages readers’ immersive engagement by placing themselves in the hero’s shoes (e.g., “What If? An Outbreak of Weaponized Pneumonic Plague Hits Your City”).³⁴ Utilizing past-tense, action-packed narration that provides a sense of inevitability, these stories turn notional events into “real life” disasters, offering instructional contrast between prepared (masculine) survivalists who prevail due to their ingenuity, bravery, and ready access to gear, and those who are less fit.

In “What If? You’re Stranded in the Desert,” the scenario is described thusly: “You’re a portly sales executive in your early fifties named Mark, about to depart on a long road trip back home to Wichita, Kansas.”³⁵ Having dropped “your” daughter off at New Mexico State, “you” decided to visit Roswell before returning home but took a wrong turn somewhere and are now lost in the desert with an overheating 1990 Ford F-150 and no cell phone reception. In the first version of the story, survival expert Jared Wihongi explains that, with even rudimentary survival skills, one would know to focus on hydration, moderating body temperature, and using basic supplies to start a fire to alert help. Two days into being stranded, “Mark” is saved by a Bureau of Land Management ranger, but not before shooting a rattlesnake with his concealed carry handgun and coming perilously close to death after running out of water. In the second version, “Mark” is completely ill-prepared to deal with being stranded in the desert: he repeatedly tries to make calls on a phone with no signal, remembers lessons from Boy Scouts only after making mistakes, breaks his phone when it drops from his “clumsy fingers,” and is ultimately reduced to lying in his truck with no plan, left only to think about all that he regrets — until he is rescued by a sheriff.³⁶

34. Tim MacWelch, “What If? An Outbreak of Pneumonic Plague Hits Your City,” *Offgrid*, April 2016, 20–28.

35. Tim MacWelch, “What If? You’re Stranded in the Desert,” *Offgrid*, October 2017, 20.

36. *Ibid.*, 25.

As in the first scenario, this “Mark” is saved by a government authority and is thus not only unprepared but humiliated. Such failures of masculine individualism serve as cautionary tales of shame.

By contrast, some “What If?” characters represent *Offgrid*’s masculine ideal, as in “What If? You’re Trapped in a Mass Shooting,” in which the protagonist finds himself in a mall as a masked gunman kills people at random. Expert Erik Lund reports that he would normally be carrying a concealed firearm, but since this scenario takes place in Chicago, “one of the most gun restrictive cities in the entire country,” where “only the elites” are allowed to defend themselves, he is reduced to hand-to-hand combat, reliant on his physical strength and the SOG Kiku knife he carries.³⁷ Though he contemplates running away, Lund’s protagonist decides, “*No, I will not run, I will fight back. If not me, then who? . . . Time to sack up. Drive him into the ground. Be fast. Be brutal.*”³⁸ When he hears a click, indicating that the shooter’s gun is empty, the protagonist tackles him, stabs him in the chest, and saves the day. Despite his naturalized masculine bravery, referenced as male gonads, the local district attorney charges this hero with carrying a concealed weapon and assault, details that signal a clear rebuke of not only Chicago politics but more generally the view that the government tends to vilify the good guy.³⁹ The protagonist’s hostility in response to public officials’ contempt for his heroism captures what Michael Kimmel calls “aggrieved entitlement,” an attitude held by white working- and middle-class men who feel cheated, under attack, ridiculed, and vilified by society despite their being noble, hardworking, and committed to country and family.⁴⁰ While such men are encouraged by conservative talk radio, among other sources, to blame feminism, the Civil Rights movement, and the government for what they perceive to be their social marginalization, Kimmel argues

37. MacWelch, “What If? You’re Trapped in a Mass Shooting,” *Offgrid*, April 2017, 26.

38. *Ibid.*, 26 (italics in original).

39. Chicago is not nearly as restrictive as pro-gun groups suggest, yet it is a favorite target of the gun lobby because despite its regulations, it continues to have relatively high rates of gun violence. See Danielle Kurtzleben, “FACT CHECK: Is Chicago Proof That Gun Laws Don’t Work?” National Public Radio, October 5, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/05/555580598/fact-check-is-chicago-proof-that-gun-laws-don-t-work>.

40. Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

that it is economic stress and social class that best explain their frustrations. In a time of financial insecurity and unparalleled economic inequality, access to opportunity may no longer be the birthright that their fathers and grandfathers enjoyed, and to which they feel entitled. Yet, given their history of systemic advantage, they are unlikely to acknowledge the structural conditions that are responsible for the present reality, and so they lash out.

Offgrid's editors and writers are tapped into this worldview and actively fan its flames; this is particularly evident in their giddy anticipation of social collapse — for example, “when the masses figure out that their cushy life is over—all we can say is, ‘Welcome to the Wild Wild West, sucka!’”⁴¹ They deploy this rhetoric in order to encourage readers to consume. A “Gear Up” review for a portable welding unit advises, “When the banks shut down and the latte sippers wake up to realize they aren’t as useful as a guy who can build a trailer out of scrap metal and found parts, you’ll be glad you can weld.”⁴² While our economic system currently rewards (effete) professionals instead of “real men,” when disaster strikes (and it inevitably will according to this magazine), *Offgrid's* hero will rise from the ashes of patriarchy’s white, working-class glory days, ready to reclaim his rightful place in society.

OFFGRID’S OTHERS

In addition to failures of manhood, *Offgrid's* vision of superior masculine selfhood is constructed in contradistinction to figures of women, children, and nature, which is conceived as agentic. These figures serve as conveniently familiar “Others through whom the...subject can make sense of himself, and upon whom anxieties about identity may be focused.”⁴³ In this case, women and children are both motivators for and surmountable obstacles to apocalyptic heroism. The use of dualistic contrast in maintaining masculine hegemony is systematized in a conceptual framework that ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood has

41. Tim MacWelch, “What If? An EMP Renders Everyone Technologically Helpless,” *Offgrid*, June 2017, 30.

42. “Gear Up,” *Offgrid*, December 2016, 10.

43. Andil Gosine, “Non-white Reproduction and Same-Sex Eroticism: Queer Acts against Nature,” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 156.

identified as central to the operation of a master identity that controls and benefits from social structures such as patriarchy. This framework is aggressively reinforced throughout *Offgrid* as manhood is repeatedly defined in opposition to subjugated, alienated, homogenized Others that are, in Plumwood's terms, *backgrounded* (where the master's dependency on the Other is denied), *radically excluded* (where differences between the inferiorized Other and the master are magnified), *incorporated* (defined relationally as lack), and *instrumentalized* (objectified and used without consideration of the Other's desires or ends).⁴⁴ This conceptual framework underpins *Offgrid's* employment of women, children, and nature in an apocalyptic fantasy that is explicitly organized around the theme of dominant master identities at war with chaos.

Nature as Antagonist

Environmentalist gender theorists argue that "the theme of (heterosexual white) men doing battle against Nature in order to achieve 'real manhood' has been widespread," creating "a representational paradigm whereby heterosexual white manhood (i.e., 'real men') is constructed as the most 'natural' social identity in the United States."⁴⁵ Wilderness in particular has functioned as a powerful location for the development of white hetero-masculinity, for instance in the American frontier era when lands and Indigenous peoples were "conquered" by white explorers and colonizers.⁴⁶ Likewise during the late-nineteenth century, the national parks were created "as places where new ideals of whiteness, masculinity, and virility could be explored away from the influence of emancipated women, immigrants," and gay culture.⁴⁷ These and other social forces were seen as contributing to the feminization of the urban bourgeois white man. The frontier remains a nostalgic site of American

44. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 48–53.

45. Mei Mei Evans, quoted in Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 182–83.

46. Virginia J. Scharff, ed., *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

47. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, introduction to *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 14.

manhood: Melzer explains that “frontier masculinity,” “the mythologized dominant version of manhood from America’s frontier past,” is “characterized by rugged individualism, hard work, protecting and providing for families, and self-reliance.”⁴⁸ The persistent appeal of the frontier as a location for the cultivation of masculinity is evident in, for example, the HBO series *Westworld*, where privileged white men pay to live out their fantasies of the “Wild West.” More generally, wild places are still envisioned in dominant discourse “in a way that presents nature — and its personal domination in the guise of hunting, fishing, climbing, and other outdoor activities — as a site for the enactment of a specific heteromascularity” that naturalizes white men’s claim to superiority.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, concerns about the feminization and weakness of white-collar American men continue, as illustrated in *Offgrid*.

The naturalization of *Offgrid*’s apocalyptic masculinity is achieved in part through its embedment in an agentic environment that is not only wild but also, following the tradition of Man vs. Nature, inherently antagonistic. In order to battle nature, Man must first be conceived as separate from it, then as its adversary, then as well-suited to confronting it. Thus is (white) Man defined: Nature may be the place where his masculinity is naturalized, but he is also an intruder there, for the definition of wilderness is a place where humans do not belong, including the Indigenous nations whose removal was required for it to be defined as such — “the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity.”⁵⁰ This exclusion is necessary for (white) Man’s conquest and mastery, his ability to convert terrain, conceived as *terra nullius* (nobody’s land), into territory. *Offgrid*’s vision of masculine combat with an adversarial environment is supported by advertisements in which nature conceals threats that can only be addressed through the procurement of specialty goods such as night vision goggles and tactical flashlights. “Don’t Let Darkness Keep You From Being a Hero,” says an ad for the Tactical Night Vision Company’s goggle adaptor for GoPro.⁵¹ This hero is advised by Mechanix

48. Scott Melzer, *Gun Crusaders: The NRA’s Culture War* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 16.

49. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 3.

50. William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69.

51. *Offgrid*, October 2016, 57.

Tactical Hand Protection to “own your environment”; “tactical” gloves represent an economic advantage that facilitates the contemporary conquest of nature and bolsters a proprietary relationship to public space.⁵² A Camillus knife ad features an explorer preparing to enter the jungle, where “the world feels different” and “the air is electric... thick with possibility”; the tagline is “No matter the challenge, consider it conquered.”⁵³ This relationship is especially pertinent as a consumerist response to the threats attendant to global climate change; in an uncertain world where nature takes on ever more monstrous proportions — where it “fights back” against our exploitation in surprising and frightening ways — planting imaginative flags of ownership on the frontier of the future is a comforting, masculine rejection of vulnerability.

Significantly, while *Offgrid* does occasionally mention global climate change as an inevitable condition that is already underway, there is no systematic analysis of its causes, consequences, or other forms of disaster; the magazine’s decontextualized scenarios yield no understanding of how, for instance, economics, planning and development, or social justice concerns might factor in to the emergence of conditions for disaster. *Offgrid*’s floods, blackouts, and volcanic eruptions are generally dramatic, mysterious events that strike without warning, violently disrupting sunny days, business as usual, and unquestioned social structures. This mystique is essential for the prepper mentality, which depends upon the potential for sudden catastrophe and precludes politicized investigation of the consumer’s own mundane role in systems such as capitalism. *Offgrid*’s vision limits the reader’s participation in disaster to small-scale, step-by-step preparations, turning unmanageable challenges into a matter of having the right accessories or, for those who prefer to deal with climate change through humor, buying a lightweight Kimber rifle so as to “reduce your carbine footprint.”⁵⁴

Offgrid’s uncritical framing of disaster is supported by its routine evocation of a feminized environment — Mother Nature — that is actively destructive. Ecofeminist scholars have demonstrated that the feminization of nature through the metaphor of Mother Nature has been counterproductive to positive relations with nature in the West,

52. *Offgrid*, August 2016, 23.

53. *Offgrid*, December 2016, 87.

54. *Offgrid*, August 2016, 33.

since in this context, mothers are viewed with ambivalence and womanhood is subordinate to manhood; Mother Nature therefore buttresses both environmental degradation and misogyny. Catherine Roach explains that “Mother in patriarchal culture is . . . she who satisfies all of our wants and needs endlessly and without any cost to us. Mother is she who loves us and will take care of us no matter what.”⁵⁵ While she is thus ripe for exploitation, the Mother is also easily positioned as an opponent since, due to women’s providing most childcare, she “appears all-powerful and caring but also capricious and malevolent. The baby thus comes to love and desire but also to hate and fear the caretaker,” a dynamic that is displayed in mainstream discourse that describes nature as a “goddess” (good mother) when “she” cooperates with our agendas and a “bitch” (bad mother) when “she” does not.⁵⁶ These roles are both implicit and explicit in *Offgrid*, as in a recommendation for anti-itch lotion: “Mother Nature can be a bitch. And we’re not even talking about natural disasters of biblical proportions. Outdoor adventurers know all too well that she can ‘bite’ back in the smallest ways, with things like poison oak and fire ants.”⁵⁷ Apparently, even ants are so threatening to the masculine trail-blazer’s manhood that they demand misogynistic anthropomorphism. As MacWelch says in “What If? You’re Stranded in the Desert,” nature is “a brutal adversary, with a host of weapons at her disposal.”⁵⁸

“What If? The Eye of a Major Hurricane Has You in Its Sights” frames a hurricane as an assailant with a deadly instrument trained specifically upon the reader.⁵⁹ In this twist on the hurricane “eye” trope, the storm is an agent of death that surveils humans through the use of precisely the sort of device that *Offgrid* is designed to sell—a weapon accessory. The “good” guy’s sense of being watched, hunted by potential “bad” entities such as nature, justifies the prepper’s defensive alertness and animates the aggrieved entitlement at work in this magazine. The prepper solution is countersurveillance. According to an anatomically

55. Catherine Roach, “Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation,” in *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 55.

56. Roach, “Loving Your Mother,” 54.

57. “Gear Up,” *Offgrid*, December 2016, 12.

58. MacWelch, “Stranded in the Desert,” 25.

59. Tim MacWelch, “What If? The Eye of a Major Hurricane Has You in Its Sights,” *Offgrid*, October 2016, 24–32.

intriguing description by David H. Martin in “An Eye for an Eye,” in which a fist contains an eyeball: “A hurricane is the haymaker of sucker punches, nature’s fist of fury” in which “winds and waters combine in a one-two punch that leaves you for dead in a blind alley—Hurricane Alley”; the key is to develop “an eye for an eye” or the “hurricane mindset.”⁶⁰ In this formulation, man and hurricane go at it on a level playing field, training their sights upon each other and doing battle until (ideally) the good guy wins. Nature may be powerful, but Man is prepared.

An article called “The Hills Have Eyes: Tips for Camping in the Backcountry Where Dangerous Game Might Be Watching You” consistently refers to predators as “dangerous game” and to wilderness as “dangerous game country”; both the animals and their habitats are radically excluded as intrinsically threatening and instrumentalized as intrinsically huntable (game). Author Kevin Estela says, “There’s a lot of information about avoiding dangerous game in the outdoors written from a nature-loving, overly optimistic perspective. But how can you . . . apply a more proactive approach to ensuring your safety . . . ? In some circumstances, you have no choice but to share the land with animals that can hurt you.”⁶¹ Estela would rather not “share the land” against his will, nor should he have to in this anthropocentric ethos, since human occupation of the wilderness is the only criterion for claiming it: “Wild edibles, water, and open areas . . . are all reasons for wildlife to make new routes through your temporary home.”⁶² While the (apparently indigent) animals are merely “making new routes,” this is the human’s “temporary home,” which, like his permanent home, is at risk, thus demanding vigilance and self-protection. If approached by “dangerous game,” the reader is advised to “Stand Your Ground,” following the principles of DLP, “defense of life or property.”⁶³ The article’s title, which references horror film *The Hills Have Eyes*, underscores the tension inherent in this unstable vision of nature as a treacherous place where the reader can, paradoxically, feel “at home.”⁶⁴ The settler-colonial castle doctrine evokes a sense of being both unsafe in and entitled to a domain. In this

60. David H. Martin, “Eye for an Eye,” *Offgrid*, October 2016, 35.

61. Kevin Estela, “The Hills Have Eyes,” *Offgrid*, April 2017, 65.

62. *Ibid.*, 66.

63. *Ibid.*, 69.

64. Alexandre Aja, dir. *The Hills Have Eyes*. Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight, 2006.

film, a suburban family is attacked by mutants while driving through a desert atomic zone; like the *Offgrid* protagonist in the wilderness, they are outsiders in a hostile “no-man’s land” and are raped and murdered one after the other. In *Offgrid*, the mutant killer is represented through the figure of a bear, as in a sidebar on “hybrid threats” such as the “pizzly” or “grolar” bear (polar bear mixed with grizzly bear).⁶⁵ Reflecting on the increasingly overlapping ranges and gene pools of these two bear species due to climate change, Estela notes that “as these rare hybrids continue to grow in number, the possibility for dangerous encounters rises.”⁶⁶ The underlying concern here is regarding property and mobility—whose “ground” is whose, who is the intruder, and who is intruded upon. Hegemonic masculinity is intensified when distinct domains are destabilized within the context of environmental uncertainty (mutancy) that *Offgrid*’s salience requires. Meanwhile, a full-page portrait of a grizzly illustrates the surveilling “Eyes” of the title, emphasizing that the landscape is frighteningly alive. This realm was occupied prior to the reader’s intrusion, which, in the settler colonial tradition of the American frontier, is always framed as a right; its native/non-human occupants have no such legitimate claim. Whereas smiling white children tramp innocently through a bright meadow on one page, a bear cub in a tree is “tearing through tree bark” (vs. simply eating) on the facing page.⁶⁷ Its existence is innately violent and threatening, particularly to juvenile white humans, who are innately deserving of safety and protection wherever they go since the wilderness is theirs for the taking. *Offgrid*’s view of nature is an ambivalent, paranoid one in which “love” and “optimism” are opposed to a “proactive” stance; native species are intruders that will first case your campsite, then attack; and “dangerous game country” extends the white man’s proprietary privilege into the farthest reaches of the public sphere.

Women and Children First

It is overwhelmingly men who conquer, own, and defend the world of *Offgrid*. “What If? Yellowstone’s Underground Super-Volcano Erupts” is explicitly “a tale of nature versus mankind” in which, across all

65. Estela, “The Hills,” 68.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 67.

three survival experts' narratives, it is only the male children who are able-bodied, resourceful, quick assistants to the male protagonist's unfailing leadership.⁶⁸ In each story, the mother, Katerina, is sobbing hysterically or severely injured. She and most of the other women and girls who appear on the pages of *Offgrid* are *essentially* unfit for extreme environments and conditions due to their femininity. Whereas environmental extremes are ideal staging grounds for the performance of a white heterosexual masculinity that is in its element when doing battle with nature, "those who have been socially constructed as Other" are often seen as "out of place when they venture to or attempt to inhabit Nature."⁶⁹ Rather, feminized Others are typically instrumentalized as supportive helpmates who assist male heroes undergoing the trials of disaster, or they are incorporated as victims who must be protected by powerful, well-equipped men. Occasionally, such Others even function oppositionally as challenges that heroes must overcome to proceed with survival, thus creating additional, backgrounded opportunities for masculine accomplishment. In Rudy Reyes's volcano story, for instance, Katerina ultimately has to be carried through the snow for twenty miles, offering the male heroes a chance to exhibit their prowess and fortitude in constructing a gurney and maneuvering it through the winter wilderness: "We all took a knee, away from a distraught Katerina. 'Men, we are in a world of shit, but we can make it through this if we work together,' I said... 'Are you with me?' The boys sprung to their feet... ready for the challenge."⁷⁰ Images show scared women and girls peering timidly through windows that separate them from the dangerous realities outside, walking behind tough male leaders, weeping helplessly, being held at knifepoint, screaming witlessly, and suffering from gratuitously brutal injuries. In most cases, men's mastery is the norm, and women and children are radically excluded, since the master identity is constructed through an ethos of survivalist self-reliance that stands in sharp contrast with the incompetence and incapacity of Others and their reduction to spectacle. Even in the rare cases when the magazine appears to be appealing to a female reader, women's vulnerability

68. Tim MacWelch, "What If? Yellowstone's Underground Super-Volcano Erupts," *Offgrid*, February 2016, 20–28.

69. Evans, quoted in Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 183.

70. MacWelch, "Super-Volcano Erupts," 24.

is usually emphasized. A Surefire tactical flashlight ad features a long-haired woman in a dark alley being stalked by an assailant with a knife; her thin, feminine arm covers her vulnerable torso. The text asks, "Who will be your defender?" implying that a woman walking unescorted at night is "asking for it."⁷¹ The expensive flashlight takes the place of an absent good guy because in no way can she defend herself. In *Offgrid*, to be able-bodied is, for the most part, to be male.

As opposed to Katerina and her many ineffectual sisters, the father of *Offgrid* is a new kind of provider. In disaster/apocalypse, a man must succeed at masculinity by dominating on the home front rather than by participating in current, hierarchized economic structures. As a result, his new domestic sphere must become masculinized. This shift necessitates reconceiving chores such as cooking, buying household goods, and housekeeping so that they are tough work requiring DIY competence and the hoarding of items defined as "gear" and "supplies." It also requires reconceptualizing fatherhood so that it can accommodate the intimate realities of parenting from which men have historically been alienated, without calling up the "Mr. Mom" image of the stay-at-home dad who is often feminized in popular culture. These redefinitions depend upon the mother's decentering from the domestic, including parenting, so that the father can step in. This is accomplished in a range of ways across stories in *Offgrid*, from the mother's being missing, to being rendered incapacitated by circumstance, to being unfit due to character defects. In "What If? A Dirty Bomb Goes Off in Your City," MacWelch describes "The Setup: You're an electrician in your mid 20s. Recently separated from her deadbeat mom, you now have sole custody of your infant, Ashley."⁷² As the protagonist's "babysitter ([his] mom)" is on vacation, he is left to fend for himself and his three-month-old baby girl, which is no problem since he is competent, quick, and has useful equipment at his disposal.⁷³ In Candace Horner's version, his "man cave has many comforts," so his well-established masculinity pays off in the form of a safe harbor to which he can retreat, though he ends up having to leave it and expose himself to radioactive material in order to care for

71. *Offgrid*, October 2016, 79.

72. Tim MacWelch, "What If? A Dirty Bomb Goes Off in Your City," *Offgrid*, December 2016, 19.

73. MacWelch, "Dirty Bomb," 19.

his hysterical, elderly neighbor Ms. Thompson, who is otherwise “going to scare herself to death.”⁷⁴ This male protagonist succeeds on his own despite the impediments presented by four female characters, including two missing/failed mothers.

An article called “Bugging Out with Baby” features images of a determined, bearded, heavily tattooed, weaponized father carrying a pink-clad, long-lashed baby girl through a rough post-apocalyptic neighborhood. He models positions for “marsupial carry options” (echoing “concealed carry”) and represents fatherhood as an uncompromised stand against a harsh world where children are “innocent victims” whose management is best left to the brave, rugged male head-of-household.⁷⁵ Author Dave Merrill says, “We love stories and movies about a lone survivor. A single man in the apocalypse, roaming the ruined world on a dual-sport bike. . . . He’s the stoic badass underdog it seems every American man wishes he could be. But you know what he rarely has? Children. . . . There’s not a whole lot of badass gun-fighting action going on when you’re changing diapers.”⁷⁶ Merrill describes children as “needy, complicated, and entirely unprepared for any situation — hell, many of them can’t even fall asleep by themselves.”⁷⁷ Further, in a disaster, “if momma gets dehydrated, she can lose her breast milk. Very quickly you could have both a hungry baby and a sick companion. Not exactly the trouble you want when you’ve already left home due to an emerging disaster.”⁷⁸ In Merrill’s estimation, given their dependency, children and mothers potentially pose additional threats to the family’s survival, generating new trouble for the erstwhile lone-wolf male “you” with whom the reader is to identify. Fortunately, he can purchase the right products for masculinizing this frustrating fatherhood. Merrill says, discussing baby slings, “If you look at pictures of tribal women in *National Geographic*, it looks like they just obtained some cloth and went to town. And sure, you *can* do that, but your results won’t be as secure or safe” as the KinderPack, which is Merrill’s “go-to” equipment.⁷⁹ Indigenous women are essential-

74. MacWelch, “Dirty Bomb,” 20.

75. Dave Merrill, “Bugging Out with Baby,” *Offgrid*, February 2016, 33.

76. *Ibid.*, 31.

77. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

78. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

79. *Ibid.*, 34–35 (italics in original).

ized, exoticized, and derogated here through an incorporated “tribal” motherhood that acts thoughtlessly as opposed to one that possesses modern skillsets or culturally specific intergenerational knowledge. White masculinity can compensate for its compulsory alienation from the domestic through a superior consumerism that will allow a man to dominate parenthood just as he does with everything else.⁸⁰ Merrill’s “certainty in an apocalypse event is hopeful in as much as it means that fathers will return to preeminence.”⁸¹

A man’s purchasing power may prevent apocalyptic feminization in caring for a baby, but labor and delivery are more fraught. In “Labor Day: What If You Have to Deliver a Baby Without Medical Help?” John Schwartze encourages men to be enthusiastic assistants who let their female partners take the lead, as “Women have been successfully giving birth since long before hospitals and modern medicine existed.”⁸² This potentially radical reclamation of birth from the grip of medicalization is undercut, however, by the story’s illustrations, which focus not on the birth process, but on a man’s actions and concerns, taking the reader on an emotional ride culminating in his triumphant accomplishment. In the first drawing, a vastly pregnant blonde in a flowered dress stands in front of a TV airing the national State of Emergency alert. In the second, her male partner, dressed warmly in a parka and with a pack on his back, leads her purposefully by the hand through the snow to the car as she, totally unprepared for life outdoors, clutches a too-small coat over her inadequate dress. In the third, as the woman lies ecstatically splayed in the open car, the man stands in the snow with winter mountains behind him and the floral scene of birth in front of him; his panicked face stares

80. This intertextual reference to the “tribal” women of *National Geographic* also encourages the (white) male Westerner to consume the colonized bodies of Indigenous women. Further, in this mystified objectification of their baby sling techniques, the parallel between a Western man’s parenting crisis and Indigenous practices comprehends the latter only as a last resort, akin to disaster, certainly not as a location of aptitude and wisdom. This is despite the fact that the modern sling is a commercial appropriation of erased Indigenous technology (as are many of the tools and skills that *Offgrid* valorizes), a debt that Merrill inadvertently acknowledges through dismissal.

81. Kelly, “The Man-pocalypse,” 105.

82. John Schwartze, “Labor Day: What If You Have to Deliver a Baby Without Medical Help?” *Offgrid*, February 2016, 38.

back at the (empathetic, male) reader, his arms thrust out helplessly in front of him. In the fourth, the protagonist drives his family away with a satisfied yet vigilant gaze into the rearview mirror at the rising smoke of disaster safely behind him; the new mother and baby sit peacefully beside him, her expression without a care. A fecund body, she has fulfilled her role in this circumstance; now he, temporarily unmanned by the forces of nature surrounding him, has returned to the comfortable position of masculine leadership. Significantly, two of the four images focus on his abilities in this emergency, though he is not shown actually assisting in the birth. The messy, subservient participation detailed in Schwartz's directions is absent here so the reader will focus visually on his driving. Woman and nature are linked and backgrounded as a mother/disaster that furnishes an opportunity for heroic achievement on the part of Man-as-culture; any threats that they might present are neatly contained by the reduction of the maternal to mere physical function.

These threats are handled not only by the articles' dismissal of the mother's capabilities, which highlights her weakness and hysteria, but they are also managed through her indictment as a "bad" mother, mirroring Mother Nature. In "What If? The Eye of a Major Hurricane Has You in Its Sights," the father-protagonist must protect, among others, his thirteen-year-old daughter Jazlyn, who lives with his "ex-trophy wife."⁸³ In Candace Horner's version—the most intensely misogynist of the three—his ex-wife Diana is decentered from parenthood, as she "was never the amazing mother she should have been. . . . I absolutely could *not* depend on her to ensure Jazlyn's safety."⁸⁴ Diana greeted the protagonist "with her stoic, Xanax-induced demeanor," then his father with "the same fake, Barbie smile she always used for him," whereupon the grandfather said, "Why are you falling out of your dress in the middle of the day at a time like this?! Put some clothes on young lady!"⁸⁵ Diana grabbed some red heels and "stormed past dad and me with the same fury the wind was whipping up outside," headed for "Becky's Hurricane Party."⁸⁶ She later drowns on the way there—cosmic justice for her frivo-

83. MacWelch, "Major Hurricane," 25.

84. *Ibid.*, 26 (italics in original).

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

lousness. In Ryan Lee Price's version, the protagonist has been renaming hurricanes after his ex-wife since their divorce because "Like hurricanes, she came into my life, stuck around for a little while, and destroyed *everything*."⁸⁷ "Diana and her implants" now live far from him, but she is still a gold-digging "shrew."⁸⁸ Tim MacWelch's Diana has a "medusa-like glare" and is scarier to the protagonist than driving through the hurricane; his closing thought is, "If I can survive a storm like that and an ex-wife like this, I can make it through anything."⁸⁹ In all three cases, the ex-wife and the storm are linked explicitly as frightening, destructive forces against which the hero must do battle on behalf of his child, illustrating the mutually dependent tropes of Mother Nature as bitch and bitchy woman as force of nature.⁹⁰ Diana is "like" nature in that she is aggressive and antagonistic, but she is *also* artificial and immodest, with her breast implants and rash decisions. Similarly to the woman giving birth, she is both a natural female force and, due to her extreme femininity, constitutionally ill-suited to survive natural extremes or protect a child. As Roach says, such Mother/Nature imagery "exposes more clearly than anything else in the culture . . . the turbulence and conflict in popular sensibilities toward the environment," as "nowhere else is there found such a passionate confluence of contradictory attitudes."⁹¹ Like bad girls in other popular natural disaster media, Diana is killed off because the wickedly rebellious Mother Nature cannot be; she deserves punishment for defying the patriarchal order in a time of crisis when that is the only reliable institution.⁹² More broadly, where nature is "a threat to human survival, to survive is to re-inhabit roles that represent what is safe, familiar, and comforting about 'nature' as it applies to human relationships."⁹³

While women's positions in the apocalypse are typically limited to victim (good — passive, compliant) and villain (bad — active, resistant),

87. *Ibid.*, 28 (italics in original).

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, 31.

90. Cynthia Belmont, "Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine," *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal* 36, no. 5 (2007): 349–72.

91. Catherine M. Roach, *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 8.

92. Belmont, "Ecofeminism."

93. *Ibid.*, 362.

token heroines do appear. Among the small handful of *Offgrid* women in active positions is the cover model of “Protect Yourself,” one of only two issues featuring a solo woman on the cover; the model lifts her t-shirt to reveal her toned belly and a concealed-carry gun. The femaleness of this sexualized tough girl, hiding around the corner from an approaching assailant, emphasizes the theme of vulnerability that is the issue’s focus. She also dispenses a bit of eye candy complementary to the sexualized women sprinkled through *Offgrid*’s back pages, selling adult novelties and posing with vehicles. This cover complicates identification for the intended heterosexual male reader: if the “good guy” here is an instrumentalized object of his gaze, he cannot easily identify with her but must also view her as an Other who is in his sights. Thus, he is situated to some degree on the side of the predatory assailant who is coming for her — the “bad guy” — a shift that disrupts this apparently strict divide. The vulnerability of what the woman must “protect” — her femaleness from violation — is actually encouraged by *Offgrid*’s heteropatriarchal reduction of women to spectacle. Even if the reader responds to this image in a chivalrous rather than predatory mode, his status as a protector of valuable goods, and her status *as* the goods, prevent her from fully inhabiting heroism, even though she is tough and carrying a gun. Here, as elsewhere in *Offgrid* and in the culture at large, sexual objectification supports women’s ideological imprisonment in subhuman materiality.

CONCLUSION

Given that *Offgrid* trades in fantasies of the sudden disappearance of all major social systems and familiar institutions, it could conceivably offer new possibilities for social relations and identities, including gender. But as with the irony of its apocalyptic disaster consumerism, gender conservatism is extreme in this vision of the future. As economist Heidi Hartmann explains, “patriarchy, like capital, can be surprisingly flexible and adaptable”: while “many people have argued that though the partnership between capital and patriarchy exists now, it may *in the long run* prove intolerable to capitalism,” there is “little evidence that . . . patriarchal relations . . . can be destroyed so easily.”⁹⁴ It seems that the

94. Heidi I. Hartmann (1981), “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed.

retrogressive, protectionist, and patriarchal politics of *Offgrid* support its consumerist imperative; its consumerism, focused entirely on competitive masculinity, also supports patriarchy.

Allan Johnson argues compellingly that while feminists “usually think of patriarchy in terms of women and men, it is more about what goes on *among men*. The oppression of women is certainly an important part of patriarchy, but, paradoxically, it may not be the *point* of patriarchy.”⁹⁵ *Offgrid* supports this contention, as it tells, again and again, the story of a deferred (apocalyptic) heroism that draws upon militaristic discourse to interpellate masculine subjects into a vision of reinvigorated, idealized manhood. What is at stake, then, in *Offgrid*'s consideration of climate change, the end of civilization, or even a snowstorm, is men's performance of gender. Women, when they flicker into view, are generally naturalized as resources—part of the territory, along with nature, that a prepared man is qualified to dominate. In strong contrast to other heroic texts, *Offgrid* does not offer women even stock supporting roles, e.g., love interest whose rescue proves the hero's valor or beautiful trophy awarded for successful heroism. Even “good” female characters function mainly as burdens and obstacles—sources of complaint that subtly reinforce the attitude of aggrieved entitlement driving *Offgrid*'s agenda.

Offgrid's fiction of a white male marginalization that can be redressed only through disaster entails capitalist practices that appear to be DIY but in fact follow a strict, standard model for the achievement of masculinity. Within a capitalist imperative, apocalyptic discourse legitimates not only patriarchy but a fear of a nature that functions as a staging ground for heroic trials. Hegemonic masculinity reinforces a culture of calamity in which the threat of disaster is fundamentally a masculine problem that can best be solved by protectionist armed men working in isolation. In this vision of societal collapse, the individual hero will win the day, saving his helpless Others and conquering all that has stifled him, provided that he participates enthusiastically in

Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2009), 305 (italics in original).

95. Allan G. Johnson, “The Gender Knot: What Drives Patriarchy?” in *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, ed. Sheila Ruth, 5th ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2001), 95 (italics in original).

disaster consumerism. *Offgrid* thus exemplifies the potency of conservative futurism, privileging masculine able-bodiedness, heterosexuality, and anthropocentrism in fortifying white manhood.⁹⁶

There is no place in *Offgrid*'s paranoid futurity for a commons, community building, environmentalism, social justice, or any politics that would involve thinking past self-interest and personal legacy. Nor does it offer a concept of difference outside rigidly hierarchized dualistic categories; there is little room for competent women and no room at all for queer, trans, or gender non-conforming people, Indigenous cultures, people with disabilities — anyone who is not the model of hegemonic masculinity or his dependent loved ones. *Offgrid*'s heteropatriarchal, rapaciously capitalist future is yet another frontier for masculine conquest, conceived as a battleground — another wilderness.

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96. Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).