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A New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma, and Community. By Kai Erikson

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that publishing companies even want to publish books written by native authors unless an author has won a Pulitzer prize or something. And that has to be in fiction. Their main response, in the native art arena, at least, is that their readers prefer the stuff written by non-Indians that describes, ad nauseam, the anthropologically correct Indian.)

Bibliographies are not novels, nor are they intended to be read for enjoyment by the lay person. This one is no exception. It is extremely dry reading, meant for the specialist only—who would, no doubt, disagree with this assessment.

Alfred Young Man
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A New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma, and Community. By Kai Erikson. W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. 263 pages. $22.00 cloth.

In 1973, Kai Erikson, a professor of sociology and American studies at Yale University, was invited by a law firm representing survivors of a devastating flood to visit Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, and investigate the sociocultural consequences of that disaster. Since then, he has traveled to a number of other disaster sites, usually to gather information for legal purposes. Most of these sites are not the results of "natural" disasters but of havoc wrought by human hands and, frequently, havoc involving toxins. *A New Species of Trouble* is a report and an admonition about this new sort of danger and its cultural implications.

A New Species of Trouble is arranged in chapters focusing on several different instances of modern trauma. These are not full-blown academic investigations but studies that Erikson calls "line drawings rather than detailed portraits" (p. 18). The specific cases studied are (1) the Ojibwa people of what is now northwestern Ontario, who have suffered chronic trauma since the European invasion, including the most recent horror—the contamination of the local waterway by methylmercury; (2) the town of Immokalee in South Florida, where a local concern embezzled thousands of dollars from migrant farm workers, most of them Haitians; and (3) East Swallow, a neighborhood in Fort Collins, Colorado, where thousands of gallons of gasoline leaked from "incontinent" tanks and now fill underground spaces beneath family homes, emitting

toxic vapors. Erikson also examines the nature of the traumas occasioned by homelessness, as well as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. Finally, he turns his attention to what he sees as a potential disaster in the making—the plan to create a permanent nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain, Nevada.

In the ancient world, Erikson writes, humanity feared natural disasters—famine, hurricanes, floods, fires, plagues. Yet, ironically, the technology that can give us some protection against these ancient scourges itself produces a "new species of trouble," disasters produced by human hands. This new species is marked frequently, though not always, by the involvement of toxins. Such disasters "contaminate rather than merely damage; they pollute, befoul, and taint rather than just create wreckage; they penetrate human tissue indirectly rather than wound the surfaces by assaults of a more straightforward kind. And the evidence is growing that they scare human beings in new and special ways" (p. 144).

Toxic disasters, unlike natural ones, have no clear limits in space and time. Sometimes their beginnings are silent; none has a definitive end: "Invisible contaminants remain a part of the surroundings, absorbed into the grain of the landscape, the tissues of the body, and, worst of all, the genetic material of the survivors" (p. 148). Victims experience a shattering of safety; their feelings of security are never again completely restored. They reach a heightened awareness of peril, but they also experience listlessness, numbness, and passivity, a dread of the ordinary, and a fear of the future.

The methylmercury that now pollutes the water source of the Ojibwa people is not the sole cause of their current misery. As Erikson details, before there was methylmercury, there was alcohol, which brought vast amounts of despair and interpersonal violence into the band. Before there was contamination of the water, there was a total reversal in living arrangements (from distanced habitations to close settlement), the institutionalized pollution of children's minds in European boarding schools, disruption of hunting and fishing patterns, and derogation of spiritual beliefs and practices. Erikson concurs with other outside observers that the Ojibwa are experiencing an almost unbearable condition of misery and a disabling loss of confidence in traditional cosmology. He notes that some observers believe there are some new "positive signs" of community resilience, but, unfortunately, he does not detail these in any way.

Like the Ojibwa, the people who live in the area around the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, also suffer from this new species of trauma, due not to the unremitting centuries-long assault on lifestyle and environment suffered by the Ojibwa, but to one "incident" in 1979 when the plant experienced a series of equipment failures and released radioactive steam into the atmosphere. Although this accident provoked outrage against human incompetence, as Erikson notes, it, like a flood, is "natural in the sense of being foreseeable, even inevitable." Machines suffer breakdowns, humans commit errors. And even though current expert opinion holds that there is no evidence of lasting physical damage, anxiety remains high among local residents. People fear that their lives will be cut short, that future generations will suffer, that the food supply is permanently compromised. The new consciousness is that the world is a place of constant peril and, moreover, that the accident at Three Mile Island is, as one observer put it, "the whispery omen of a hovering future" (p. 155).

One horrifying aspect for all life, present and future, is radioactive waste, generated not by accident but by perfectly functioning nuclear power plants. Much of the waste is lethal for at least ten thousand years. Ironically, the construction of nuclear power plants was made a national goal not so much for the generation of cheap and abundant electricity—which has been neither cheap nor abundant—but to counteract the deadly image of nuclear weaponry in the public mind and to provide some pleasant and productive associations with nuclear technology. Now, however, we must recognize the hidden morbidity of these plants and somehow cope with the enormous problem of toxic waste.

The current U.S. plan is to create a permanent depository for nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. The idea is that the wastes can be entombed safely deep under the earth and will remain undisturbed for the next ten millennia or so. Erikson asks for our profound doubt about that optimistic scenario. How can we be sure that the unmonitored wastes will not leak at some point into the groundwater? How can we ensure that, over that span of time, human beings will not disturb the site and cause a calamity? The whole enterprise is contingent upon the notion that one thousand feet underground is somehow outside the biosphere or environment—a highly suspect idea. Significantly, the site itself is claimed by the Shoshone and the Paiute, who view its use by the federal government as "willful trespass." These are also

peoples whose worldviews would prohibit such folly: "Native people are much more likely than Anglos to think of underground spaces as a living part of the human habitat. The very idea of injecting the most virulent poisons ever known into the body of a mountain seems to them an insult to the earth, an affront to ancestors, and a violation of natural good sense" (p. 209).

A New Species of Trouble is a gracefully written, thoughtful, and informative work. Erikson amply illustrates his observations with the voices of people from the affected communities and raises readers' awareness regarding the effects of such forms of trauma on consciousness, both individual and collective. As Erikson states, "the experience of trauma at its worst can mean not only a loss of confidence in the self but a loss of confidence in the scaffolding of family and community, in the structures of human government, in the larger logics by which humankind lives, and in the ways of nature itself" (p. 242).

This new species of trauma, then, seems to strike an apocalyptic note. Or does it? Erikson does not really say enough about the implications. Here and elsewhere, this work does not cohere completely, but remains a series of related essays without enough of a comprehensive overview of the historical antecedents or consequences of this phenomenon.

Reading this wor,k I was reminded of Paule Marshall's novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), a work concerning the devastations and endless trauma wrought by slavery and colonialism. Marshall opens the book with this African proverb: "Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end." Human-wrought, ineradicable, boundless disaster is perhaps not so new as Erikson suggests.

The contamination of the water source for the Ojibwa, though "new," is nonetheless a continuation of the genocide wrought by the European invasion (which Erikson unfortunately euphemizes as "contact"). Colonialism, genocide, slavery—all of these are human-wrought disasters with long-term, virtually endless traumatic effects. So, too, as Judith Herman reminds us in her work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), the private atrocities of rape, wife abuse, and incest constitute traumas that also shatter one's sense of safety, leave a feeling of contamination, ensure that the world is forever experienced as a place of constant

peril, and destroy trust in individuals and institutions and perhaps even in nature. Valuable as *A New Species of Trouble* is, I wish that Erikson had more fully contextualized the phenomenon of toxic trauma and articulated its implications.

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The Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, 1877–1900. By Orlan J. Svingen. Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1993. 197 pages. $22.50 cloth.

The writing of Cheyenne history and ethnography, a long and distinguished literary and scholarly tradition, has acquired a badly needed addition in Orlan J. Svingen's *The Northern Cheyenne Reservation, 1877–1900.* Svingen begins where many Indian studies end, at the establishment of the reservation community that would define the tribe's political and economic life for the next century.

In 1877, after repeatedly challenging federal authorities, the Northern Cheyenne found temporary homes on the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation in Oklahoma, at Pine Ridge in South Dakota, at Wind River in Wyoming, and at Fort Keogh, Montana, where some worked as scouts for the army. In 1880, Chief Little Wolf's murder of another Cheyenne resulted in his self-imposed exile from the Fort Keogh group, leading him to a homestead about six miles up Muddy Creek, a tributary of the Rosebud. Svingen remarks that the site appealed to Little Wolf as suitable for farming; tribal elders have told me that the lower Muddy was known to the Cheyenne as a place where the buffalo wintered; in any case, it was a known site, not randomly chosen as an alternative to Fort Keogh. The red hills and grassy valleys from the Bighorn to the Powder had been familiar to the Cheyenne for generations. Cheyenne activity in the region has been documented at least as early as 1820, and perhaps even 1806 or earlier. Unfortunately, Svingen never clearly states the precise argument regarding the Cheyenne claim.

As more Cheyenne began to homestead the Rosebud-Tongue region, cattlemen raised objections; the resulting struggle to legitimize the Cheyenne homeland lasted twenty years. In 1884, the Cheyenne received official permission to settle the