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Anthropology Book Forum

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MATTHEW LAUER, 2023, *Sensing Disaster: Local Knowledge and Vulnerability in Oceania*, California: University of California Press, 272 pp., ISBN 9780520392076

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Sensing Disasters by Matthew Lauer is a remarkable ethnographic study of Simbo, an economically poor island with minimal disaster infrastructure, showcasing miraculous survival strategies without modern alert systems. The book opens at a critical moment in the aftermath of the 2007 tsunami that affected the Solomon Islands. Instead of the usual explanation of disaster response as the intergenerational oral transmission of Indigenous Knowledge, Lauer traces Simboan disaster response to their ability to sense and act on environmental cues. In this book, he advocates epistemic democratization by critiquing the imposition of external scientific and bureaucratic frameworks over indigenous knowledge to understand disasters and plan their mitigation. Dissecting the concepts of vulnerability and resilience by historicizing calamities and revealing their socio-cultural and economic entanglements, the book reveals the Simbo experience of sensing disasters.

The book delves into the lifeworlds of the Simboans, situating their disaster experiences within the broader context of their discourses and materialities to challenge standardized forms of ‘perceiving’ (p. 28). It eloquently discusses how the Simbo settlement history and its radical restructuring due to global economic and colonial transformations generated socio-ecological changes and (re)shaped vulnerabilities. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, household surveys and ethnographic interviews over eighteen months, the book calls for new approaches to understanding disasters and rethinking the position of indigenous knowledge amidst dominant power structures. Lauer studies spatial reorganization, social solidarities, and the dominance of scientific knowledge

during disaster reconstruction efforts by experts. His practice approach reorients knowledge as a form of practice informed by the practitioner, the specificities of time, place, social conditions and interpretations, thus making a strong case for contextualization of knowledge and ascertaining vulnerability as ‘politically polyvalent’ (pp. 84, 18, 184).

Simboans sense disasters as *muolongo*, glossed in English as ‘sensing, anticipating, interrelating,’ referring to the extraordinary abilities to make sound judgements and respond appropriately to apprehensions. Noticing changes to local environments, anticipating danger by understanding strange events, relationality between humans and nonhumans and getting attuned to reflexive sensitivity together illustrate the Simboan *muolongo*. Lauer argues that ‘learning to be sensitive’ allowed the tsunami survivors ‘to detect odd shifts in the ocean and act on them appropriately with little codified, intergenerationally transmitted knowledge about the phenomenon’ (p. 186). With brilliant theoretical focus and empirical understanding, Lauer highlights the multiple ontological positions associated with marine habitats. He argues that Simboans can perceive and comprehend even the most subtle and gradual changes to their surroundings.

Simboan sensing is posited as a ‘regenerative process’ of rendering entities as ontologically multiple. The novelty of this conceptualization lies in its ability to highlight the implicit and introduce new entities, ideas, and practices that reinterpret local knowledge and transform it in the process (p. 20). Making sense of the local understanding of vulnerabilities requires contextualizing biophysical uncertainties within the long history of Simbo’s associations with capitalist and colonial regimes. This sets the stage for Lauer to rethink how viewing vulnerability as an inherent condition of the Simbo landscape necessitates external efforts for capacity building, thereby keeping the broader structure of epistemic dominance of scientism unchallenged.

Interestingly, Lauer’s ethnography reveals Simbo’s critique of the global economic system and the colonial network of power in terms of *bulo-poata*, meaning a detrimental marketing of everything. His focus on performativity ensures an understanding of the assemblages of multiple representations of the external reality, influenced by marginalized regional political economy, evolving cosmologies and waves of social solidarity. Therefore, Lauer’s attempt in the book is to unsettle the predominant analytical frameworks of disaster and develop ‘conceptual tools that

bring into view and generate new meanings, concepts, and material processes' (p. 208). The book radically challenges dualistic thinking based on objectivity and argues for 'poly-ontology' built on the plurality of phenomena (p. 96).

Lauer identifies that the models of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) fail to consider the cultural values rooted in Simbo's miraculous disaster response. Moreover, Simbo survivors employed 'a melange of different responses' which was a part of their cultural values of '*kastom*', understood as generosity and reciprocity, and '*varivagana*', or mutual sharing (pp. 134-5). Yet, with humanitarian relief extended by the UNDP, NGOs, and disaster experts, 'new discursive strategies, concepts, experiences, and technoscientific practices ... to assemble Simbo land into vulnerable tsunamiland' were introduced (p. 171). This shifted the responsibility and expertise of techno-scientifically managing disasters on the islands towards the Global North. In the neoliberal condition, resilience-inspired disaster management strategies of experts 'depoliticize' and 'naturalize' disasters and reinforce the global power disparity (pp. 180-2). The book critiques participatory capacity-building workshops as potentially reinforcing state control despite their intentions to empower indigenous disaster response methods. It exposes the contingent and partial nature of dominant perspectives of various forms of scientism in disaster management. Lauer emphasizes the importance of empowering the natives to stress their ideas, practices, and worldviews in order to foster a deeper understanding of the entangled worlds in the Anthropocene. Such a formulation unmask disasters as 'discursively and materially catalytic'; that is, instead of diminishing 'the ebb and flow of life', disasters coalesce with 'with the preexisting fabric of life and produce an outpouring of local theorizations and speculations to explain and digest it' (p. 201).

Sensing Disasters impressively takes the first step towards understanding the conceptual resources of Simbo by listening closely to alternate worldviews with appreciation. Extending disaster anthropology's focus on social dynamics, power structures, and political and economic disparities as triggering factors, Lauer makes a case for historicizing calamities by locating them in a web of social and ecological relations. This approach generates the space for changes and prospects of varied modes of sensing disasters to emerge. It rests on the philosophy that not everyone describes the world in the same way or shares the same set of ontological assumptions (Cortesi 2021, p.

871). Lauer makes a timely and significant contribution towards exhibiting how the embeddedness of cultural practices within the socio-ecological systems explain how differing lifeworlds often coexist simultaneously and engender multiple meanings. By complicating the presumptions that inform Indigenous and Western Scientific Knowledge, Lauer brings out their nuances and makes a relevant addition to the field of the Social Construction of Knowledge.

Works Cited:

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