# Making Trouble

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# Book Review

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*Crash Cultures: Modernity, Mediation and the Material* edited by Jane Arthurs and Iain Grant. Bristol, UK, and Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2003. 202 pages (paperback). $30.00.

*The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* by Kevin Rozario. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 313 pages (hardcover). $27.50.

It often feels that disaster, catastrophe, calamity—call it what you will—functions as a dominant modality of our lives, and it seems we spend as much time and energy seeking to prevent disasters as we do trying to understand and recover from them. Yet the apparent ubiquity of calamities belies the historical and cultural processes through which disasters have been "produced," that is, understood, construed, and even manufactured as a discernible type of event. Two recent volumes examine the intersections between culture and disaster in provocative ways: *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America,* by Kevin Rozario, and the collection *Crash Cultures: Modernity, Mediation and the Material,* edited by Jane Arthurs and Iain Grant. Although they differ in their methodologies and in their specific analyses, both books assert that calamities and crashes

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are constitutive of modernity, as indeed, for Rozario, modernity itself obeys a catastrophic logic. Whereas the essays collected in *Crash Cultures* map various "crashes"—of stock markets, of cars, etc.—onto a number of cultural texts, *Culture of Calamity* engages in a rich historical account of the social contexts in which specific calamities have occurred and the subsequent cultural changes they helped engender. Given the vast number and extensive history of spectacular representations of massive destruction, the continued theorization and historicization of disasters and accidents seems an important pursuit, as evidenced by, for instance, the cultural analysis of Otto Friedrich's *The End of the World: A History* or Ulrich Beck's sociological work on the "risk society." Both *Crash Cultures* and *Culture of Calamity* make fascinating contributions to this endeavor, and the volumes will appeal to cultural critics who wish to deepen their understanding of the topic.

Looking at the development of the American imagination of disaster, *Culture of Calamity* interweaves textual analysis of various cultural works with numerous primary and secondary historical sources that detail select natural and man-made disasters. Rozario's study begins with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Although occurring in Europe, it initiated the ongoing connection between modernity and calamity, inasmuch as calamities have since operated and been perceived as opportunities for renewal and improvement. Rozario shows how earthquakes and fires in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century America were construed as blessings, as messages from God that the faithful needed to reform; people felt grateful that God had not destroyed the world entirely. Although significantly informed by Puritan religious faith, this phase in disaster thinking also synthesized economic and political imperatives.

Rozario then devotes two chapters to the earthquake and resulting fire that occurred in San Francisco in 1906, first examining the event itself and then charting the ensuing responses. As an important precursor, however, he describes the proliferation and reform of the insurance business following the New York City fire of 1835, which in turn "engendered a sense of security in the face of nature's recurrent harms, by spreading the cost of calamities from individual victims to communities" (83). By the time of the San Francisco earthquake, there was a sentiment that disasters were good at engendering economic growth, indicating the increasingly secular view of calamities. This logic found its cultural response following the earthquake and fire, when all manner of people discussed "spectating" the fire like a thrill ride similar to those offered at Coney Island. In this "culture of calamity," Rozario argues, people are excited by calamities, which break up the monotony of modern life and provide "adventure,

escapism, and entertainment" (105). Further, at this point he details the interpenetration of capitalism and calamity. Specifically, Rozario interrelates the material destructiveness of disasters with the "creative destruction" necessitated by perpetual capital accumulation, asserting that disasters mimic the destructive forces of capitalism and simultaneously promote economic growth by clearing the field for the production of destroyed materials. "Progress," it seems, requires that outdated, outmoded, or no-longer-efficient material goods and structures, like houses, for instance, get wiped out, and disasters help that process along "naturally."

The next chapter details the governmental response to Hurricane Connie in 1955, which significantly shifted the relations of power of federal and state authorities. Specifically, as this hurricane occurred in a cold-war context, it was situated as a national (security) emergency, prompting "the expansion of government authority and relentless capitalist expansion" (142). By the time of 11 September 2001, which Rozario spends his entire final chapter discussing, we find many public sentiments arising out of the sediments of catastrophes past, from the evangelical Christian jeremiads that followed to the greatly augmented power assumed by the federal government. In the epilogue, which looks at Hurricane Katrina, Rozario finds that people "found it harder than usual to absorb Katrina into a triumphalist narrative" (212), marking another important shift just as the book's historical narrative reaches its temporal limit.

*Crash Cultures,* on the other hand, does not aim at the historicity of *Culture of Calamity.* In fact, the volume occupies a very curious moment, as it was published in 2003 but written "in the aftermath of particular events in Britain—Princess Diana's car crash, the controversy over [David] Cronenberg's film of [J. G.] Ballard's *Crash,* the disasters on the railways at Paddington and Hatfield, the millennium computer bug that threatened systems breakdown, but before the events of September 11th in New York" (2). In addition to these topics, individual essays include Anne Beezer's examination of the film *The English Patient* (1996) in relation to a negative dialectics of race, Ben Highmore's analysis of Roland Barthes's deadly encounter with a laundry van in relation to semiotic theories, and Harjit Kaur Khaira and Gerry Carlin's exploration of the general racialization of technological crashes throughout culture, among other topics. Strangely, perhaps, these essays exhibit both a radical heterogeneity among their topics, as well as several common touchstones—the book and movie *Crash* being the most notable; editor Jane Arthurs looks pointedly at the tumultuous process of distribution and public reception that the film had in England, for instance. Drawing

from a wide range of theoretical frameworks, including "Benjamin and Barthes, Haraway and Baudrillard, Deleuze and De Landa, Freud and Lacan, Elias and Foucault, Adorno and Irigaray" (2), these essays offer intensely considered interpretations of numerous social events and cultural texts. One of the novel additions to the collection is a work of short fiction, a detective story that speculates about the various rumors surrounding the disappearance of Amelia Earhart. This work, along with the intellectual adventurousness of all the essays, helps make *Crash Cultures* an intriguing read—as well as a stimulating companion to Kevin Rozario's *Culture of Calamity*.