The Monster and the Mother

The Symbolism of Disaster

Susanna M. Hoffman

The study of signs [is] at the heart of social life.

—Ferdinand de Saussure, A Course in General Linguistics

Whether a society encompasses few people or multitudes, whether its landhold is remote and its records without letters or its reach global and its renown etched in ink, disaster contradicts its members’ definitive knowledge. No matter if the disaster stems from nature or errant technology, is experienced or merely expected, no one, neither sage nor scientist, preacher nor president, can wholly tell the why or the where of a calamitous event. And so, no matter what place in the world it occurs, what form it might take, whether singular or chronic, peoples’ explanations of disaster tend to rely on creative, often mythological, imagination. The belief systems of people experiencing or expecting calamity are rife with symbols dealing with their situation, and their cosmologies are vibrant with metaphor.

Like all symbols and metaphors, those dealing with catastrophe reflect the mental processes of a collective people and the fruits of both creative impulse and sense-making reasoning. They give an ethnological picture of how disaster is seen, interpreted, and utilized prior to, after, and in preparation for an event. Some scholars have proposed that symbolic values have a cathartic effect for cultural modification.
Whether the scheme appears as a static social and cosmological arrangement or is expressed within a process of a cycle from start to scheduled end, the environment roars up implacably to demonstrate that the divisions by which the people regimented reality are illusion. In order to reestablish cultural sense in such situations, victims must strive to reformulate distinctions and reconstruct order to their world.

One might ask how the examination of disaster symbolism relates to other aspects of disaster study, such as issues of vulnerability, political ecology, disaster response, and mitigation. Symbols are, in the first place, highly pertinent to a people's reaction to disaster. Symbols influence shared behavior. Equally important, symbols can be utilized and manipulated by different factions involved in a disaster and thus become political. Disaster spoils pattern, and matters in the state of disruption become less restricted. The potential for change becomes greater, to the point that disorder itself can become part of pattern (Douglas 1966). Cultural symbols can be also seen as exclusive systems of coercion and control, and as inclusive systems of mitigation and order (Prattis 1997:xi, 1-20).

People experiencing disaster stand on a pivot differentiating a model "of" and a model "for." A model "of" is the symbolic presentation of the existing relationship between elements in a social system. A model "for" creates the image of a postulated reality that would be realized in social practice (Geertz 1973:93). Different groups in a society can embody the "of" and the "for." The dominant can produce models "of" and impose models "for" for the less powerful. Moreover, because of the ambiguity of symbols, the same images and forms can be used by any and all sides in a conflict.

As for individuals facing or experiencing catastrophe, they engage the symbols evoking their predicament in an almost visceral manner. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:145) point out that the symbolic process provides a continual feedback system in which symbol must be integrated with experience if a deeper understanding is to be the end result. Human experience can and should be considered under the scheme of a constructed metaphor, since people start to comprehend experience in terms of metaphor, which, when they begin to act in terms of it, becomes a deeper reality. Understanding the occurrence is exactly the task disaster victims, as well as students of disaster, undertake.
Susanna M. Huffman

To illustrate this chapter, I rely primarily on my experience and research with the Oakland-Berkeley firestorm of October 1991. I incorporate material from other disasters as well. The data on disaster symbolism are sparse. In the midst of rubble, few, victim or researcher, think to write down the content of ceremony or form of imagery. Nonetheless, picking through the embers, mud, and detritus of a calamity for what signs and allegories can be found is, I believe, a relevant and necessary step to further the study of catastrophe and culture.

The Oakland Firestorm

By midnight, gas-jet flames dotted the blackened hills where the houses had been. Over 1,600 acres had burned. Hundreds of pets were lost. Property damage was estimated at $1.5 billion.—Patricia Adler, 1992

May We All Be Restored And Renewed—Message tied around a tree, Oakland, 1991–92

As the sun moved toward mid-morning on October 20, 1991, in Oakland, California, the day was already dry and blistering hot. Unusually turbulent winds were blowing in from the east. In the midst of this torrid condition, about 11 o’clock, a spark from a blaze that had ignited atop the town’s graceful hills the previous afternoon—a fire that firemen thought they had extinguished—rekindled. From that spark developed a ferocious firestorm that swept down the heights, leaped two multilane freeways, and, although it burned for two more days, in four hours destroyed some three thousand dwellings. Though the fire skipped homes and blocks here and there, across much of the extensive burn zone only chimneys stood. Flats, bungalows, condominiums, and three-story houses were reduced to eighteen inches of ash. Melted automobiles listed into metallic puddles. Twenty-five people died, and more than six thousand were left homeless. Since the temperature of the fire reached over 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, most survivors lost almost every possession they owned.

In contrast to most disaster victims, the inhabitants of the destroyed area could largely be described as well educated and relatively affluent, middle to upper middle class. The majority were of European background, but the community was mixed, with many Asians, a consider-
able number of African Americans, and a wide range of ethnicities living throughout. With its unique homes, the area had attracted doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, business owners, and artists, as well as people with other callings. Among the victims were a number of notables: a member of Congress, a state senator, a former mayor, a famous sports star. Some of the victims probably possessed substantial wealth, but most depended on salaried jobs, albeit good jobs, and some struggled to make ends meet. Sprinkled throughout were students attending several colleges.

The community was highly familial. The modest to large, mostly older homes had been constructed to accommodate children, and about one-fourth of those burned out were minors. A number of single individuals, single parents with offspring, returned older children, other extended family members, and childless couples, both heterosexual and homosexual, also lived in the zone. Residing so near a renowned university (the University of California–Berkeley) and an elegant city (San Francisco), most of the victims could be said to follow socially progressive tenets and practices. Most men and women gave at least public voice to racial, gender, and age equality. Many were highly committed to political causes. Ecology, human rights, and concern with education were popular issues. Families were small. Most women not only worked, but worked as professionals. Most residents had eschewed intense kinship bonds and socialized far more with a network of friends. People were familiar with contemporary trends.

Most of the victims, though not the students and some elderly, had home insurance. Almost all, however, quickly discovered that they were seriously underinsured. The animosity that erupted following the catastrophic did not focus, as is usually the case, on aid givers and government agencies, but rather on the insurance industry. In due time most victims won settlements from insurance companies, though not without considerable struggle, and the victims’ efforts to effect sweeping changes in insurance industry practices shortly died out. Faced with what they considered unfair regulations, victims did have the fortitude—and political wherewithal—to change a number of federal laws governing disaster victims.

As is almost universally the case after a calamity, most of the survivors returned to dwell again in the disaster zone. Most rebuilt homes
on the same sites as before. Some re-erected near-replicas of their former residences; others let their imaginations and architects loose. A number purchased and built on different lots or bought undamaged houses within the fire zone, while some of the survivors moved to other communities near and distant. At this point, nearly a decade later, about three-quarters of the community is reconstructed and reoccupied, with over half the residents probably fire survivors and the others newcomers.

Affluent or not, sophisticated or not, the inhabitants of the Oakland and Berkeley hills nonetheless suffered a devastating disaster. In the following months and years, like disaster victims everywhere, they faced the enormous task of reconstituting their lives from residence to reasoning, madadam to meaning. These people resided in an urban, industrialized, far from parochial situation. By anyone’s standards they led very worldly lives. Yet ritual arose among them immediately. They built shrines, invented ceremonies, and told sagas. A newspaper with fire-related news, survival information, calendar of events, personal accounts, columns, and fire-inspired poetry and fiction sprang to life. A book of disaster writings and photographs appeared. Shows of firestorm art and videos surfaced in galleries. The city erected a permanent memorial to the event constructed from tiles designed by survivors. Some tiles display artwork, others names or words, but every one illustrates a firestorm thought or tale. Interaction among the survivors and between them and others—the surrounding community, insurance agents, aid workers, builders—went through an intricate, albeit predictable, social pavane of unification and segmentation that revealed much about their perception of the human community. Survivor talk consciously and unconsciously advanced their concepts of time, space, place, the cosmos, and the calamity.

I began my research into this particular catastrophe as a decidedly involuntary participant observer. The research “trip,” however, has proved one of the most enlightening I have ever tackled, as well as the most intense and lengthy. It will endure, I warrant, the rest of my life. I am an anthropologist, but I am also one of the survivors of the Oakland firestorm. In the fire I lost my home, all my possessions, and two pets. Since my office was in my home, I also lost twenty-five years of anthropological research, seven manuscripts not yet submitted to publishers, slides and photos, lectures, course notes, and my entire library. I have witnessed and taken part in disaster recovery as both a victim and scientist, undergone and overviewed the reconstruction of community, the enactment of celebration, the exploration of explanation, and the reconstitution of a once again sensible world.

The disaster aftermath continues to this day. Ceremonies still emerge, as do fables, now ever more metaphoric as history passes into myth. Magazine and newspaper articles describing and analyzing the event continue to pour forth, often taking an increasingly revisionist and allegorical point of view. Victims and officials mark the anniversary of the disaster with convocations and tributes that glow every year more emblematic. Politics and other factors color the replay. I have seen how the Oakland firestorm community dealt with the disaster, its eventualities and effects. I have taken note of how victims, and others, “encrypted” the catastrophe verbally, behaviorally, artistically, and architecturally and continue to do so.

What the Oakland firestorm survivors underwent and how they behaved does not differ greatly from survivors of other disasters. All display much the same sort of symbolic expression and metaphoric solutions, as do people who live in zones of chronic calamity. The residents of Oakland themselves dwell in a region of chronic disaster. They were expecting a calamity, only the calamity they anticipated was what they had experienced two years earlier—an earthquake. The area had as well undergone prior firestorms. In 1923, 584 homes in a 72-block area of Berkeley succumbed to a fierce blaze (Cerny and Bruce 1992), and in 1970 a less drastic conflagration destroyed 37 Oakland homes within the zone that burned in 1991. Citizens had also intermittently undergone California's other two recurring mishaps, flood and mudslide. California is, indeed, so disaster prone, some call its four rotating afflictions—fire, earthquake, flood, and avalanche—the state’s version of annual seasons. Still, echoing Paine's description of risk denial and mediation (this volume), only the specter of a monster earthquake loomed in Oaklanders’ cultural itinerary. Fire, though prevalent, did not enter their consciousness.

With the aid of symbolic thought, the Oakland firestorm survivors had formed a fiction to deal with and "defang" their environment. Utilizing oppositions, embodiment, and metaphoric description, they
swept aside the hazards about them and, in the days and years following
the firestorm, spun the chimera again. I deal largely with their postdis-
aster symbolism, as the prior was inert. The actions, utterances, palaver,
rituals, writing, and art that fiery Sunday initiated "outed" it.

In surviving the disaster and researching it, I interacted with the
firestorm survivors on many levels. I attended almost all community
gatherings. I participated in the postfire neighborhood association for
my residential block and the larger ones encompassing adjacent neigh-
borhoods. I served on a panel exploring why my district lacked water
adequate to fight the blaze. I organized and led a group of those with
my same insurance company through their settlements. These associa-
tions, which included people of both genders, every age, and many eth-
icities, continued for several years. I also belonged to a large group of
women survivors organized by the women architects of the area and to
a small, phenomenal, self-organized support group of twelve women
that met every week and still occasionally gathers.

Because of the circumstance of my research, I cannot avoid that I
represent here a number of "voices." To separate them I have chosen to
use the pronoun "they" to mean the victims of the firestorm, despite the
fact that I am one of them. I use "I" in reference to my own experiences,
reserving "we" to refer to students of disaster. I give ethnographic data,
but my approach is strongly analytical, and much of my discussion is cor-
respondingly filtered through that screen. I apologize from the onset
for any disequilibrium in my own dualities. It is difficult, often perplex-
ing, to be both actor and ethnographer; along with ethnographer, by
strong bent ethnologist; researcher and unwitting survivor.

THE REEMERGENCE OF DUALISTIC SCHEMES

One eventually begins to wonder whether Nature herself does not
abhor disruptive groupings.—J. S. Bruner, J. J. Goodnow, and
G. A. Austin, 1956

The cultural distinction drawn between humanity and its obverse,
animality, or between the safe and orderly and their antithesis, the wild,
gives rise to a fundamental opposition between nature and culture, an
operation that Levi-Strauss argues is latent in all peoples' attitudes and
schematic division is not universal (Strathern 1980). Still, many people
do employ it, especially those involved in any version of Western society,
which so pervades globally today.

Even among those who do construct this opposition, who abstract
matters cultural from matters natural, however, the physicality of life
behind the cultural remains at some level undeniable (Levi-Strauss
1963a, 1966, 1969, 1973). To overcome the logical paradoxes that exist
when nature is divided from culture and to reduce dialectic tension,
people use symbolic codes. Generally the symbols they create assume
the inherent problem by rooting perceptions about cultural formations
within nature. In other words, people pluck features from the physical
world and employ them as a model for cultural arrangements. This, at
any rate, is what has been posited as the workings of nonindustrial soci-
eties. In industrial societies such codes have been assumed to become
obsolete. People in technologically developed situations, so the
thought goes, are sufficiently removed from their immediate natural
environment to lift themselves away from borrowing elements from the
physical world as a way to regiment the social one. They use other mat-
ter for their models, barbers over bears, class over clans (Levi-Strauss

But when a disaster occurs or threatens, not even people in indus-
trial communities can ignore that their living circumstances are
founded in the physical realm. Nor can they ignore how far they have
fashioned, in fact have struggled to fashion, themselves separate from
that reality. Very quickly in the face of a physical upheaval, the fallacy
of their segregation from nature comes to the fore. Both nonindustrial
and industrial people must once again deal with their fundamental
grounding and with the urge to vault themselves apart from that mate-
rial purchase. They must again impose separation between nature and
themselves, and in so doing generate again the disequilibrium that
separates within that division.

At the time a calamity occurs or threatens, be the people industrial
or not, they inevitably already have in place a plan that arranges and
explains the world to them. It is by and large this blueprint, or elements
of it, that emerges in the presence of calamity. The emblems represent-
ing catastrophe overlap with cosmological and environmental symbols.
This was certainly the case in Oakland. In all manner of terminology
and representations, in ceremony and behavior, the survivors of the Oakland firestorm resurrected deep environmental precepts to paint a symbolic portrait of their misfortune. Without a grid of totems, the images expressed were nonetheless reducible to nature and culture and to the fundamental division between the two.

To begin with, the survivors of the firestorm immediately cast the fire as a phenomenon from nature’s sphere. The fire was characterized as wild and uncontrollable. It was further instantly posed as oppositional to culture. One of the first and most pervasive statements to arise was that the fire should never have encroached upon an area variously described as “cultivated,” “landscaped,” or “residential.” Though the area destroyed by the conflagration was as earthbound as any, it was styled “city,” a refined area of homes constructed for human occupation, a “civilized” region lifted from nature and humanly formed.

Survivors blamed the inferno on a combination of several factors, all of them deemed conditions of nature. Strangely enough, they resounded of the four primary components of nature Aristotle set forth long ago. Besides the fire itself, they faulted the air; it was blowing. The earth, too, conspired; it was arid. Water played a role. There had been a drought, and although Oakland’s reservoirs were full, its ancient fire hydrants were unable to pump—a cultural failure.

Some cultural causes were cited, but they were contextualized on a nature-culture slide rule. Houses had been erected too near untamed parkland, that is, culture had been “too close” to nature. Shades of Mary Douglas (1966), it was matter on the margins, not quite within nature and not quite cultural, that was often cited as the “dangerous” factor. “Nobody should be allowed to have a house that close to the unkempt park,” said one survivor to me. “There should be a border area.” Many said natural elements, such as weeds, within the cultural, such as yards, should have been prohibited. The spark that flared into the conflagration apparently arose from a culturally set fire—workers burning off weeds, but therein lay another error. A natural thing, like a fire, should have never been employed to solve a cultural problem, like an overgrown yard. “Why didn’t those workers just use a machete?” was the rhetorical question I heard over and over. Only a cultural means, a tool or human labor, should have been used to remedy a cultural predicament.1

Once the Oakland fire was “put out,” rituals arose stunningly quickly to “culturalize” the advance of the physical. Survivors gathered upon or as close to the burn zone as possible. There they spoke and heard uplifting and allegorical words about how they would rebuild the domain of culture again. “We will return the area to the garden it was,” said one speech maker. The gatherings and ceremonies employed customary cultural formulas—prayers, convocations, and appearances by public officials—and displayed accouterments of culture’s persistence—a stage, music, cooked food. Within households, people constructed shrines of cultural items that passed through the inferno and emerged recognizable again. They included keys, vases, dishes, and bits of photos. Pictures of “before” were set up evoking the reconstruction of the same, as if the fire between were a mere interagent.

At the same time, what was left of nature within the burned-out area was mollified with cultural gifts. Surviving people turned surviving trees into cultural altars. They bedecked the few that still thrived with vases of cultivated flowers, ribbons, trinkets, and messages. People paid homage to burned-out lots with similar paraphernalia, transforming their charred property into semi-chapels and meditation sites. “I take flowers and a cushion. It’s the only place I’m comfortable,” a woman in the architect’s group told me. I admit, I visited my lot in a similar manner. This same spectacle was noted by Oliver-Smith (1986:192–95) after the avalanche in Yungay, Peru. People brought flowers to the muddy scar and adorned it with crosses of wood and stone. Four surviving palm trees were turned into a chapel. In time the town moved its official ceremonies to take place there, so that the physical remains of the event evolved into a culturalized, wholly sacred monument. In Oakland as well, the victims of the disaster became seeming crusaders in reclaiming nature’s detritus back into culture. One post-fire landscaping company entitled itself “Culture, n.” (Phoenix Journal 1993–94).

Of highly charged concern to the victims of the Oakland firestorm was “disorder.” The fire left a chaotic scene, messy and undifferentiated, whereas cultural things are generally, or at least to people’s minds, more tidily arranged. Nature may be awesomely beautiful, but part of its magnificence and danger is its seeming disarray. The mess left after the fire was simply too tousled for the comfort of many survivors. At all early gatherings, the rubble and its cleanup claimed
absolute topical immediacy. Who would remove the mess, and when would the removal take place? Many victims, unable to wait for the city's cleanup program, rushed to "clean up" their lots themselves, until tidy rectangles of delineated lots once again spanned the space nature had torn through.

If disordered space was disturbing, so was disordered time. As one fire poem stated, "We return and sift through/the ashes of our homes/archaeologists/how many centuries have passed/since yesterday" (Cooney 1992:90). "In those first hushed days after the containment of the October fire, the most ordinary routines seemed remarkable," wrote another survivor. "The simplest chore felt like a rare privilege" (Adler 1992:i). Day and night, a moon's month, a year are natural temporal spans. The rest, hours, minutes, weeks, are culturally imposed. For the survivors, the drift away from cultural to natural time unnerved. Torn from schedule, their lives had become discursive and dysfunctional. The opening of an aid station with its clear and circumscribed hours became a focus of community. Meetings scheduled at specific times hypnotically lured.

But nothing seemed to grip the firestorm victims so powerfully and so symbolically as the matter of domestic animals gone feral. Survivors were obsessed with the possibility that because of the fire, once acclimatized animals had returned to a wild state. The effort to bring animals now gone wild back to tame was so intense it spurred a three-year rescue mission and the publication of a 171-page expository book (Zompolis 1994). Pictures of found animals were displayed at the survivor-aid station. A telephone pet "hot line" was activated. Foster homes were provided while owners were located and adoptions set up for the unclaimed. One of the final editions of the Phoenix Journal announced that all retrieved but ownerless "fire" pets had been taken into good homes (Zompolis 1994; Phoenix Journal 1993–94).

Other dualisms emerged in survivor imagery and action as well. The struggle to recover was portrayed as a trip "upward," while the disaster was painted as a "down" fall. A schism between male and female with older, traditional gender behaviors resurfacing (Hoffman 1998). Death versus life also came into play. Victims sketched the disaster in chiaroscuro, as "a dark episode" and "going through hell." The climb to renewal was portrayed as the "light at the end of the tunnel." Oliver-
us, nature is entirely a cultural concept, and the firestorm survivors manipulated it.

With the natural realm under the category of culture, there was scant option but to see the storm as something unnatural. Given nature as embodied and humanly ministerial, no path was open but to dehumanize the violent, anticultural side of the physical. Again, survivors had in traditional ideology a particular figure that was natural, yet unnatural, formed yet unformed, that had shape but was malshaped: the monster. Just as the embodiment of nature as a mother was not new, neither was the specter of the monster. Monsters and the monstrous have haunted Western mythology and literature for millennia. Legends of monsters dispatching legions of men arise in epics as far back as Gilgamesh. From Beowulf to Melville to Anne Rice and Stephen King, in lore the monster devours the quick. Nor is the typification of disasters as monsters new in other societies. Those with gods of calamity, such as the Hawaiian Pele and Indic Kali, tend to clothe them as terrifying ogres. Bode (1989:111, 143) quotes the Andean villagers as calling the mountain that brought the avalanche “a savage.” In our tradition, “Vesuvius is a monster not to be restrained by any man’s cunning or ingenuity,” wrote volcanologist Alessandro Malladra in 1913 (“Life 1982:120”). Descriptions of Stromboli vivify the mountain: “Up there lives a dragon, a sleeping monster” (“Life 1982:125”). Earthquakes are frequently described as roaring dragons, tornados as devils, floods as ghosts; and what English speaker has not heard the phrase “freak of nature?”

Oaklanders had no divinity to characterize the power and fear of a catastrophe. Still, survivors rushed to anoint the firestorm a freak. In oral and written words, they used terminology synonymous with monstern—“a horror,” “a terror,” “ghastly,” “ecrite,” and “uncanny.” Just as there is sometimes no form to the monster, there is sometimes no proper noun. “The unnamed and unnamable,” Clark (1996:40–41) calls it, “What is familiar, may not be properly known.” Nonverbally, survivors further illustrated the firestorm as a devouring fiend. My particular favorite is a tile in the commemorative mural that portrays the fire as a half horse-dragon at the front, its hind quarters a blood red, all-consuming, spiraled swirl, not unlike a local artist’s portrayal of the Yungay avalanche as a dragon on the cover of Oliver-Smith’s 1986 book.

in place, that of a gentle and nourishing mother. The image was not new. Harvey (1996:121) points out that members of Western society inherit the humanization of nature from the tap roots of Christian culture, which favors domination. From that deep source comes Mother Nature. Even before Christianity, Western tradition linked nature to mother figures, and of late, it seems in culturally progressive sites such as Oakland, even prior to the fire, nature has reascended as a mother figure. Nature, also called “earth,” has again come to represent wholesome and proper living along with “real” nourishment that is not the product of technology. Many in the US have come to revere and worship nature, to the point that rarely has nature been a more potent image, politically or otherwise.

Most of those in Oakland conceived it their duty to nurture nature. Nature loomed so large that “she” was viewed not just as a mother, but as a battered one. Many in Oakland lay the blame for the fire not on nature’s whim alone but on the abuse of the environment, and after the fire they initiated and lobbied for more correct and respectful treatment of Mother Nature. They replanted property with foliage proper for the environment and removed more flammable trees wrongly borrowed from other ecological zones.

Unable to disabuse themselves of nature as a possession under their control or rid themselves of a current cultural divinity, Oakland firestorm survivors could scarcely class nature entirely under the category of “nature,” despite its fiery eruption. In their new iconography, they also perceived that they both needed to heal nature and needed nature’s nurturing to recover. Hence, they were faced with a paradox, which they solved rather double-handedly. On the one hand, they cast the storm as an aspect of nature and depicted nature as wild and uncontrollable; on the other, they took the mother image and shifted nature almost entirely into it. Nature was quickly again referred to as fostering. People removed nature from blame and forgave it. Amending nature back into something cultured, survivors then had little choice but to transform that which was wild and uncontrollable about the physical world into something other. They appropriated something figurative and illusive. They seized upon a monster. In short, the Oakland firestorm survivors bifurcated nature and fleshed out the firestorm with body and unbody. As David Schneider (1976) reminds
In daily vernacular, the next step, the linkage of the uncivil or monstrous with calamity, was already in place. With an overactive child called a tornado, an angry person a volcano, and a shocking disclosure an earthquake, little was needed to moderate the idea to suit the firestorm.

The amorphous monster constitutes a perfect symbol of cataclysm for industrialized societies, which typically have a less direct sort of symbolic scheme. In metaphorical nuance, even the formless can take on semiotic value, and in urbanized society, where a plethora of the formed, the bodied, and the categorized abounds, the formless is always more frightening. The illusion of the monster carries two other long-standing symbolic and highly applicable renowns. Quite infamously it conveys danger. Quite famously it stands as a category breaker. Cohen (ed., 1996:x) states that in myth and literature the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference. Derrida (1974) describes the figure of the monster as one that breaks bifurcation and disassembles such constructed dualities as between nature and culture. The monster is a form suspended between forms, threatening to smash distinction, and as such is dangerous (Cohen 1996:6). The monster, such as Caliban, Frankenstein, and Grendel, refuses to participate in the classified "order of things." The monster muddles the clash of extremes as "that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis" (Garber 1991:11). Rather than appearing at troubled times, the monster, like an unexpected quake or hurricane, creates the exigency. Thus, when the firestorm shattered the disjuncture Oakland’s residents had contrived between nature and culture and confronted them with that aspect of nature they could not command, the monster readily slipped into representational role. "Everything was fine until that monster firestorm came," a man in my insurance group complained.

In transforming the disaster into an unnatural phenomenon, the monster as an image again possessed ideal traits. The monster in mythology is always an unnatural creature. It exists at the boundary of humanization. It is not quite a person, yet does not exist without humanity. Disasters similarly hover at the edge of human community, yet do not measure as calamities without that community. Monsters and disasters both prey on humanity and destroy. Without a group of experts, the monster is a metaphoric way of "bounding uncertainty" (see Stephens, this volume).

The monster is a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissectible analysis. Only when a monster looms and strikes does it give opportunity for intelligibility (Cohen 1996:4–5); the same holds true for disaster. The monster has ontological liminality (Cohen 1996:6). What fashions a monster or brings it out always remains unknown; what generates a catastrophe and ushers it forth remains as obscure. The monster also has antidochronicity. All that is known about monsters is seen through hindsight and records; it can only be read backward from the present (Waterhouse 1996, and see García-Acosta, this volume). Equally, the majority of what is known about disasters derives from their incidence. Moreover, the monster makes a problem of temporality. No one can calculate the calendar of the ogre’s appearance, and in a time-linear society such as ours, the certainty of a calamity’s reappearance coupled with the uncertainty of when have made prediction an obsession of disaster researchers.

Both monster in myth and disaster in science resist capture. They stand at the limits of knowing. The true threat of the monster is its propensity to shift and to be unpredictable. Similarly, despite modern advances, both natural and technological catastrophes defy retelling and pinpointing. Disasters spring up insidiously and ever more frequently. Moreover, the monster always escapes (Cohen 1996:4–5). After each appearance it turns immaterial and vanishes. So, ostensibly, does disaster, although the effects of both linger. A catastrophe lasts a few moments, days, or years and is gone. Both monster and disaster, however, always come back. Each time the grave or earth opens and the beast or quake strides forth, a message is proclaimed. Neither can be stopped. In the face of both ogre and cataclysm, scientific inquiry and ordered rationality crumble.

The anamorphic monster validates the "paradoxical virtues of defect" (Cohen, ed., 1996:xi; Prescott 1996). It brings to light unsuspected things about its victims, their nature, society, sins. In effect, so do disasters. In the environment the defect may be a slip fault, an errant ember, or a company dumping pollutants (Button, this volume). There are political consequences lying in the belly of the monster representation as well. In literature the monster presents an excuse for persons or factions to impose rules and controls upon others. In environmental matters, the representation of a monstrous disaster justifies
the same enterprise. The monster brandishes an invitation to action, particularly of the military and governmental sort. Harping on the threat of calamity or its reappearance, persons and governments do the same. Use of the monster image allowed the massive water projects and concomitant despotic governing of China (Wittfogel 1953). The behemoth Mississippi River, embodied as an uncontrollable old man, validated massive funding for manipulation of its course by the Army Corps of Engineers. Monsters and disasters alike as well are characterized as "gobbling up" and used to evoke fear and suppress dissent (O'Neil 1996).

The monster defatrizes the social spaces through which people may move and prevents intellectual and geographic mobility. The fiend at the door makes people stay in their place and keep to the conservative. Dwelling in the shadow of a calamity likewise keeps people circumspect. The monster is a vehicle of prohibition (Cohen 1996:12–16). In belief systems, the causes that entice both monster and calamity to appear, sometimes immorality and corruption, sometimes innocence and virtue, echo remarkably. One never knows, so it's best to toe the mark. On the other hand, the specter of the monster as an "outside" enemy gives people the cause and symbol to unify, as disaster victims characteristically do (Eriksen 1994, Hoffman 1999).

Of course, along with all else, the monster, like the mystique of a disaster, also represents a kind of desire. At the same time as destroying, the monster offers escape, the enticement to explore new paths and new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world (Cohen 1996:16–20). As noted earlier, Douglas (1966:9) mentions the identical feature for disorder: Beauty is enchanted by the possibilities of the beast; people are attracted to disasters and want to encounter them. Thousands of people poured into Oakland to see the damage the fire had wrought. Many uttered the wish that they had undergone the catastrophe.

ETERNAL CYCLE COSMOLOGIES—WHEN THE MONSTER COMES 'ROUND AND 'ROUND

Pachacuti, which is to say the world turns around. For the most part (Andeans) say it when things are turned from good to ill, and sometimes they say it when things change from ill to good.—Garcilaso de la Vega, quoted in S. MacCormack, 1988

Along with dualistic systems, disaster symbolism arises with ideologies in which time forever rotates in cyclical fashion. When and where such temporal schemes prevail, disaster is almost universally depicted as culprit and creator. A cataclysm of one sort or another ends one cycle, yet begins another. Disasters also frequently appear repetitively to mark minor stages within major ones. Among some people such cyclical ideologies are highly formalized with mythologies that herald the length of periods and the horrors of terminating catastrophes. Among others, the notion that time and catastrophes repeat emerges in a more informal manner, almost an unmindful one.

All the religious cosmologies indigenous to India—Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism—characterize the universe as transiting cyclical time in an exact and formal manner. Over virtually in calculable periods of time the cosmos travels through a process of evolution and decline ending with calamity, only to evolve once more (Basham 1959:272). These beliefs continue in areas that Basham called "monsoon Asia," as Zaman's (1994) disaster research in Bangladesh documents.

The Incas of South America supposed time to elapse in great periods as well. At the close of every era, irrespective of human merit, a physical and social cataclysm took place, and the world turned upside down. Volcanoes, storms, and floods announced the apocalypse, after which new people with strange customs and replacement gods took over. The cycles were articulated within the concept called pachacuti, first referred to by de la Vega as pachamacutin (McCormack 1988:961, 988; also see Moseley, this volume). Pachacuti appeared in Incan imagery in monster form and also as a rainbow whose arc implied the beginning or reversal of a given order. The doctrine of pachacuti proclaimed that all humans would mutate into monsters at the end of time. Bode (1989:258) found many ideas reminiscent of Incan cyclical cosmology still expounded in the Peruvian highlands city of Huaraz after the 1970 earthquake.

In the Western conception, time is like a line stretching into infinity, and every event along that line is new, but for the Maya time was like a wheel. Everything that transpired at one point in time occurred at a
parallel point in the next and replayed endlessly in cycles to come. Each cycle, short and long, ended with catastrophe (Freidel, Schlele, and Parker 1993:60; Peterson 1990:11; Waters 1975:256–57). The Aztec continued these beliefs and developed the cosmology yet more (Goe 1994:149). At the culmination of every fifty-two-year loop, women were locked up to prevent their transformation into monstrousities. Within the core of the beliefs lay the conviction that if the Pleiades did not appear, earthquakes would ravage and terrible miscreations would be loosed to roam the land (Peterson 1990:37; Nicholson 1967:44). The Hopi and Ute tribes of North America, both Uto-Aztecan speakers, hold analogous cosmologies (Waters 1977).

Oakland firestorm victims also conveyed a belief in cyclical time, but the precept arose in their reflections in an informal rather than formal manner. Survivors disclosed, in fact, two strains of rotational theory. The first reiterated the belief, long extant in Western and Judeo-Christian thought, that disasters have occurred on a regular basis throughout time and take place because of moral malfeasance. To numerous firestorm survivors, or perhaps more so to the surrounding community, Noah’s flood and Sodom and Gomorrah echoed close. Current sins, however, were judged not so much sexual as ethical. The affluent inhabitants of the fair hills had enjoined gluttony and pride and merited the disaster. “Those people in the hills deserved to be wiped out. It was God acting,” said an Oakland flatlander to me, and he was not alone.

More commonly, survivors gave heed to a second form of cyclical belief, one that more subtly encapsulated time and disasters into repetitive pattern. They declared that the firestorm had been “due.” It was, many proclaimed, the “seventy-year fire.” It was bound to happen” was another iteration I encountered. The disaster survivors thereby shifted the blaze into a recurrent, rather than unique, form and gave it a calendar. The 1991 victims had merely tumbled into an unlucky year and, by that happenstance, were the unfortunate recipients of a persistent and rhythmic, if not exactly punctual, turn. Within a short time, fellow Americans underwent other such fitful yet periodic recurrences. They endured the “hundred-year flood” (the Mississippi) and the “five hundred-year flood” (Grand Forks), while every year experiencing the annual “season” of tornadoes occurring where they always occur, in “tornado alley.” Americans should expect hurricanes to destroy much of the Carolinas, Long Island, and Florida in the next decade or so, according to predictors of hurricane sequences. Earthquakes and avalanches are not only due, but should they miss their deadline, “overdue.” The informal cyclical thinking is perpetuated by scientists and their ominous yet vague forecasts. Through this informal system, Americans, like other peoples, culturally manipulate catastrophes so that they appear, both in prediction and certainly in aftermath, to be anticipated and normal. They become like drought to the Turkana (see McCabe, this volume).

Oakland firestorm survivors, like disaster survivors elsewhere, also whitewashed the time before their particular calamities and indulged in good time—bad time nostalgia. In doing so, they reinforced that informal as well as formal cyclical time ideologies begin and end with disasters as dividing lines. After the firestorm, Oakland survivors as well began to live their lives again—linguistically. Practically every verb spoken was launched with the prefix “re.” Survivors recovered, rebuilt, replaced, and were renewed. In linguistic metaphor, they took a second spin on the wheel of existence, and everything they performed was a duplication of what had gone before. On top of that, survivors were avidly caught in anniversaries. One week, one month, one year, they celebrated and suffered every one. “I’ve gone to every anniversary,” one woman told me. “They tell me what I was and who I am now.” “As a unique time designation anniversaries are a special situation,” Forrest (1993:455) writes of disasters. “Implied in the concept is the convergence of the past, present, and future.”

Cyclical concepts of disaster mirror dualistic schemes in much of their symbolism. What differs is the operation more than the essential meaning. Almost more than dualistic schemes, cyclical ones disclose a fundamental opposition between nature and culture in their framework. However, rather than contrive a stark separation of the categories, cyclical metaphors spell out an arbitration between them. Each rotation processes one aspect of the dialectic into the other, mediating them into a continuum. Nature destroys culture, but simultaneously begins culture again. The same disequilibrium between false categories that dualistic schemes generate exists, but it is written into the tale rather than left in disjuncture. Nature and culture oscillate. With
equilibrium intellectually solved, the fallaciousness of the
dichotomy does not entail disintegration when calamitous events
ensue. Cyclical schemes formulaically allow nature to go back to
nature. Survivors in Oakland tacitly acknowledged this feature of rota-
tional schemes. They reaffirmed that “it was good for nature to be
cleaned out,” and that the fire allowed nature “to start again.” All told,
cyclical metaphors offer more malleability for people in disaster sit-
tuations, which perhaps explains why they are more prevalent where cata-
strophe is chronic.

Cyclical ideologies join the present to the past, so that current hap-
penings are already preordained history. What appears unexpected is,
in fact, expected. Events do not have to do with date but rather time.
Extraordinary occurrences need not slip into myth, for they are already
mythical when they take place (Levi-Strauss 1978a, 1989). In addition,
calamity does not imply loss, for all returns. The unknown becomes
known, for the plot is teleological. Acts of recovery, and the speed with
which recovery takes place, are not of issue. Time, repairs, and mitiga-
tion merely fold into the crescendo toward the next calamity. The
process of restoration from any calamity is like cooking. From the raw-
ness of the natural, culture must once again cook, and cook till done
(Levi-Strauss 1969).

Cyclical schemes, both formal and informal, place God in nature,
which means that nature is in essence never really without mastery.
Natural acts become purposeful ones arranged by deities, and all event-
ualities take on sacred, and thereby cultural, implication. Within recy-
cling schemes, the dichotomy between gods and humans is also
mediated, and life entire waxes spiritual. Psychologically, cyclical sym-
bolism offers particular comfort to victims, for what occurs is preor-
dained, not retributory. Politically, on the other hand, cyclical sym-
bolism leaves people particularly vulnerable. Where people dwell
and how, along with hazards of the physical environment, are not of
consequence, since fate determines all that transpires and who holds
power. Mobility, too, is rendered useless. Victims may be obligated to
deal with the particulars of any calamity, but they remain powerless to
alter overall or underlying circumstance. Preventive acts alay nothing.

Since cyclical ideologies conjoin nature and culture, their symbol-
ism often presents both figures in one representation. The destroyer is
also the regenerator, as in images like Kali or concepts like pachacuti,
where the monster and the mother are united. If anything, in cyclical
schemes it is people, both singularly and as a collective category, who
stand on the margins.

THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF TECHNOLOGICAL
DISASTER—WHEN CULTURE ATTACKS CULTURE

In the first place, disasters that are thought to have been brought about
by other human beings... not only hurt in special ways but bring in their
wake feelings of injury and vulnerability from which it is difficult to
recover.—K. Erikson, 1994

Though the Oakland firestorm was not per se a technological disas-
ster, some would say its overwhelming and unexpected devastation
most assuredly stemmed from technological fiasco. The fire was not
entirely a bolt from the blue nor a matter of living in a friable zone. It
occurred to a certain degree as a result of direct human mismanage-
ment of the environment, and the victims were aware of it. Besides
inappropriate landscaping, building materials and frivolous placement
of houses invited conflagration. Roads in the dry, hilly area were nar-
row and circuitous. Some terminated without egress. The water system
was antiquated and inadequate. Typically, the folly of Oaklanders’ ways
and the nonchalant path to a “normal” accident manifested only in
retrospect.

This is not to say that wholly technological disasters did and do not
threaten Oakland. Technological disasters, those linked arm in arm
with natural factors, such as the Buffalo Creek flood, and those materi-
alizing totally independent of environmental features, such as the
Bhopal toxic spill and the Chernobyl nuclear incident, have descended
on the modern world with chilling ominousness. Their growing inci-
dence, coupled with their invisible menace, have seized people’s imagi-
nations to the point where they inspire universal fear. Appreciation of
them, however, emanates not only from their insidious nature and
destructive potential but also from their horrific symbolic implications.

As outlined in previous sections, much disaster symbolism
expresses a separation between nature and culture. In many peoples’
worldviews, historical chronicles, and symbolism, disasters have been
reckoned as deriving from the category of nature. Flood, fire, wind, earthquake, or slide, all fit in peoples’ minds within the category ontologically considered their domain. Nature is the “proper” origin and phylum of disaster.

Technological disasters emanate from the wrong category. They emerge from the arena that is cultural, not its antithesis. They come from within the sanctity and sanctity of the humanly managed, the category conceptually labeled “safe.” They are not supposed to erupt from the constructed and contrived realm, the estate of humans. When they do, it is very hard, indeed nigh impossible, for people to give them differentiation and disjuncture. “Displacement is the genesis of symbolic behavior,” says Cassier (1966), and technological disasters cannot be displaced. They dwell in the same category we do.

Symbolically, technological disasters portend still more. With technological disasters, symbolically, the “culturechthonous” becomes an auto-da-fé. That is, something born from culture turns into a public execution. I borrow the Spanish Inquisition’s euphemistic referral to a public execution as an “act of faith,” for it applies in both its references to technological disasters. Above all, humans have faith in culture. Culture is the seal of human trust, the provider of protection. In consequence, when a calamity that culture creates falls upon people, in imagery and in reality it seems that culture turns upon its members and kills them. The fundament of faith executes those who have faith in it.

As stated earlier, disaster dismantles the false dichotomies that some people construct and eradicates the denial of the savage. When so-called natural disasters occur, ones from the correct and oppositional category, that denial can be reestablished; but disasters that spring from culture itself seemingly debar culture’s hale return. If culture brought the tragedy, how can culture become whole again? Denial of menace cannot be wholly reconstructed. Technological disasters present exactly what humans cannot tolerate and continuously endeavor to put at distance: They signify an incubus on culture’s own back, a malignancy in the wholesomeness of the constructed world, danger within the secure. They represent a cultural betrayal. Matters that spoil pattern are the cause of fear, points out Douglas (1970), and technological disasters mar the very heart of humanly ordained pattern.

It follows that in concept, technological disasters often take on the quality of the most dangerous and the most polluting, albeit they may be so in reality as well. Their silent undermining and invisible damage do not fade. Enemies from within always provoke continuous tension and require constant vigil, and that is the aura that technological disaster creates. Rajan discusses the continuing disquiet within victims of the Union Carbide accident in Bhopal (1999 and this volume). Stephens (1995) paints the same picture for the Sami of Norway. Paine (1992b) describes the increasing sense of risk globally, and Erikson (1976:255, 1994:11-21) the individual and collective trauma left by technological disasters. Included are both technological disasters that are abrupt and those that Erikson describes as gathering force slowly and silently.

Few sense-making images or explanatory metaphors satisfy when culture attacks culture. Hence, in their aftermath technological disasters also leave nearly unsolvable issues of how to reconstitute logic. In the first place they tend to be immeasurably disruptive physically. “From an ecological perspective, natural disasters rarely result in long-term disruptions of the relationship between humans and their biophysical environments, while a community’s built and modified environments frequently sustain loss. On the other hand, technological disasters routinely disrupt the exchange between human settlements and their natural or biophysical environments, while in many cases resulting in comparatively little or no damage to built and modified environments,” state Kroll-Smith and Couch (1991:355–66). In addition, they fundamentally disrupt conceptual order. Kroll-Smith and Couch (1991:361–362) go on to say, “Our conception of living and dwelling are psychically rooted in our relationship to the earth,” but our methods of living are cultural, and a technological catastrophe alters them in a way not altered in natural disaster. “Humans experience their environment mediated by conceptual categories fabricated in social interactions,” states Mary Douglas (1985:34). With technological disaster these interactions are permanently shaken. Levi-Strauss (1985) adds that should local ecology lead to change in one part of the story, the rest must follow, and that involves the symbolic system.

In consequence, as Malcolm Gladwell (1996:32) points out, technological disasters prompt particular rituals: “In the technological age, there is a ritual to disaster. When planes crash or chemical plants explode, each piece of physical evidence...becomes a kind of fetish
object, painstakingly located, mapped, tagged and analyzed with the finding submitted to boards of inquiry that then probe and interview and soberly draw conclusions. It is a ritual of reassurance.” What is, of course, occurring in the ritual is culture taking care of a cultural problem so that people can rest secure. The rituals imply that culture has understood and corrected its error and will prevent the event recurring.

Communities also resurrect a long known, though discarded, restorative, in a rather new form. They pry out the wrongdoers, but of a new sort. In the wake of a technological disaster, people search for the humans they can designate “inhuman.” They seek those they can name responsible, not necessarily for moral reasons as has transpired before, but largely for errors in craft. It is not sins in the eyes of God that are denounced but miscalculations in the arts of culture. People take the callous chairman of the board or the iniquitous manufacturer out of the human category and categorize the malefactor as inhuman. The wrongdoer is a “monster.” Those who should have mothered, blundered. The process is not unlike a witch hunt of old.

Technological disasters stand “ex” cycle. Though they fit within predictions of general disintegration in certain formal versions of cyclical time, they contradict specific formulas and, thus, defy God and time. They completely repudiate informal cycles. Events such as the Three Mile Island nuclear plant meltdown never reemerge as seventy-year floods. In keeping, technological disasters never pass from history to myth, but always stay history. Technological disasters also never receive beautification. Only catastrophes from the category of nature gain redemption from their stunning, if ferocious, bedazzlement. Technological disasters in symbolism and symbolic power leave lasting scorched earth.

THE BEAUTIFICATION OF DISASTER—CONCLUSION

People seek to clothe the nakedness of death with a cloak of opulence... The beautified corpse is a formality for the hardened survivors.—M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, 1972

In the long afterglow of the fire’s embers, Oakland firestorm survivors launched two finalizing symbolic ships. They reinvented the disaster as “creative destruction.” They claimed the storm cleared away the mess and was good for the environment. The fire allowed a new start, many said. Most declared the calamity was “good” for their lives. They now had “clean slates,” as if their slates, whatever they were, had been sullied before.

They also redescribed the firestorm as awesome in its beauty. When people reinvent calamity as “creative destruction” or describe a violent act of nature as “terrifying beauty,” they are doing what Horkheimer and Adorno describe for death rituals—seeking to clothe the nakedness of the unacceptable with a cloak of opulence. As people do for a funeral, they embroider a body and primp facts so the antithesis between life and death or nature and culture becomes less daunting. In gracing the fire with finery, Oakland’s survivors performed a triple sweep. They blew away the ashes, scrubbed the ruins, and prettified even the concept of calamity. They turned the disaster into a comely corpse, and with that went on with their lives.

They further glamorized the calamity as a preservative boon, a preemptive strike that prevented a worse disaster from occurring. It was a warning, and with it nature had done good. Nature was not untrustworthy. Nature was just handing out a little well-deserved caution. Technological disasters are often depicted in the same manner. The anxious declare them omens that make the population conscious and caution people to change their cultural ways.

Already the Oakland firestorm has begun its fusion into fable. Though the victims remember its exact date, others have asked me, “Wasn’t that fire about twenty years ago?” or “Wasn’t that last year?” while across the country the blaze is almost forgotten. Disasters drift from the real to the unreal, and sometimes from the unreal to the real. The Greek villagers among whom I often work soberly told me how the red volcano behind them once erupted and threatened to pour death on everyone, but the Virgin Mary came and blew it out. In fact, the igneous remnant they nod to bubbled up over more than 20,000 years ago, long before the island was inhabited and a Christian virgin could have protected it.

Disaster is, of course, a symbol of itself along with all else, so while cataclysms indeed occur, in symbol they do not actually have to (Wagner 1986). The mere term “disaster” epitomizes disorder. The
matter of disaster is also itself symbolic. Fire burning, air swirling, earth shaking, water spewing, even atoms in their fission, dirty streams, and foul air, all make for the making of imagery.

In examining the symbolism of disaster, I feel I have embarked on a Herculean task. This study seems only the first of a probable twelve labors. Not all cultures symbolize disasters in the ways I have described, but all use symbolism somehow as part of their operation to depict and explain them. I believe that in understanding the symbolism of disaster perhaps lies the key to comprehending certain inexplicable riddles disaster researchers encounter. Why, for example, do the victims of disaster return to the area wasted? Why do those living in regions of chronic disaster stay? Some have no choice; they are economically closed out of safer places to live. But students of religious symbolism have long since clarified that metaphor also leads to the process of ownership (Deshen 1970). If metaphors of the environment enable such a process, then place attachment becomes more sensible. How Laughlin (1995) speaks of religious metaphor further elucidates why inhabitants of disaster zones feel no call to act upon ecological or technological problems. Symbols and metaphors mitigate the need for change. Why not stay? Why not return?

Disaster researchers also operate symbolically. In most descriptions and analysis, culture and society are expressed in habitual past tense. Yet the strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is the immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products the past tense conveys (Williams 1977:128–29). We in disaster studies speak in the past, although disasters are ongoing and are coming. We should not embrace the illusion of the bygone. We cannot afford to do so.

Notes

1. Similar characterizations arose around the great Chicago fire. Though never verified, in legend the fire was said to have been started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow, which kicked over a lit lantern. Nature, in the form of the cow, should not have been in an urban area, barn or no barn. Nor should Mrs. O'Leary have brought a natural element, fire, into that misplaced barn with that malapropos cow. In the Chicago situation, racism, classism, sexism, and religious prejudice all entered in the schema, in all of which respects Mrs. O'Leary herself figured as lower and closer to animalism along with her cow (Bales 1997; Smith 1995; Sawislak 1999). The Chicago fire legend stands as a classic example of how disaster symbolism can assume political implications. In Oakland, political implications of the Chicago sort were thankfully absent, though the fire starters were reputed to be "Mexican."

2. Lovejoy (1964) points out that down is more animal and up more godly, at least in Western thought.

3. Levi-Strauss (1978b:198) notes that the transformation back to culture at the end of the cycles requires enactment, spatially, temporally, and acoustically. As a rule, this takes place through the destruction of cultural items—the smashing of calendars, icons, furnishings—followed by the reformulation of cultural matters—rekindling fire, replacing divinities, and refurbishing the home, such as was done by the Aztecs.