

Disasters as Betrayal

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What constitutes a “disastrous event” and who names it? Drawing on ethnographic and phenomenological research in the mountainscapes of Northern Pakistan, I explore how disasters catalyse conditions for social let-down. I think with my interlocutor: Niaz, whose life is further confounded by another form of betrayal, that of his body. As a result of a life-altering injury, Niaz’s bodily limitations placed significant constraints on his life long before the earthquake that devastated his Himalayan village. Niaz’s failed body (a body that refuses to “recover”), presents an important counterpoint to the disaster of the earthquake. However, Niaz does not attribute his most profound dysphoria to either of the two events, but the disloyalty of his best friend. Niaz helps us to understand disasters as cascading forms of violence where small and large events coalesce, and relationships slip, fall, and possibly reconstitute. He compels us to consider that sociality is not always experienced as a form of plenitude, and perhaps disasters are not mere ruptures of a coherent lifeworld but part of the ongoing labour of inhabiting the world.

De-colonizing disasters: Affect, race, and queer theory