

For a short time, we were the best version of ourselves: Hurricane Harvey and the ideal of community

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors use a co-auto-ethnographic study of Hurricane Harvey where both authors were citizen responders and disaster researchers. In practice, large-scale disaster helps temporarily foster an ideal of community which is then appropriated by emergency management institutions. The advancement of disaster research must look to more radical perspectives on human response in disaster and what this means for the formation of communities and society itself. It is the collective task as those invested in the management of crises defer to the potentials of publics, rather than disdain and appropriate them. The authors present this work in the advancement of more empirically informed mitigation of societal ills that produce major causes of disaster. The authors' work presents a departure from the more traditional disaster work into a critical and theoretical realm using novel research methods. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper produces a co-auto-ethnographic study of Hurricane Harvey where both authors were citizen responders and disaster researchers.

Findings – The authors provide a critical, theoretical argument that citizen-based response fosters an ephemeral utopia not usually experienced in everyday life. Disasters present the possibility of an ideal of community. These phenomena, in part, allow us to live our better selves in the case of citizen response and provide a direct contrast to the modern experience. Modernity is a mostly fabricated, if not almost eradicated sense of community. Modern institutions, serve as sources of domination built on the backs of technology, continuity of infrastructures and self-sufficiency when disasters handicap society, unpredictability breaks illusions of modernity. There arises a need to re-engage with those around us in meaningful and exciting ways.

Research limitations/implications – This work produces theory rather than engage in testing theory. It is subject to all the limitations of interpretive work that focuses on meaning and critique rather than advancing associations or causality.

Practical implications – The authors suggest large-scale disasters will persist to overwhelm management institutions no matter how much preparedness and planning occurs. The authors also offer an alternative suggestion to the institutional status quo system based on the research; let the citizenry do what they already do, whereas institutions focus more on mitigate of social ills that lead to disaster. This is particularly urgent given increasing risk of events exacerbated by anthropogenic causes.

Social implications – The advancement of disaster research must look to more radical perspectives on human response in disaster and what this means for the formation of communities and society itself. It is the collective task as those invested in the management of crises to defer to the potentials of publics, rather than disdain and appropriate them. The authors also suggest that meaningful mitigation of social ills that recognize and emphasize difference will be the only way to manage future large-scale events.

Originality/value – The authors' work presents a departure from the more practical utility of disaster work into a critical and highly theoretical realm using novel research methods.

Keywords Disaster response, Disaster preparedness, Modernity, Co-autoethnography, Hurricane Harvey, Ideal of community

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, to do the work we desire, and are our sister's and brother's keeper (Solnit, 2009, p. 3).

Disaster as paradise is not congruent with common thought. Rather, narratives of dystopia dominate where collapse of order is legion. In contrast, Rebecca Solnit (2009) provides multiple examples of ideal, yet ephemeral communities. In the 1906 San Francisco



earthquake, she describes, "It is utopia itself for many people, though it is only a moment during terrible times, and at the time they manage to hold both irreconcilable experiences, the joy and the grief." (2009, p. 17) Solnit provides multiple examples to support disaster a form of paradise.

Documented behavior in disasters confirms Solnit's work. Hurricane Harvey, a category 4 storm when it landed on the gulf coast of Texas, unleashed unprecedented floods on the state in late August of 2017 (Blake and Zelinsky, 2018; Schwartz, 2018; Harris County Flood Control District, 2018; Snyder, 2018; Schafer, 2017, 2018). The storm is one of the more recent examples of a massive disaster. Further, Harvey's wrath overwhelmed formal emergency management efforts, with multiple deluges necessitating approximately 120,000 rescues in the Houston area alone (van Oldenborgh *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). Citizens, both local and beyond, descended upon affected areas either in person or digitally to assist in a variety of efforts.

We participated citizen response first-hand. One of us engaged in attempted boat rescues of stranded individuals. The other did volunteer shelter work and house remediation. There were deaths of family members; one drowned at home, his corpse trapped in the raging river that filled his house for almost two weeks. Another, a grandmother, died during the storm. Her family turned the air down to the lowest setting, delaying decomposition, and waited over 24 h for her body to be retrieved. In these horrific moments, what had been was permanently shattered. Most did what they could to help affected brethren in ways that made sense given their contexts.

Infrastructures of emergency management, under which disaster response rests, tells a different story. They generally treat at-risk and affected publics as threats or passive agents in the disaster continuum (Baker, 2014a; Baker and Grant Ludwig, 2016). Further, misconceptions about how people negotiate disasters pervade media, institutional, and technologic discourses (Baker, 2016; Tierney and Bevc, 2007; Tierney *et al.*, 2006; Sun, 2011, 2012; Sun and Jones, 2015). Elites have created an imaginary world where public response is indicative of social chaos or panic. Planning and preparedness is advanced by elites as the solution to such problems of disaster. However, research points otherwise.

Studies of adaptation are important here. Improvisation (Weick, 1998), sensemaking (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Mills and Weatherbee, 2006) and ephemeral organizations in response to disruption (Lanzara, 1983) are just some illustrations. One of the mechanisms by which people improvise is the re-assortment of everyday routines (Feldman, 2000; Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Flexibility has been somewhat incorporated in formal structures (Ciborra, 1996), as it has been recognized as important. The incident command system (see Bigley and Roberts, 2001) is one instance of a platform that modifies military protocol to allow some room for elasticity.

The importance of adaptation has been extended into the disaster discipline. Relevant studies include those on the 9-11 boatlift by Wachtendorf (2004), crises-based improvisation (e.g. Tierney, 2002; Wachtendorf and Kendra, 2006) and the adaptation of work routines during Katrina (Baker *et al.*, 2014). Digital communication has opened up a new avenue of possibility through "crowdsourcing." Such "ephemeral" work occurs within the digital realm over dispersed geography, employed in a range of situations from disaster to revolution (e.g. Liu, 2014; Schimak *et al.*, 2015). In Harvey, citizen-initiated response leveraged crowdsourcing on a large scale.

Given the above, this paper is about a few things. First, we provide a glimpse into the lived experience of disaster both as citizen responders and researchers through a mutually produced co-autoethnography. To elaborate briefly, we use our involvement with the Harvey in conjunction with our status as academics and institutional insiders. We do so to offer a critical take on "emergency management," in general. Autoethnography, unconventional in the study of disasters, produces empirically grounded critical social

theory (Hughes and Pennington, 2017) that interrogates issues of societal power and privilege through the dual role of participant/researcher (Chang *et al.*, 2016). Here, there is a concentrated employment of the reflexive interpretation of connectivity between self and others (Bochner and Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Adams *et al.*, 2015). As such, we use this interpretive research method to “examine how the private troubles of individuals are connected to public issues and to public responses to these troubles,” (Denzin, 2014, p. vii). Through our research, we produce a critical, theoretical argument that citizen-based response fosters an ephemeral utopia not usually experienced in everyday life.

Indeed, disasters, like Harvey, present the possibility of an ideal of community (Young, 1986). These phenomena, in part, allow us to live our better selves in the case of citizen response and provide a direct contrast to the shackles of modern everyday experience. Modernity is a mostly fabricated, if not almost eradicated sense of community. Or in the view of Michel Foucault (1984), modern institutions, “seem given and natural but in fact are contingent sociohistorical constructs of power and domination.” (Best and Kellner, 1991, p. 35) It is built on the backs of technology, continuity of infrastructures and self-sufficiency (Baker, 2014a, b); all drivers toward convenience. When disasters handicap a society and its continuity, unpredictability breaks illusions of self-sufficiency. There then arises a need to re-engage with those around us in meaningful and exciting ways.

Ultimately, we suggest large-scale disasters will persist to overwhelm management institutions no matter how much preparedness and planning occurs. To be clear, we do not believe this statement applies to more small-scale situations. Rather, in the catastrophic, they will fail to control the unknown. We also offer an alternative suggestion to the institutional status quo system based on our research; let the citizenry do what they already do. This is particularly urgent given increasing risk of disasters exacerbated by anthropogenic causes. We expand on these points. First, we situate our argument in some documented problems with institutional approaches to disaster through the lens of preparedness.

The fallacy of preparedness → response resilience = successful recovery

Human behavior is non-linear, rather it is extremely messy. Stories we like to tell ourselves, particularly in the context of modern western societies, generally push the archetype of happy endings akin to the hero's journey (Campbell, 1990). But does real life work like this? No, it does not. Instead, people die. They suffer. But they also experience joy and love despite the lack of a concrete happy ending. Indeed, the apex of the best human emotions is often expressed in extremely stressed environments, like war (Cottee, 2011; Junger, 2016) and disaster (Solnit, 2009). Furthermore, there is no clear evidence that assumptions about how to behave, such as the one demonstrated in the current paradigm, are remotely close to the lived experience of crises. We dismantle this below beginning with preparedness.

As much as there is research demonstrating people can experience recovery from disaster without any formal preparations, decades of scholarship show there is relative lack of general preparedness of publics (see Basolo *et al.*, 2008; Drabek, 1986; Steinberg *et al.*, 2004; Wright and Rossi, 1981). Excuses are given for whether people prepare or not, such as demographics (Lindell and Perry, 2000), institutional trust (Basolo *et al.*, 2008), income (DiGian, 2005), prior experience (Mileti and Darlington, 1997; Palm and Hodgson, 1992; Russell *et al.*, 1995) and even apathy (Lindell and Whitney, 2000; Palm and Hodgson, 1992; Paton *et al.*, 2000). It is often assumed that increased disaster awareness through education leads to preparedness, but even this is questionable (Paton, 2000). Research shows people do not prepare, and institutions desperately want them to. But is this really a problem?

Some work in other areas would suggest it is not. Evans and Reid (2014) argue the preparedness-resilience connection is borne of neoliberal pretense fueled through the disempowerment of resource-scarce populations of autonomous agency (Evans and Reid, 2014). Others critique how emotions like anxiety produce an illusion “security,” a set of institutions that include disaster management, is necessary (Masco, 2014). There is additional scholarship that explores the “sociotechnical imaginaries” such systems generate (Jasanoff, 2015). Such security “regimes” are constitutive of a risk society (e.g. Beck, 1992, 1999; Giddens, 1991) that underlies modernity and uses threats of mass disruptions such as disaster, in part, to enact social control. On a more micro-level, the fetishism of plans in disaster management can also be problematized.

Preparedness and its embodiment in plans, is a way to satiate the need for control over uncertainty. In the realm of disaster, they produce a trickery of direct translation to successful response (Clark, 1999). This is because plans, as largely symbolic, cannot predict human action (Nardi, 1996; Suchman, 1987; Throgmorton, 1996). Rather, action is always engaged “in the context of particular concrete circumstances.” (Suchman, 1987, p. viii) Preparedness, as a projection of successful disaster response fantasies, creates an illusion of a good and safe future through a prepared vs unprepared dichotomy. Jacques Derrida (1981), however, in a deconstructive perspective, argues the social world does not exist in straight dualisms, rather it is more productive to these dichotomies apart and see what they hide. This was our intent through the critical, interpretive research articulated here.

Method

We present an unorthodox research method for disaster studies. Our work consisted of interwoven autoethnographies or co-autoethnographies, where we drew heavily on our experiences of disaster and our expertise as scholars. In this case, our identities, from the outset, were used as epistemology (Hughes and Pennington, 2017), or an authoritative way of knowing. The rationale was to produce theoretical findings focused on meaning that was rooted in lived-experience of disaster as it happened. Regarding research as we know it, most studies of response are conducted retrospectively and not through engagement with self in-the-moment, as in the case of this work. Such efforts allowed us to produce an empirical and critically rooted theory of disaster as it moved over time, space, and context. We started this work in the immediate context of Hurricane Harvey without an explicit awareness we had embarked on a distinct research project. However, as we are both qualitative researchers who study disaster, it became quickly apparent that we could use our experiences as an autoethnographic method.

What is autoethnography and how does it qualify as research? This interpretive method is a reflexive, questioning, and unveiling study of self as primary in the production of knowledge (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Hughes and Pennington, 2017; McIlveen, 2008). Similar to ethnography, it involves “studying the rules, norms, and acts of resistance associated with cultural groups.” (Hughes and Pennington, 2017, p. 11) Autoethnography also provides a push to privileged academic and hegemonic discourses as a way to theorize about power in ways not permitted through positivist methods. New versions have incorporated collaborative and combined multi-researcher perspectives.

The research was initially structured as separate autoethnographies. However, a co-autoethnography emerged as we engaged in dialogic debates over meaning in data. Co-autoethnography, according to Chang *et al.* (2016) is a “pragmatic application of the autoethnographic approach to social inquiry” (p. 21). Important is an iterative process of dialogic and dialectic engagement with self (Bakhtin, 1993; Coia and Taylor, 2006; Freire, 1972). Thus, a salient aspect of data analysis was a constant negotiation between differing

approaches to research (pragmatic vs critical) and variances as two separate social actors. We became particularly attentive to arguments (Bakhtin, 1993). Far from just two people debating each other, these dialogics forced us to transcend difficult ways of collecting and analyzing data. The analyses of self as data led to the negotiation of subjectivity within areas of convergence and divergence. This put us at the boundaries of testing assumptions within our identities as both experts and experiencers of disaster where our dialogics produced tensions and convergences. We call these instances epiphanies (Creswell, 1998) that we drew on to formulate the practical and theoretical conclusions.

It should be noted this method, as in most of the interpretive approaches, are too often easily criticized by positivist scholars. This is mainly because they come from an entirely different understanding of epistemology and ontology. Critiques (see Gans, 1999; Atkinson, 1997, 2007, for example) orient around how autoethnography draws heavily on personal experiences, emotions, and perspectives (i.e. bias) to produce empirical theory. In the interpretivist tradition, such biases are not necessarily a negative issue (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Rather, more subjective interpretations are powerful ways by which autoethnographers make meaning of data and theorize about the social world. These orientations had an influence on all aspects of our research process. Moreover, findings might look like a negative bias toward disaster management institutions before the outset of the work. This is not the case given the fact that we both, the second author in particular, are part of this system ourselves. The critical aspects of the response system emerged in the evolution of our work.

Structurally, our process was twofold. As volunteers in Harvey, our direct experiences were separate, both spatially and temporally. Moreover, as prosocial responding is dissipative (Perry and Lindell, 2003), we had to rely on evocative anchoring and emotional self-reflexivity (Ellis, 1997) to capture data. Engagement in the community at sensitive and charged intervals often prevented us from traditional data collection efforts such as note-taking, imaging artifacts or structured debriefings *in situ*. Thus, we other methods of information gathering aside from the autoethnography to enrich our findings. We conducted over 40 open interviews (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) and over a year's worth of field observations for triangulation (Hughes and Pennington, 2017). Participants came from specific groups such as citizen responders, members of emergency management, and affected publics. Additionally, we were given over 7,700 records of electronic rescue data through a third-party. Archival materials consisted of news reports, community fliers and other relevant documents.

An analysis of these large amounts of traditional data did not supersede the evocative portion. Rather, we kept resonating back to personal perspectives and experiences in the evaluation of data together. Episodic framing as a form analyses led to dialogic epiphanies; or the most salient capturing phenomena that (re)surfaced across contexts. Epiphanies are likened to resonate themes but are also foci of tensions about taken for granted concepts like "preparedness" these epiphanies served as a way for us to perform dialogic deconstruction (Derrida, 1981). Such analyses permit us to articulate a lived-experience of adaptation in disaster as it unfolds over time, but also take apart inherent assumptions that unfolded through our process of dialogics.

Co-autoethnographic epiphanies

Dialogic epiphanies were based on intense immersion in data and are treated as separate for conceptual clarity. We labeled these epiphanies as unstrapping, desecuritization and appropriation and explain below, using portions of data to support arguments.

The epiphany of unstrapping. We found pervasive rule-breaking within efforts focused on Harvey response. This occurred among professional emergency responders, volunteers and those personally affected. It emerged as appropriate responses to conditions that

constrained rule-following; or this happens because rules or procedures no longer make sense in context. One example is “back channel communications,” or ways of interacting outside of formal protocols, which outperformed official channels in Harvey. Formal communications in Harvey as represented by after event assessments were often described as “untenable.” Unstrapping, for those in emergency management, was a means to get things done even at the risk of loss of employment.

Our previous experience within disaster management institutions instilled an obligation to follow procedure and avoid deviance from existing protocols. In Harvey, rules were broken, mostly by necessity. This ranged from not heeding evacuation orders to intentional circumvention of ineffective processes while volunteering with the American Red Cross. For example, volunteers were advised to take actions inconsistent with official messaging, such as directing potential rescuers with Coast Guard approved boats to avoid roadblocks, despite disapproval by authorities.

The following describes a concrete example of unstrapping. Here there was a reluctance by city officials to request state aid for a variety of reasons. To circumvent this roadblock, pre-existing connections were used to open up avenues of aid despite formal protocol. An interviewee explains:

I work very well in back channels because I know a lot of people. I called my friend, the risk manager for the state. I said, “This is what’s going on.” And he said, “Let me see what I can do [...]” Within three hours the flood gates of aid came very quickly.

This also happened with spontaneous volunteers. Many sought ways to bypass law enforcement when they wanted to engage in rescue efforts. Some were told to go home by officials, only to reemerge at other locations where they felt there was need. One such responder, along with hundreds of other volunteers, skirted a roadblock with their large truck. They elaborate:

Once we got to the mall [...] where there wasn’t as much rule [...] there is no sheriff standing there telling me what you can and can’t do. It was more like, we need people to go here and they just go.

Violation of standard policies was also common. A Red Cross volunteer confided, “I know I am not supposed to be taking the shelter resident into my car to get their medications; but what are you going to do? Fire me?”

Though unstrapping suggests success of adaptation, there was no evidence it led to death, or other major losses. However, acts of unstrapping were nearly unanimously decried as potential problems in formal reporting efforts, such as after-action reviews. Thus, this demonstrates a dissonance of disaster reality with post-disaster assessment. The predominant narrative emphasizes a belief that formal response works, either in disaster, or after “lessons learned” from one event are incorporated into future planning and preparedness efforts.

Aside from unstrapping, Harvey broke down a perceived need for a constant sense of security. We experienced this in our responses to the disruptions of the storm. The next epiphany is situated in these involvements.

The epiphany of de-securitization. “I waded in slowly rising water to open the gate; was told where to look for the key, how to disarm the alarm, and which prized possessions to move upstairs. Soon, I stand in the kitchen looking at pictures of an unfamiliar family. On any given day, my community is guarded by gates, doors, and locks.” In the midst of Harvey, de-securitization, as encapsulated in the quote above, emerged as a palpable phenomenon.

Not only did we (and also our research participants) let go of fears that necessitate a need for security, we behaved in ways that would violate such norms. For instance, residents of

flooded homes granted strangers access to the most sensitive areas of their lives. Later on, crowds of volunteers sorted through the debris of dreams, tearing down walls, making arbitrary decisions about what to throw away. Often, folks came and went without leaving a name. A man watched his home gutted by volunteers in under a week, dutifully removing most traces of his previous life. This included subtle reminders of his husband's death; drowned by waters intentionally spilled from a nearby dam.

Despite media accounts of "you loot, we shoot," there was little evidence of hypervigilance. This détente of security was described as a cease-fire by one citizen, where people made their own assessments based on trust and context:

I'm in this area I don't know, 15 trucks and boats and people and we're all talking and trying to sleep when we can. 2:00 in the morning someone came and knocked on the window, "Hey can you watch my truck, we're going out. Literally here's the keys to my truck. If the water rises move my truck, come back, move yours, and I'll find my truck later." At one point I had five sets of keys on my lap.

Other volunteers had open access to medical records. As equally norm-breaching, there was sharing of vital medical and personal information via newly created citizen rescue applications.

De-securitization faded as formal emergency management became established. Upon arrival of various task forces and law enforcement agencies, more strict processes of credentialing or regulating access flows were instituted. This hampered and bureaucratized emergency response in an attempt to re-securitize the disaster context.

Epiphany of appropriation

Massive rescues by civilians dispersed geographically as needed. Such collective action provided cues to emergency management structures that, at some point, Harvey was fast becoming a social disaster; or officials only knew one was happening once citizens began to materialize. To demonstrate, emergency management leaders in a focus group confirmed these cues: one informant expressed, "I was talking to another gentleman with our risk management office; I said the civilians are out there." Another informant adds, "You see it on television, I was like the civilians are out there anyways," with the last person saying, "We're getting phone calls from them and guys in our own neighborhoods, we were talking to them our local fire departments, we knew what they were doing so we knew that those activities were already happening." This conversation led to the ultimate conclusion that such efforts should be controlled:

I told this gentleman, "Look they're already out there we might as well coordinate these guys and then what we can do is push them down to the fire departments and [...] they can control them."

Not only did managers recognize the shift from potential to actual disaster through the actions of citizens, they felt threatened and expressed a desire this emergence should be controlled.

The larger narrative is that publics become mobilized by coordinated actions of emergency management entities. After Harvey, there was a desire to somehow appropriate citizen response into system. An interviewee relates:

There comes a time, and that time happened during Harvey, where the decision was made where we knew we had civilians out there doing what they were going to do. You're not gonna stop that but what we can say is, "We know you're out there doing this. All we ask is that you coordinate with us. We want you to help, we want you to be apart, [rather] we want to bring you in to this fold."

However, despite widely publicized openness to volunteers, actual efforts at bringing them in were limited.

As citizen action occurred in the open, it was appropriated as a testament to a success of formal management. For example, Zello, a communication application widely used and popularized by citizens connecting people to rescuers, became usurped by officials as their

own innovation. Civilian rescues were termed “evacuations of convenience,” whereas those few engaged by officials were characterized as “life-saving.” All of these efforts and sentiments worked to de-legitimize emergence, reinforce the expertise of management institutions and appropriate citizen response into the system itself.

Implications of epiphanies

Our epiphanies imply the following points. First, unstrapping suggests rule-breaking is crucial to negotiation of disaster, as a way to both enact safety and engage response. In Harvey, many formal rules were irrelevant in a dynamic context of calamity. Similarly, de-securitizing happened instead of “social chaos and anarchy” when the rules broke down. Not only does this suggest societal security is an illusion, self-organization naturally happens with disruptions to the system. Last, the attempted appropriation of rule-breaking and de-securitization by management institutions is an attempt to reinstate the premise disasters can be fully managed. Appropriation allows emergency management institutions to assert their legitimacy in the illusion they initiate, supervise, and govern citizen response. Usurping emergence conceals their short-comings. It is likely this will continue in future large-scale disasters in the maintenance of the status quo. Even greater, these epiphanies lend to our larger conclusions about modern society.

Conclusion

Mass shocks experienced in catastrophe open up spaces for ephemeral utopias within the disintegration of everyday life. Disasters illuminate unseen aspects of human behavior in normal times, as we know (Tierney, 2007). They present the possibility a temporary paradise is situated within the auspices of perdition; order within situations commonly characterized as “chaos.” It also suggests the sense of community produced in disaster is achievable and perhaps desired over what exists in normal times.

While this comes out in fragments within extant writings, disasters are typically portrayed as a time when people are at their worst. This predominant narrative comes from a Hobbesian perspective (Hobbes, 1651/1904) view where “because you will not care for me, I will not care for you” (Solnit, 2009; p. 3) becomes fact. Regrettably, the former dominates perspectives on crises despite “the image of selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human beings in times of disaster has little truth to it” (Solnit, 2009, p. 2). In contrast, Harvey provided community to become realized by citizens. A local leader in an underserved area of Houston describes:

The word community is the most bastardized word. I asked a government person, “How you have these meetings, and in the national protocols it says you need to include the community? Presidential Directive number 8 section 22, “community should be [...] how do y’all do that and y’all don’t meet with us?” They make decisions and we don’t even know nothing about it.

Community was where we and many others happened to be, connected either physically or virtually. Neighbors and those with special needs became important. Immigration status or social status did not matter. Harvey provided a necessity to encounter strangers and businesses previously unknown. The crisis attracted individuals from far away; from states like Illinois, Nebraska or Minnesota. For a short time, we were the best version of ourselves. As formal response took over, this dissipated. However, there was no such meaningful management within Harvey by responsible institutions. This fell on the populace, which they did very well. Thus, mitigation of societal ills that lend to disaster should be given primacy. Not preparedness.

Disruptive disasters temporarily present the possibility of utopia. We can liken this to Young’s (1986) critique of an ideal of community which she describes as a “radical other of existing society,” where difference is dissolved and intimate cooperation amongst its members is fundamental (Young, 1986, p. 17). It is flawed because it views that a “bad”

society is defined by “alienation, bureaucratization, and degradation,” (17) whereas a “good” society diminishes difference and idealizes cooperation. In keeping with our wariness of dichotomies, we heed Young’s warning that an ideal of community:

[...] totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations. It also detemporalizes its understanding of social change by positing the desired society as the complete negation of existing society (1986, p. 2).

Instead, Young suggests a better way of being would be to incorporate “politics of difference [...]” which is “an understanding of social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community.” (2) This fact is demonstrated by the crises.

Large-scale disasters stem from a society built on domination over the citizen with vulnerability as a consequence. Emergency management is one part of the domination inherent to modernity built on isolation, purposeful inequity, convenience and a façade of security. These are the very seeds from which disasters are grown. In the work of the citizen, the enactment of temporary paradise goes beyond an ideal of community into one that embraces the fragility of difference. This is an essential part of social life for which we are all responsible. Instead of suggesting that disasters are a window into what we should be, they should be taken as a warning about who we are. In some ways, modernity is a hell from which disasters allow us to briefly escape.

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