

NEEDS 2021

5th edition of the Northern European Conference
on Emergency and Disaster Studies

Östersund / online 21–23 September

Abstracts from the panel

De-colonizing Disasters: Affect, race, and queer theory



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Belatedness of Modernity, Hastiness of Earthquake: An Autoethnography around Fikirtepe

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Seismologists say the risk of a 7.6 magnitude earthquake striking Istanbul by 2030 is up to 70 percent high. Scientists think it is very likely that between 73,000 and 120,000 people will be injured if a major quake shakes Istanbul, home to sixteen million.

Even though I find "Disaster Anthropology" one of the most fascinating areas of the larger family of Anthropology, it is definitely not the easiest and the "chilliest" area. To talk, to think, to shoot, and to write about a topic like "disasters", feels like you remind people of a "pain". A pain of a previous disaster (in the case of Istanbul, the pain of the "1999 Izmit Earthquake"), a pain that people want to avoid. A pain that is maybe indeed "unnecessary".

My research question has been such an "unnecessary" question throughout all these years. I kept on asking people in forum, residents of my field site, colleagues, my family members and myself, this disturbing and smartass explanation and this follow-up question "In 1999 Earthquake, officially 19.000 people have died. The seismologists announce the next big earthquake will happen in Istanbul around 2030s", so "how come 16 million people living in Istanbul cope with such a big risk?"

The answer was and still is an obvious one. The ones that they could do anything about it have already done it. They left the city, they changed the city, they changed the district, the workplace, the school of their children, and the apartment building they are living in. However, the majority have not. They do not do anything because they can not. The majority have to cope with the risk by avoiding it because that is what they can do.

I have more questions than answers at the end of my ethnographic journey. I tried to elaborate on some of the questions that raised as a part of my research to the scope of this article and my knowledge.

The article concludes that disasters and risk mitigation are not a choice of free will but a result of a lack of power. And also argues that autoethnography and storytelling, in general, can contribute researchers to reconnect with the societies they are researching; a relationship, if built strongly, can help the mitigation of vulnerabilities in a long term.

Disasters as Socionatural Displacements: time, materiality and affect.

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This paper seeks to (re)conceptualise the spatio-temporalities of disasters by conceptualising the aleatory, cyclical and embodied aspects of them. Disasters are most often thought of as ruptures that are contained in time and space and that effect particular territories and inhabitants whose losses are recorded through numbers of fatalities, lost hectares and US dollars. But by taking a material spatio-temporal and affective lens, we show how disasters are better understood as socionatural displacements that are embedded within wider histories and geographies of inequality and change. Using decolonial conceptions of space-time, we reject Enlightenment linear understandings of events and rather seek to understand how the event/disaster attaches itself into everyday life and affects different spatio-temporalities. Using examples from Zambia, Nepal and Nicaragua, we work through specific disasters showing how socionatural affective relations are displaced and reconfigured meaning that new spatio-temporal material relations emerge. We thus decentre attention from the immediacy of the extraordinary and focus instead on the long-lasting reconfigurations of daily practices, knowledges, relations between humans and more-than-humans, and the emotions they engender.

Towards a Geopoetics of Disaster: The Place of Glissant in Postcolonial Disaster Studies

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Researchers in the field of disaster studies increasingly point out that the term, natural disaster, reproduces a problematic division between a hostile and unpredictable environment on one hand, and human efforts to control it on the other. In parts of the Global South that are particularly vulnerable to hazards, the opposition between human order and natural catastrophe neglects the role of socio-historic factors in disproportionately exposing marginalized and poor communities to the worst effects of disasters. As climate change magnifies the frequency and impact of hazards, the need for a more nuanced and postcolonial approach to disaster studies is all the more urgent.

I suggest that Edouard Glissant's work has an essential role in the evolving framework of postcolonial disaster studies. Glissant's writing from the 1980's-90's marks a turn from the regional to the global, and he develops concepts like Relation and chaos as possible correctives to the homogenizing, managerial impulses of "continental" thought. Glissant's insistence upon the interconnected nature of culture and history can help to reframe our understanding of hazards from peripheral tragedies of the underdeveloped world, to undeniably global events produced at the intersection of many factors including climate change, colonialism, poverty, and resource depletion.

I explore how the concepts of chaos and what I call "durational disaster" operate in Glissant's final poetry collections, *Pays rêvé*, *pays réel* (1985) and *Les grands chaos* (1993). Glissant's durational poetics, developed in *Poétique de la relation*, may be applied to a reevaluation of natural disaster away from its purely geophysical causes. Duration emphasizes the complex etiology of catastrophe in the Caribbean, which is in some way always linked to the foundational disaster of the Middle Passage. Slavery operates continually in the present, shaping everything from the postcolonial political economy to disaster response and recovery. Chaos in the Caribbean is presented along a kind of longue-durée in which catastrophic events are not locally or historically contained; rather, chaos accumulates over time and space to decisively shape the present. If chaos in the European imaginary is generally associated with confusion and the absence of meaning, Glissant's geopolitics legitimize it as a local form of dynamic, non-totalizing, and anti-systemic knowledge. A careful consideration of chaos and duration will reveal the critical contributions of Glissant's relational thinking to conceiving a postcolonial disaster studies.

Disasters as Betrayal

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What constitutes a “disastrous event” and who names it? Drawing on ethnographic and phenomenological research in the mountainscapes of Northern Pakistan, I explore how disasters catalyse conditions for social let-down. I think with my interlocutor: Niaz, whose life is further confounded by another form of betrayal, that of his body. As a result of a life-altering injury, Niaz’s bodily limitations placed significant constraints on his life long before the earthquake that devastated his Himalayan village. Niaz’s failed body (a body that refuses to “recover”), presents an important counterpoint to the disaster of the earthquake. However, Niaz does not attribute his most profound dysphoria to either of the two events, but the disloyalty of his best friend. Niaz helps us to understand disasters as cascading forms of violence where small and large events coalesce, and relationships slip, fall, and possibly reconstitute. He compels us to consider that sociality is not always experienced as a form of plenitude, and perhaps disasters are not mere ruptures of a coherent lifeworld but part of the ongoing labour of inhabiting the world.

Return to Surf: Re-understanding the Sea among Local Surfers in Post-Tsunami Settings

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Tsunami comes in the form of gigantic waves, whereas surfing occurs on waves. While the former is disastrous, the latter is playful. Then, how do local surfers in the post-tsunami coastal communities situate their lifestyle sport activity? More importantly, what are their 'new' meanings of sea and waves in the aftermath of tsunami and within the discourse of post-tsunami recovery? Focusing on the relation between sea, lifestyle sport, and tsunami, this research aims to understand how coastal community learns to re-understand the sea in the post-tsunami context. The oral histories of local surfers in two distinct post-disaster settings of Fukushima (Japan) and Aceh (Indonesia), respectively experiencing tsunami in 2011 and 2004, will be collected. This oral history method is sought to have more complex and inclusive understandings about how post-disaster recovery can be performed through mundane lifestyle sport of surfing and by everyday ethic of re-learning to live with the sea. In such recovery process, relationships between human and sea are expected to be reproduced, while simultaneously creating the 'new' meanings of sea. This research contributes to disaster studies by giving insights on how post-disaster recovery can be understood in terms of human-environment relations and lifestyle sport practices.