“We Will Make Meaning Out of This”:
Women’s Cultural Responses to the Red River Valley Flood

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Recent work on gender relations in disasters focuses largely on women’s material experiences and vulnerabilities. This paper draws on cultural studies theory to interrogate gender symbolically in the context of a major U.S. flood. Based on analysis of cultural artifacts and “texts” as well as interviews conducted for a larger study of women’s work in the 1997 Red River Valley flood, the author argues that women’s use of grassroots popular culture to interpret disastrous events shows how interpersonal networks and traditional quilting skills helped them express gender-specific experiences and feelings, and convey an otherwise neglected ecofeminist critique of disaster vulnerability. The author concludes that women’s cultural responses to disasters afford a neglected angle of vision on human responses to catastrophe.

Women are rarely as absent or incidental in disaster films and fiction as they are in disaster studies. Consider the film Volcano, in which gender power and sexual attraction foreshadow conflict over a range of decisions ahead about emergency communications, hazard mitigation, and mass evacuation. The (female) geologist battles the patronizing attitude of the (male) emergency manager as lava inexorably bubbles up toward the unsuspecting residents of Los Angeles. While her (lesbian?) colleague dies a gruesome death early on, the brilliant blonde falls for the ruggedly handsome manager—a father who single-handedly cares for his retarded daughter while managing a volcanic eruption. In another
twist to the work and family drama, the selfless (female) emergency physician heroically resists the entreaties of her husband to put their relationship first.

As Quarantelli (1985) noted, disaster films often cast women in stereotyped gender roles, and presumably men as well. Scanlon found factual distortion as well as stereotype in fictional accounts of women’s actions during the 1917 Halifax explosion (Scanlon 1999). Various portrayed as heroic “motherly angels,” castrating “new age” ecologists punishing men for creating ecological catastrophe, and mass (white) victims of rape by (nonwhite) hordes in the aftermath of nuclear war, women are decidedly present in the “imagination of disaster” through film and fiction disaster (Davis 1998, pp. 273–355).

How did we miss it? Not a lack of creative imagination but inattention to gender as an organizing principle in social life explains the ostensibly gender-blind quality of most disaster studies. This bias is deeply embedded in disaster theory (among others, see Enarson 1998; Fordham 1998; Bolin, Jackson, and Crist 1998) and evident in research strategies producing exclusively or predominantly male samples, for example Carmen Moran’s (1990) study of humor as a coping device among (4 female and 39 male) first responders. Happily, a new international body of research integrating gender is developing (e.g., contributors to Enarson and Morrow 1998, and to Morrow and Phillips 1999), now focused predominantly on the material vulnerabilities and experiences of women in disasters. Studying the popular culture of disaster affords an opportunity to interrogate the role of gender symbolically as well as materially.

Research Questions and Strategy

My own interest in this topic is threefold, arising from a concern for how people interpret social reality and make it meaningful; how gendered space and terrain are symbolically and materially disrupted by disaster; and how women respond culturally to disaster. Toward that end, this paper draws on gender theory and cultural studies to analyze women’s disaster quilts and other cultural responses to a major Midwestern flood in the United States.

I analyze qualitative data collected during field visits 6, 12 and 18 months after a damaging spring flood along the Red River of the North impacted the sister cities of East Grand Forks, Minnesota, and Grand
Forks, North Dakota, as well as rural communities to the north toward the provincial capital of Manitoba. I spoke with women about their work before, during, and after this event, conducting semi-structured interviews with women in key flood response positions and arranging 14 focus groups. The sample of 115 was predominantly female and included paid disaster responders, educators, family day care providers, single women, community activists, seniors, home health workers, rural women, social workers, businesswomen, single mothers, and cultural workers such as artists and quilters.

Reflecting the ethnic structure of their community, most respondents were Anglo (white, non-Hispanic), though one focus group involved 7 Latinas, and I interviewed 4 Native American women separately. Eight women were over 70 years old, but most were middle-aged and either married or formerly married. The sample was dominated by middle-class women currently or formerly employed in education, health, and human services occupations; it also included affluent women with secure careers, small-business owners, and marginally employed women in working-class occupations in retail, clerical, and personal service. Though I interviewed rural women in outlying areas untouched by floodwaters, the great majority of respondents reported moderate to severe damage to their homes, workplaces, or both.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and conceptually coded for computer-assisted analysis. I primarily sought evidence of how, as one woman explained, flood survivors sought to “make meaning” of the flood. I also analyzed cultural themes in 38 oral histories with women conducted by the University of North Dakota (UND) Department of History and the North Dakota Museum of Art, reviewed material from the flood collection of the UND Chester Fritz Library, and examined flood-related cultural products in the public domain.

Following a brief discussion of how disasters are culturally gendered in the public imagination, I sketch a theoretical approach to popular culture incorporating gender. In the next section, I illustrate the range of women’s cultural responses to this flood and consider two flood quilts in some depth, asking: Why is quilting a popular medium of cultural expression in disasters? What ideas were represented through women’s fabric art in the Red River Valley? The paper concludes with observations about directions for future research.
Culturally Engendering a Flood

Disasters are deeply rooted in the social relations of race, class, and gender. Ethnographic studies make this point vividly, among them John Barry's (1997) account of how race relations differentiated black and white experiences in the 1927 Mississippi Flood; Kai Erikson's (1976) analysis of Appalachian culture as a mediating factor in community impact and response; and Anthony Oliver-Smith's (1986) grounding of community resistance and solidarity in historical colonial practices and contemporary class and racial formations.

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Hayes Turner's (1997) social history of women and community in Galveston, Texas, during the Progressive Era demonstrated how white women's responses to the devastating Galveston hurricane both reflected and altered prevailing gender, class, and race relations. This history of a hurricane echoes many of the themes developed in international case studies of women and disaster. Notwithstanding political-economic and cultural differences, the findings from a wide range of studies confirm how profoundly gender identity, gender relations, and gendered organizations and institutions shape women's vulnerabilities, responses, and experiences during disaster (see Fothergill 1998 for a review of this research).

It is less often noted how the experience of disaster is culturally engendered—generally in stereotypical ways—through humor, language, metaphor, and image. As Alway, Belgrave and Smith (1998) note in their analysis of gender issues in Hurricane Andrew, the practice of naming hurricanes female names continued until 1978. Aside from the association of knowledge, protection, and safety with male figures. Even when women were absent from the home or were just as scared, helpless, and confused as everyone else, the media voices and images of wisdom and reliability that carried people through the worst of the storm and reconstruction sustained and confirmed male authority. (Alway, Belgrave and Smith 1998, p. 190)
Similarly, I found that images in newspapers, magazines, calendars, and picture books about the Red River flood highlighted military, political, and emergency response roles, inevitably focusing attention on men as one-dimensional rescuers. Women activated the photographer's eye mainly when they appeared needy (e.g., rescued by men), expressed normative emotions (e.g., tearful loss), worked in stereotypical roles (e.g., cooking for sandbaggers), or passively observed the flood scene (e.g., watching rising water). Female mayors in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Grand Forks, North Dakota, the occasional uniformed female soldier, and Hutterite women in traditional clothing filling sandbags were represented as exceptional women.

The cultural equation of women with unruly and destructive natural forces against which men marshal the forces of reason and technology is the context in which people make sense of disastrous environmental events (e.g., Merchant 1995). One coffee-table flood book described the Red River simultaneously as the "mother of Manitoba" and "an angry old sow, driven so mad by blizzards and rains that she tries to devour her children" (Winnipeg Free Press 1997, p. 178). Flood talk is often manifestly gendered. For example, a Grand Forks woman turned to metaphors of elephant circles surrounding "the women and children inside" to describe sandbagging efforts; others spoke of "mobilizing" residents for sandbagging in the "war zone." A male respondent in Manitoba described the Red River as "a bitch" and boasted a T-shirt emblazoned: "I bagged a dyke in St. Adolphe!"

While largely absent in sociological analysis of disasters, the subtle and unconscious engendering of disasters is evident in popular culture—from films to graffiti. The following discussion of women's cultural responses to the Red River Valley flood suggests that gender themes in these symbolic cultural interpretations of disaster warrant more investigation.

"Making Meaning" of a Flood

Many disaster scholars share with contemporary cultural studies theory a concern for how people actively construct and reconstruct their symbolic universe. Both reject a model of human action as passive and overdetermined by social structure. Without minimizing the power of publishers or movie producers to popularize images and ideas (e.g., about human behavior in disasters), cultural studies now
emphasize the agency of culture consumers and the social practice of interpretation.

Because symbolic meaning is constructed interactively, no cultural product or practice assumes a single meaning. To take an example closer to home, at the 1999 Natural Hazards Workshop in Colorado I played a taped version of the country-western song *Fury of the Red River* for those attending the popular culture session; these practitioners and researchers certainly heard a different song than did residents evacuated from their homes who may have tuned into the flood telethon for which it was written. Returning to *Holocaust*, the prejudices of viewers may be affirmed regarding what good emergency management looks like (white, middle-class, middle-aged, able-bodied, and male), but some viewers will hear more clearly the dissident feminist critique represented by the female geologist.

The point is not that there are always multiple meanings layered in songs, fiction, or film, but that no meaning exists 'out there' to be accepted, rejected, or otherwise modified; rather, the meaning of any text (e.g., disaster film, picture, or song) resides in the interpretation of various audiences or cultural consumers in historically specific contexts. John Storey (1996) explains:

> Meaning is therefore a social production; the world has to be made to mean. A text or practice or event is not the issuing source of meaning, but a site where the articulation of meaning—variable meanings(s)—can take place. And because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text or practice or event, meaning is always a potential site of conflict. (p. 4; emphasis added)

This directs disaster researchers to the politics of popular culture. *Live Aid* concerts publicizing the global politics of famine explicitly embodied a political message, but all disaster popular culture reflects the politics of social structure and culture within which it is produced. The negotiation of meaning through popular culture is, therefore, a "terrain of conflict and contestation... a key site for the production and reproduction of the social relations of everyday life" (Storey 1996, p. 2).

The Red River flood was interpreted for residents by multiple constituencies. It was evoked symbolically in the words and images chosen by local and national journalists, scientific and emergency management
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experts, elected officials, and family and friends around the country—all “consumed” by displaced and returning residents. But it was also variously interpreted symbolically by flood survivors. Those who lived through record-breaking winter blizzards before the spring flood tried and failed to “save the city” through weeks of intensive sandbagging, evacuated in darkness to the sound of emergency sirens, and returned weeks or months later to muck out debris and make the difficult decisions of reconstruction also made time to tell their stories through art, poetry, music, drama, dance, and fabric art.

The imagined reality of cyclones, earthquakes, and floods represented in commercial film and fiction contextualizes disaster popular culture, but it seems likely that it was their own stories that sustained flood victims along the Red River through the difficult recovery period. The power of naming is a critical part of “making meaning.” Recalling the Berkeley/Oakland fire storm as a survivor and anthropologist, Hoffman (1998) noted that survivor jokes about the fire helped rebuild a sense of community; outsider expropriation of that disaster humor was deeply resented (see also Hoffman and Oliver-Smith [forthcoming]).

As the cultural texts and practices of disaster survivors are diverse and conflicting, it is important not to misread “grassroots” popular culture of disaster as “consensual.” In Darwin, Australia, for example, residents visiting their local museum could literally see different cultural interpretations of Cyclone Tracy, from the colorful and familiar maps of meteorologists to the sketches for ritual dancing made by aboriginal artists in the hopes of appeasing the Rainbow Serpent responsible for the cyclone.

This complexity was evident in the conflicting emotions and ideas expressed through survivor graffiti by flood victims in the Red River Valley (Hagen et al. 1999). Nor was there consensus about the role of the arts in community recovery. Because it remained dry and its longtime (female) director positioned it as a vital community center, the North Dakota Museum of Art responded proactively, from sponsoring potluck suppers and offering free meeting space to churches and community groups to fostering children’s flood murals, commissioning flood-related works of art, collecting oral histories, and developing cultural exhibits on flood themes. Many local artists and performers applauded the “healing” role of the arts. But other residents were highly critical of the focus on cultural losses, for instance the city’s decision to
use flood relief funds to help rebuild the historic downtown Empire Theater, recently renovated as a performing arts center."

"Making meaning" of untoward events is part of disaster recovery. As Eyre (1998) suggested in her discussion of death and long-term recovery following a series of British disasters, making sense of "complicated" disaster deaths is a central task for survivors moving through the slow-motion process of disaster. We know less about this process than we do about the sociotechnical details of emergency medicine or body handling, but both are important to understand. Studying the cultural texts and practices produced at the local level by survivors (what we might call indigenous disaster culture) helps researchers and practitioners situate the disaster experience in the cultural worlds of survivors.

Women's Cultural Work in the Flood

Helen Cox (1998) noted women's local cultural activities in her study of the Australian Ash Wednesday bush fire. They drew heavily on humor and organized street theater, dances, a carnival, and a major "wood chop" event; 13 years later, they kept the community cricket match, termed "The Battle of the Ashes," going to "let everybody know we're still here and give the kids a good time" (p. 139). These cultural activities helped the community rebuild (p. 142): "In their vital but unsung roles, women rewove the fabric of their communities while men rebuilt the structure."

Why and how is disaster popular culture gendered? Gender theory suggests that women's reproductive work in the family—preparing ceremonial meals, sewing traditional clothing and artifacts, organizing transitional family ceremonies like weddings, preserving children's native language—situated them as cultural conservators when indigenous culture is threatened by genocide, mass media and global mass culture, or displacement by war or natural disaster. This was apparent after Hurricane Andrew, when Haitian women organized a spring celebration of Haitian culture to maintain community spirit during the slow recovery (Morrow and Earson 1996).

In the Red River Valley, a pastor observed that women more than the men in her congregation seemed determined to "make meaning out of this" event. Women more than men took on the work of chronicling the flood in journals, expressing emotions aroused by the flood, interpreting the event for family and friends through seasonal holiday letters,
and helping young children come to terms with what happened. Art was an important strategy in post-disaster response to children. The gendered division of labor in households and occupations engaged women more than men in this cultural work, for example as members of the disaster outreach team, counselors, elementary teachers, child care providers, and mothers. The local museum invited children to construct their own flood mural, and some area schools followed suit.

Women often lacked time for self-expression and spoke poignantly about disrupted scholarly writing, journaling, poetry, and other cultural projects. But women also made time for flood art. One woman's oral history described salvaging her mother's cedar chest and a water-logged piano to use later in her sculptures. At least two women published children's flood books. In Olinda Crawford's Poem From the River, the Red River was explicitly gendered, urging the "children of the earth" to cut off their futile "sandbags over hearts" and "go with my flow" (original emphasis). Local poet Madelyn Canard's poem The River Leaps conveyed the power of water and the work ahead through strikingly domestic imagery, as in this verse:

*Like leavened bread it rose, swelled and bubbled across my lawn, eked its way into my house, leaving molds in the basement, seeding yeast between walls, smearing slime on hardwood floors, staining and miring like a black ketchup.*

Survivors often interpreted the flood through music. One local musician donated her time and energy to organizing a series of free summer concerts presented in the art museum. Local musician June Kae Randall composed the country-western song Fury of the Red River as a fundraiser for victims. In addition to lyrics evoking community resilience and nationalism, the chorus foregrounds vulnerability. "Now we're back to rebuild our lives/Can't give up, we must fight the fight/For our family, for the elders, for the child."

Before the debris was gone and the houses were dry, original songs such as The Sump Pump Blues and Bern Envy were written for a flood-based community musical called Keep the Faith. These songs emphasized humor in adversity, community solidarity, and a prairie people's respect for water. Women were primary organizers and performers in Keep the Faith, a project which engaged 400 children and teenagers.
enrolled in a summer music and art program during the clean-up period. It attracted repeat local audiences and was videotaped as a fundraiser. The City of Grand Forks flood website also linked visitors to the musical. Perhaps this presentation of (community) self was a simple public relations gesture, but the musical’s popularity also suggests how meaningful it was for flood survivors. Liner notes for the *Keep the Faith* compact disc minimized state boundaries which divide the region physically and sociologically, and contextualized the event in disaster recovery:

*Keep the Faith* was conceived and written as a celebration of community as the “One community separated by a river” rebuilds and begins the process of becoming stronger, more beautiful and more prosperous than ever before. . . . Within the music we find laughter and tears and a spiritual outlet of emotion necessary during this healing time. This entire project was completed by students, directors and composers in three weeks. This is itself stands as a testament to the fortitude and commitment of the people of this area.

**Subversive Meanings?**

Cultural interpretations of disasters carry meanings negotiated by producers and consumers in particular contexts rather than imposed uncritically on captive audiences. Though not liberatory by definition, the agency of the consumer/audience makes oppositional meanings both possible and likely. Making popular culture can offer ideas “resistant to dominant understandings of the world” and hence empower subordinated groups (Storey 1996, p. 5). The idea has been taken up by feminist cultural studies theorists who argue for women’s empowerment through subversive readings of cultural texts. Janice Radway (1987), for instance, argued that romance novels appeal to women as a subtle form of protest against domination. Women assert control over their time through reading, and actively construct through romance fiction an imagined alternative to the disempowering and alienating relationships they actually experience with men.

Borrowing notions of subversive subcultural communities from poststructuralist cultural theorists may help disaster researchers search for multiplicity and contradiction in the popular culture of disaster. As
community solidarity breaks down and deeply-rooted divisions and conflicts re-emerge, survivors may critique domination culturally. Writing about changes in gender relations produced by the 1949 famine in Mali, Vaughan (1987) analyzed popular women’s songs from this perspective:

At home the women waited for their husbands to return, which they usually did at night so that their neighbors could not see how much food they had with them. But both written sources and oral testimonies indicate that often the men did not return at all, but stayed away in their home areas until the famine was over, or took extra wives in the places to which they had gone to find food. p. 1949 is thus remembered as the year of “many divorces,” and this aspect of the famine features prominently in women’s songs:

_We have suffered this year_

_Our men are divorcing us._

_Oh, what shall we do with this hunger?_ (p. 34)

Popular songs or poems allow survivors an avenue for the anonymous critique of powerful elites upon whom they may depend. A Canadian hit by the Red River flood lampooned mismanagement of the flood in a parody of The Twelve Days of Flooding, complaining: “On the first day of Flooding my premier gave to me” (among other things) 1. A state of Emergency 2. Two Sandbags-(NO SAND) . . . 6. Six Vans of convicts . . . 11. Eleven EMO Assessors, and 12. Nervous breakdowns” (original emphasis). Like folk songs popularized by Buffalo Creek miners attributing the chronic disaster of black lung disease to workplace pollution (Gibson 1976, p. 99), a piano popular after the Johnstown flood blamed the death of over 2,000 people on an upstream dam serving the interests of an elite hunting and fishing club: “All the horrors that hell could wish/Such was the price that was paid for — fish!” (McCullough 1968, p. 250). A chess analysis of the Titanic disaster was conveyed through cartoons and a popular song with these lyrics: “They sent them down below/Where they’d be the first to go” (Hirschberg 1997, p. 71). Popular art was a powerful medium for political critique after a major Japanese earthquake in 1855. Art prints made in the shape of roof tiles depicting “mythical catfish that avenged the hardships of urban poor” circulated informally among survivors despite opposition from political elites.
In the Red River Valley, flood victims used disaster clothing to assert conflicting interpretations of the flood. Two popular slogans on T-shirts were “I asked for a Bud not a flood” and “49 feet my ass.” The latter expressed anger over National Weather Service flood forecasts which many residents felt had seriously misrepresented the hazard. In an explicit response to what felt to her like “negative” imagery, a local woman printed T-shirts with designs conveying “hope, faith, survival, and strength.” The simple figures and primary colors of her art conveyed residents with “thankful hearts;” a ship called the SS Hope sailing through troubled waters, a brilliant sun and rainbow rising over a distressed city, and other inspirational images. Her flood art often included angels, reflecting both the expected largesse of McDonald’s heiress Joan Krook’s “Angel fund” for flood victims and the contemporaneous national obsession with angels in popular film and art. These optimistic flood designs appeared on cards and posters, as a CD liner for the Keep the Faith musical, on sweatshirts and throw blankets, on Christmas ornaments, and on the North Dakota governor’s holiday card. She explained how she began, after resigning a new job as an art teacher across the border in Minnesota to return home and help her single mother rebuild:

I knew I had to do something positive and I knew things were going to get better. And I wanted to tell the whole story. I like children’s art and colorful and primary colors, and I just knew my style would be good for it. I wanted to tell the whole story (original emphasis).

The popular T-shirt and other artifacts conveyed an emotional approach to recovery which resonated with many locals. Investing the salary she had earned for three months of teaching in 500 copies of her first flood poster, she immediately sold out to neighbors, customers, and friends. She remembered their response:

Because we saw a couple other flood T-shirts that were kind of negative—you know, “49 feet my ass,” “Floods suck.” People would come over to the house and buy the print and some people would start crying right in my living room, because they—I mean, it was just such an emotional time, and it brought it up. And lots of people thanked me for being so positive about it. And then someone wanted greeting cards and Christmas cards, and so I came up with that and printed that. And some-
one said “tree ornaments,” and my mom, I designed hers, my mom sold ’em. Someone said “neckties,” so I had the neckties. . . . I did a sandbag one and one that says “hope.”

Women’s cultural responses to disaster illustrate the range of meanings survivor art carries. Songs, clothing, graffiti, and poetry manifestly both critique and reinforce community power structures, and hence carry no single message “from the grassroots.” The folk art discussed above also illustrates the emotional power of indigenous disaster culture, as do the flood quilts examined below.

Flood Quilts in the Red River Valley

Gender bias in the boundary-maintaining organizations defining high culture has fostered unconventional cultural self-expression by women through decorative pottery, work songs, rug weaving, and other art forms related to domestic production. Quilting is a case in point. Often solitary work undertaken to furnish a household, it is also a means for artistic expression, an interpretation of family history through clothing scraps, a leisurely pastime, and an occasion for sociability and travel. Quilters typically share their work with others through travel, newsletters, and, most recently, the Internet.

Quilts document women’s lives. Those made by rural women in New Mexico and Texas, for example, express their relationship to work and landscape through pieced images of plowed fields, whirling windmills, cotton plants, sunbonnets, isolated schoolhouses, and log cabins. Quilting also affords some women a sense of control:

You can’t always explain things. Sometimes you don’t have any control over the way things go. Hail ruins the crops, or fire burns you out. And then you’re just given so much to work with in a life and you have to do the best you can with what you got. That’s what piecing is. The materials is passed on to you or is all you can afford to buy . . . that’s just what’s given to you. Your fate. But the way you put it together is your business. You can put them n any order you like. Piecing is orderly.

(Cooper and Buford 1977, p. 20)

American quilters often donate quilts, for example to AIDS babies, battered women’s shelters, and victims of violent crime, child abuse,
car accidents. Women in Paducah, Kentucky, worked with experienced and novice quilters to collectively create "Patchworks of Remembrance and Hope" memorializing the victims of the school shooting; over 400 quilt blocks were eventually contributed by quilters from 35 states and 5 other countries (Alexander 1999). Quilters also respond to natural disasters. Oklahoma quilter, for example, set a goal of "1,000 quilts for Oklahoma" following the 1999 tornado. North Carolina quilters recently donated over 150 quilts to flooded families; among others, the Crystal Coast Quilters Guild in Morehead City made 41 quilts over two work days. These handcrafted quilts evoke a sense of care. One elderly woman’s oral history of the flood revolved around her serious illness and subsequent hospitalization in strange surroundings during the evacuation. She spoke twice about how “comforting” it was to find a handmade quilt on her hospital bed. In a focus group of senior women, one widow described “just feeling better about myself” as she became progressively more involved in voluntary relief efforts; during her 6-week evacuation, she made 19 quilt tops using fabric donated by New Mexico quilters.8

Quilts are sometimes explicitly political “texts” through which women piece together the stories of their lives and take positions on current issues. Women’s history quilts, human rights quilts, and the AIDS and breast cancer quilts are examples. Appliqued *arpilleras* from Argentina and Chile were sandsewn to publicize political abductions and to raise money for families of *los desaparecidos*. Slave quilts from the American South illustrate how subversive meanings were sometimes literally stitched into fabric; even if produced at the behest of their mistresses, these quilts could carry subtle messages of empowerment and solidarity. The most famous example is the Underground Railroad quilt design which encoded astronomical maps to aid escaped slaves as they made their way north.

It should come as no surprise that women also produce quilts about natural disasters. To my knowledge, these have not been systematically catalogued or documented, but I am personally aware of quilts from Miami using the traditional crazy quilt pattern to represent Hurricane Andrew; a story quilt displaying the fault lines of a California earthquake; darkly colored quilts connoting both dark emotions and oily beaches and wildlife after the Exxon Valdez oil spill; and the flood quilts from the Red River Valley under discussion.9 All were displayed locally
(e.g., in art museums, municipal buildings, women’s centers) and in some cases traveled regionally, suggesting that while women’s disaster quilts have not yet drawn the attention of disaster researchers, they are accorded significance by disaster survivors.

What ideas are represented in this art? Two flood quilts from the Grand Forks region illustrate a range of themes significant to women. In the first case, a professor teaching a college course on ecofeminism invited her predominantly-female class to design painted-on quilt blocks for a group flood quilt ("The River Ran Through Us"). Her notes to students about the project supported a model of flood recovery through the arts: "The full ‘tiredness’ of the community as response to disaster necessitates alternative (including playful) means for learning and growing. This experience offers a level of depth missing in strictly cognitive discussions." During the first flood anniversary, the work-in-progress on display at the UND Women’s Center draped over an antique quilt frame rescued from a flooded home.

The second flood quilt was produced by the North Star Quilter’s Guild in the year following the flood. This was a challenge quilt in which members agreed to craft individual blocks reflecting their flood experiences. Designed and constructed by quilters of varying ability, the blocks were then individually set by an expert quilter onto background fabric. "Setting them out a ‘tilt,’" she explained, "really reflected the disorientation that was a universal." Signifying an intent to share their stories, the quilt was constructed in three panels for easy travel and display. The quilters used scraps from the many "truckloads of fabric" donated by quilters around the country, including fabric evoking icy prairie, barren trees, and muddy waters. Donated fabric was also distributed to members who lost their supplies in the flood.

What ideas did these two flood quilts intend to convey? First, both the class quilt and the guild quilt were collective projects specifically designed to help women interpret the flood. Their most important message, then, is that women’s flood experiences and emotions matter. The professor who organized the classroom quilt project asked her students: "Our experience was a unique moment. If we don’t tell our stories, who will?" In this sense, the quilts were oppositional texts constructed against the official flood story.

Secondly, both quilts used color, design, and motif to convey a sense of hope and optimism about flood recovery. Textual notes painted on
the blocks were often humorous; primary colors predominated over dark or muted colors. Women stitched pictures of the Red Cross symbol and Salvation Army food trucks, brightened their blocks with colorful rainbows rising over the burning city center, and pieced in hearts, angels, crosses and cats. They did not use their art to critique emergency management authorities; political criticism was not their intent.

The class project quilt did address root causes for the flood. Student quilters drew on ecofeminist theory to critique the lack of balance between human and natural forces, writing “nature is nurtured” and “we are just borrowing this land for our short journey on Mother Earth.” Project notes from their professor disputed the inevitability of the “so-called ‘natural’ disaster,” asserting: “This occurred because we live in the River’s home. The Earth speaks through poets and artists, this is a time to listen to what she is teaching you and me.” Student blocks and text animated the relationship between river and resident: “Please hear me, please listen to me. Your ears must be too full to hear me, your eyes must be clouded over with visions of materialism. . . . Why do you accuse me? I didn’t try to hurt you, I just need you to pay some attention to me. I just wanted you to notice.” These tenets of ecofeminist theory have been critiqued as essentialist by those urging a more materialist feminist environmentalism (Agarwal 1992). Yet here they provided quilters a logically coherent interpretative framework for the flood. As ecofeminist thought was not otherwise represented in public discourse about the flood, the quilts can be seen as oppositional texts.

In contrast, older women in the North Star Quilter’s Guild used fabric art to express how the flood impacted them personally and their feelings about the event. Five key ideas were apparent, each of which might be profitably investigated by disaster researchers.

First, quilters affirmed the significance of cultural work in their lives. “Sunbonnet Sue” is shown evacuating her marooned home with a quilt draped over her arm. The text reads: “With the motor running, carrying the quilt half-quilted, she ran into the car.” Another woman reportedly evacuated in a Humvee with “a sewing machine in one hand and a cat in the other.” Craft supplies, handmade baby clothes, and heirloom quilts were among the most valued possessions women lost in the flood. This may help explain why some studies have shown that women prepare for disasters more proactively than men (e.g., O’Brien and Atchison 1998; Emerson and Scanlon 1999).
Second, the flood was stressful for women. Their significantly expanded domestic workload when hosting evacuated families for long periods of time (often in addition to paid jobs) may well contribute to women's generally higher levels of reported stress (Anderson and Manuel 1994; Ollenburger and Tobin 1998). A friend explained why one quilter borrowed Edmund Munch's image of *The Scream* to convey this challenge:

*I know the people that stayed with her. Her kids go to the same school my kids go to. She has five hyperactive kids and the lady herself is hyper. And I guess every time there was a weather report she would just go 'Oh my, Oh my!'*

Married women in the United States are also more likely than married men to experience mental illness (Gove 1972) and hence to be more vulnerable to stressful events like disasters. One block in the guild quilt represented a mother's struggle with depression. Flood preparations kept her from an appointment with her psychiatrist to adjust her medications, yet she worked through her illness: "I spent my time moving stuff upstairs in our house and babysitting and cooking and doing that kind of stuff when I could stand to do anything at all." Later, at the Air Force Base shelter, she waited most of a day to see a psychiatrist whose visit was ultimately preempted by the arrival of President Clinton. When her husband could no longer cope both with her and the flood, she telephoned regional psychiatric wards seeking admission. Her quilt block read: "Crazy patch was the only choice for this block! My struggle with major depression became overwhelming during the flood and I spent much of the time in hospitals in Fargo."

Third, women's caregiving responsibilities continue throughout the life span when families and kin need their help. An older woman's design evoked the hard work of (grand)mothering during this period, a theme echoed in many oral histories and interviews. A fellow quilter explained:

*They were not affected by the flood directly, but her grandchildren were, so she had her five grandchildren come stay with her. So that's why she had the five little gingerbread boys. So that's how the flood affected her. All of a sudden she had this influx of children she had to take care of.*
This idea was also conveyed by the block depicting a portable toilet on a rubble-strewn street. The mother/quilter “was petty training her son during the flood and so they walked back and forth many, many times a day from their house to the port-o-potty!” Like their material tasks of childcare, cooking, cleaning, shopping, organizing family ceremonies, and communicating with kin, women’s “emotion work” with intimates also continues unabated (see Fothergill 1999; Grant and Higgitt 1998; Enarson forthcoming). This behind-the-scenes socioemotional and material caregiving enables spouses and others to take on active emergency response roles but limits women’s participation in the more honorific dimensions of the “flood fight.”

Fourth, the quilt helped viewers understand that both women and men worked to repair their households physically. One block whimsically represented the colorful building permit in the window of a home still under repair. The quilter had primary responsibility for managing the home repair process. Many women like her along the river learned or developed nontraditional construction skills during the reconstruction period (Enarson forthcoming).

A fifth theme emphasized women’s indirect emergency response work. Near retirement age, one woman had no choice but to commute when the insurance company she worked for transferred its key staff to Fargo:

I feel that last summer was the summer that wasn’t. I was in Fargo. Yes, I came home on weekends, but you do laundry, you’re ironing clothes, and you go back to Fargo. And you leave your husband to do his own laundry and do his own cooking—fortunately, he can cook! But I think—I actually feel that I lost four months of my life.

Her block showed “Quilter’s Quarters” relocated to Fargo and her small red car in transit on a long road through the flooded prairie, noting: “75 miles one way comes to 150 times 19 weeks is a lot of driving.” Over two-thirds of all women in Grand Forks were employed at the time of the flood, many in service, clerical, and professional occupations drawing them indirectly into relief and recovery work with flood victims (Enarson forthcoming).

Taken together, these disaster quilts suggested themes which, while not universal to women living through disaster, may well be common
pancymic and warrant further investigation. The quilts might also be compared with cultural artifacts produced by other women in disaster-impacted communities and with men's cultural responses to disaster. Women's informal social networks (e.g., in quilting guilds) have been undertheorized in analysis of community-based mitigation, response, and recovery. As has been suggested about Brazilian samba schools (Blankie et al. 1994, p. 237), the cultural practices of popular organizations can be a powerful avenue for community organizing around disaster vulnerability. Women's local, regional, and national quilting guilds offer just such an opportunity.

But we must also understand quilting as a political process enabling (some) members of disempowered groups to claim the prerogative of the storyteller and (as the folk artist above insisted) to "tell the whole story," or at least their story. Like the songs, poems, and art they created, flood quilts were empowering to women not holding socially visible roles as frontline responders, emergency managers, or relief administrators and with less power than journalists, publishers, producers, and disaster researchers to interpret the flood.

While not manifestly subversive or emancipatory texts, women's flood quilts from the Red River Valley are important both for the occasions for social solidarity they afforded women in the wake of the flood and for what they teach us about women's lives in disaster. Women's post-disaster family and community work after the Berkeley/Oakland fires "reinforced community . . . and tatted back neighborhoods like so much lace" (Hoffman 1998, p. 61). In just this way, telling women's stories through quilting helped make the Red River disaster meaningful and reinforced community.

### Toward an Inclusive Approach to Disaster Popular Culture

This case study of women's symbolic interpretation of disaster suggests three new directions for research. First, the popular culture of disaster can and should be a primary source for generating grounded theory about social structure and process in disasters. We must certainly attend to the imagined realities (the "sent" messages) about disaster which are produced for profit and marketed to a mass audience. But to understand how individuals and communities make disasters meaningful, our primary focus should be on survivors as active cultural producers rather than passive consumers.
Secondly, understanding the barriers to women in cultural and interpretive institutions, we must look in the interstices where women make art. Women are more likely to express their ideas and emotions through the artifacts of daily use—the quilts, children’s books, songs, holiday letters, cards, posters, and T-shirts fashioned in the wake of a flood, hurricane, or earthquake. It is here that women’s informal work as cultural interpreters of disaster is evident, and we will miss it if we do not look for it. This suggests to me that more disaster researchers need more and better access to women and women’s groups and an appreciation for how gender relations structure disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.

Finally, the study of disaster popular culture must begin with the assumption that social structure shapes the symbolic interpretation of events as much as the relative vulnerability of people to hazard environments or their access to recovery resources. As we begin to re-think how best to approach the field (Webb 1999)," we need to attend to this larger political context, asking not only who is saying what but why. Why do some women recovering from flood or earthquake paint pictures, piece fabric, or sing songs? What are they saying and why? Why do some communities assert meanings that others reject? We will not answer these questions without casting a very wide net in our investigation of disaster popular culture and without attending to the social relations of gender, class, and culture.

Notes

1. A series of severe winter and spring blizzards set the stage for the flood. When local dikes were unexpectedly breached, emergency managers implemented the midnight mandatory evacuation of East Grand Forks (population 9,000) and Grand Forks (population 50,000), and extensive flooding and fire in Grand Forks followed. Residents dispersed for periods of 2 to 6 weeks to relief centers, host families, and extended kin around the nation as the isolated prairie cities assessed their significant housing, industrial, and agricultural damages and began vital repairs.

2. My thanks to Eliot Glasheim of the Museum of Art and Dr. Kimberly Porter in the UND Department of History for generously allowing me early access to transcribed oral histories.

3. I am grateful to Special Collections librarians at the UND Chester Fritz Library for facilitating my access to their flood materials.
4. See, for example, the photo books, Under the Whelming Tide (Byl, 1988) and A Red Hot Sunrise: The Flooding of the Cassias (Winnipeg Free Press 1997).

5. For an analysis of gender issues in the evacuation experiences of couples on the Canadian side of the flood, see Enarson and Scanlon (1999).


7. This generalization needs to be investigated empirically. It is based on my review of flood documents collected by the Special Collections staff of the UND library, which included letters, photos, poetry, and other documents forwarded to the library by survivors.

8. This account was provided through the disaster popular culture Website by Wolf Dombrowsky (see discult@k66009.soziologie.uni-kiel.de) referring to research conducted by Dr. Laura Fried (lfried@att.th).


10. In the same spirit, members of women's service organizations described receiving large quantities of hand-crafted items sent by out-of-area women's groups. One out-of-state woman "had a dream" and arranged to deliver handmade gift-filled Christmas stockings to each of 800 Sunday school children in the flooded area; another brought 100 hand-knitted caps and 1,000 boxes of Christmas decorations.

11. For more information, contact curators at the Miami Museum of Science; Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum in Golden, Colorado; City Museum of Homer, Alaska; and the North Star Quilter's Guild in Grand Forks, ND.

12. Internet discussions of disaster popular culture were conducted by Gary Webb in October 1998 and by Tricia Wachtendorf in February 1999. Transcriptions are available on-line (www.cmforum.org).

References


