



Global Flooding

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Late August: Hurricane Harvey hits Texas' Gulf Coast, causing massive and catastrophic flooding and leaving much of Houston, the United States' fourth-largest city, under water. Millions are displaced. Late August: torrential rainfall in the Nigerian state of Benue displaces an estimated 110,000 people. From mid-August to mid-September, heavy monsoonal rain causes massive flooding across much of Northern South Asia. Death tolls climb to over 1,000. Over a third of Bangladesh is inundated with flood waters. Thousands of homes in Nepal are swept away. Flood damage and wide-scale displacement impact the Indian states of Bihar, Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal. Urban areas including Mumbai, the fourth-largest city in the world, are swamped. On September 5, Hurricane Irma makes landfall in the Caribbean, causing massive damage, flooding, and displacement in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Florida. The devastation of Irma is compounded, especially in Puerto Rico, by Hurricane Maria, which hits on September 20, leaving further damage and flooding, as well as compromised relief effort, in its wake

We live in a moment of global flooding. By any measure, August and September of 2017 have been a period of unprecedented disaster and crisis related to storms and flooding. Each of these events is in need of independent attention and analysis. But what

are we to make of them in total? To what extent should they be understood as harbingers of things to come? And what might thinking anthropologically about global flooding add to an already unfolding discussion of climate change, disaster preparedness, and life in the Anthropocene?

The 2017 floods raised a number of critical issues. Among them were the centrality of infrastructure and, indeed, infrastructural failure. The disaster on the Gulf Coast, in particular, had a host of Cassandras. For example, in a 2016 piece that eerily prefigured Harvey, Roy Scranton outlined the vulnerability of Houston to a massive hurricane and exposed the potentially toxic impact of such a storm on the petrochemical industry along the gulf coast.¹ While Harvey's devastation did not, fortunately, live up to Scranton's predictions, the storm did cause seepage of waste from a Superfund site, underscoring the chemical risks of poor flooding infrastructure in industrialized coastlines. Moreover, the hurricane highlighted the inability of Houston's bayous to handle drainage, pointing to the ways that rapid urbanization combines with aging infrastructure to produce flooding precarity. There are many examples of this pattern in large urban centers across the globe.

Similarly, the unfolding effects of the hurricanes in Puerto Rico highlighted the effects of austerity and neglect on infrastructural preparedness. Indeed, the crises of debt repayment, privatization, and neoliberal re-

We live in a moment of global flooding.



Figure 1. Monsoon rains in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
Image: Jason Cons.

form, dramatized by the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) passed by Congress last year, are central dynamics not only in the scale of damage on the island, but in the challenges to mounting rapid and successful recovery and relief efforts. On the other hand, flood-

ing in Nigeria has been blamed on a different set of infrastructural failures — corruption. Representatives of the Benue State government allege that the floods can be blamed, at least in part, on the diverting of funds meant for digging and repairing drainage channels in 2013. The lessons of the so-called infrastructural turn in Anthropology have much, then, to offer to an unfolding examination of the impacts of global flooding. Indeed, they might point the ways toward thinking of dampness and periodic inundation as key tropes of the contemporary.

Yet another notable point from 2017's global flooding was the global inequalities on display in their very coverage. The flooding of Houston was, unquestionably, a media event, narrativized through a dazzling array of aerial footage, Internet infographics, on-the-ground reporting, chilling before and after videos, and more. This was notably different from the ways that Western, and indeed international, media dealt with

the simultaneous flooding in South Asia and Nigeria. Indeed, the contrast between media coverage of Harvey's impact on the Gulf Coast and coverage of flooding in South Asia became, oddly, its own media event. News outlets such as the *New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, and *The Guardian* ran a series

of stories asking why there was so little coverage of flooding in South Asia (as opposed to, say, increasing their coverage of it). As such, through a series of representational moves eminently familiar to scholars of postcolonial theory, flooding in places like Bangladesh came to matter in global reporting not only in and of itself but also in relation to events in the West. Swamping in South Asia spoke in relation to swamping in Houston.

Yet, perhaps most central to a range of emerging debates within the discipline are the ways that this recent round of flooding has engendered discussions about possible (and impossible) futures. Grim assessments of the damage to places like rice-growing deltas in South Asia, islands in the Caribbean and cities on the Gulf Coast have raised a series of questions about whether such spaces are habitable in the long run and, indeed, what the meanings of “long run” are or might be. A seemingly inevitable takeaway from this year’s global flooding is that everyday life in such spaces is and will remain precarious. Global flooding highlighted the seemingly inescapable (for most) fact that the impacts of climate change are anything but a future abstraction. The floods are resounding indications that we live in the time of climate change: that the intangible anthropogenic forces that are inexorably reshaping the globe are not questions to be confronted tomorrow, but things that already have fundamentally shifted our relationship to land, to water and to what we understand as “habitable space.” The future, in short, looks damp.

Global flooding highlighted the seemingly inescapable (for most) fact that the impacts of climate change are anything but a future abstraction.

This reckoning with planetary crisis in places like Houston and Puerto Rico, if nothing else, brings these areas into dialogue with a set of conversations that are being carried out in other places around the globe — especially in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This is not to say that people on the Gulf Coast and in the Caribbean have not been confronting questions of climate change and the future before now — they are and have been. Rather, it is to point out that the crisis of habitability that global flooding heralds situates cities like Houston squarely within broader discussions around development in an era of climate change.

Over the past decade, for example, the central question of development in the Bangladesh delta, where my own research is situated, has been not so much whether, but for how long, people will be able, realistically, to inhabit it. The Bangladesh delta region is a place regularly described as one of the most climate vulnerable places in the world due to increasing cyclonic activity in the Bay of Bengal, accelerating saline intrusion into agricultural land and projected sea-level rise. Against this backdrop, a new development rhetoric has emerged that takes for granted the delta’s long-term transformation into a space inhospitable for human life. This has radically reshaped the ways that its short-term futures are imagined and engineered.

As I have argued elsewhere, fatalism about the delta’s future has opened up a range of troubling interventions that reimagine the delta as an experimental stage



Figure 2. Climate adaptation and mangrove rehabilitation projects, Munshiganj, Bangladesh. Photograph courtesy of Jason Cons.

where potential new technologies might be developed and tested for rolling out in an imagined climate crisis elsewhere.² At the same time, the imagination of peasants in the delta as soon-to-be footloose surplus populations has fueled not only new security paradigms along the India-Bangladesh border, but also new imaginations of urban growth.³ In these discussions, the rights, aspirations and lived conditions of agrarian production often are treated as secondary. Another way to put this is that short-term, quotidian concerns about life and livelihoods have been eclipsed by dire framings of the long-run future. These shifts are suggestive of ways that discussions around habitability might unfold elsewhere.

This, of course, is not to suggest that the Bangladesh delta will serve as a model for rethinking the development of the rest of South Asia, of Texas' Gulf Coast, of Puerto Rico or of central Nigeria. Rather, it is to point out that the crisis of habitability signaled by global flooding will shape framings of the future. Global flooding is thus a "critical event" in Veena Das' sense of the term: events filled with a surplus of meaning that shape large historical processes and everyday life.⁴ Moreover, they are also events that fundamentally reshape the relationship between the local and the global.

What kinds of emergent policies, projects, discourses, beliefs, assumptions and anxieties follow in the wake, and in anticipation,

of global flooding is a question at the heart of an anthropology of the Anthropocene. On the one hand, it foregrounds the ways that capital and inequality continue to be central to discussions about climate change. This is dramatized in the differences of coverage of and response to different flooding events. On the other, it highlights the ways that the “nature” of global disasters must continue to be at the heart of our engagements with climate futures. Whether a single hurricane can be called anthropogenic may be up for debate,

but the kinds of infrastructure that do or do not exist to protect people from them are, decidedly, the result of social forces.

If anything, then, the devastation of 2017’s global flooding reaffirms a need for anthropological engagement with questions of disaster, climate and infrastructure. Yet it also foregrounds the need to reengage with and to question the stability of our categories for investigation. Much anthropological work on the Anthropocene has called for new tools to engage a changing world. The moment



Figure 3. Mangroves on the India-Bangladesh Border. Image: Jason Cons.

of global flooding that we are living through both affirms and raises questions about this proposition. On the one hand, the events unfolding around the globe in the flooding season of 2017 are understandable within long-standing contexts and modes of analysis. Central here are questions of abandonment, capital, neglect, marginality, vulnerability, nature and more. Yet, what has shifted, perhaps, is the terrain of engagement and our assumptions about it.

While much anthropological work has taken land and water as its object, increasingly we will need to turn our attention to the damp: swampy spaces where distinctions between land and water break down. Giorgio Agamben famously argued that the camp was the biopolitical paradigm of the modern — the space that opened up when the sovereign exception became the rule.⁵ Agamben's argument pointed us toward an examination of camps (concentration, detention, refugee, etc.) as spaces that illuminated essential, if troubling, conditions of modernity. If we are to make sense of the 2017 flood season, we might do well to consider the possibility of a different paradigm, one that emerges when the damp becomes the rule. That is to say, the biopolitical paradigm of the Anthropocene might be the swamp.

Notes

1. Roy Scranton, "When the Next Hurricane Hits Texas," *The New York Times*. October 7, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/opinion/sunday/when-the-hurricane-hits-texas.html?mcubz=0>.
2. Jason Cons, "Staging Climate Security: Resilience and Heterodystopia in the Bangladesh Borderlands," *Cultural Anthropology*, forthcoming.
3. Kasia Paprocki, "All That Is Solid Melts into the Bay: Anticipatory Ruination on Bangladesh's Climate Frontier," in *Frontier Assemblages: The Emergent Politics of Resource Frontiers in Asia*, ed. J. Cons and M. Eilenberg (London: Wiley, 2018).
4. Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).
5. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

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