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# **Living through the Tsunami: Vulnerability and Generosity on a Volatile Earth.**

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## **Abstract**

How might geographers respond ‘generously’ to a disaster on the scale of the Indian Ocean tsunami? Critical geographers and other left intellectuals have chosen to stress the way pre-existing social forces conditioned human vulnerability, and have implied that ordinary people ‘here’ were implicated in the suffering of others ‘there’ through their positioning in chains of causality. Critics have also sought to expose the bias, unjustness and inappropriateness of post-tsunami patterns of donation and programs of aid and recovery. A supplement to this mode of critique is offered in the form of a view of disasters and human vulnerability that hinges on the idea of the self as ‘radically passive’: that is, as inherently receptive to both the stimuli that cause suffering, and to the demands of others who are suffering. All forms of thought – including geography and disaster studies should themselves be seen as ‘vulnerable’ and responsive to the impact of disasters. The idea that every ‘self’ bears the trace of past disasters – and past gifts of others – forms the basis of a vision of bodies and communities as always already ‘fractured’ by disaster – in ways which resist being ‘brought to light’. This offers a way of integrating human and physical geographies through a shared acknowledgement of what is unknowable and absent. It is also suggestive that gratitude might be an appropriate response to a sense of indebtedness to others – for who we are, as much as for what we have done.

**Keywords:** Tsunami; Disaster; Generosity; Vulnerability; Earth processes; Difference

## **1. Offering solace**

‘Warming oneself in the sun,’ Emmanuel Levinas (1969) once noted, is one of those small pleasures that make life dear to us (p. 112). To feel the warmth of the sun is to be exposed to a force other than ourselves, an energy we soak up and are enlivened by. It is through such ‘nourishments’, Levinas suggests, that we become who we are, even before we *do* things, before one is a self. To warm oneself in the sun is to receive a gift, the overflowing of energy from a ‘superabundant star’ that expects nothing in return, as another philosopher once put it (Nietzsche, 1961. p. 39). And as Nick Land adds, drawing on similar sources: ‘our bodies have sucked upon the sun long before we open our eyes’ (1992. p. 30). This is how we get a life, how we come to a love of life that is something more than simply loving ourselves or wanting to look after our own interests.

Perhaps this is why some of us go to such great lengths to secure a small patch of sunshine in which to sit back and do not a lot. Which is precisely what so many people were doing on the shores of the Indian Ocean around Christmas 2004 when the great waves generated by the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake rolled in.

They had found their place in the sun. Or rather, as is so often the case for those of us from cooler latitudes, they had claimed a place in someone else's sun. For while some reclined, others had work to do: the work of hosting, of making their visitors feel comfortable, relaxed, replete. As Georges Bataille (1988) proposes, it is not only plentiful sunshine - 'the flux and the fleeting play of light' - which makes for a pleasant stay, it is also a warm welcome - 'the passage of warmth or light from one being to another' (p. 94). Warmth, given and taken in pleasant and some not-so-pleasant ways, as we know. The industry that organises this movement of pleasure-seeking bodies and the care they receive along the way is now said to be the most lucrative on the planet. Like other sectors of a globalised economy, international tourism is premised on a set of carefully modulated transactions, hard currency in exchange for soft treatment. It's an economy that operates, at least according to its own premises, in an orderly, symmetrical, and mutually beneficial way - a conditioned and careful hospitality.

Shaky video images narrated in quivering voices record the moment on the morning of December 26 when this economy burst apart. The fabric of shared assumptions about what could be offered and what could be requested, where and when it should be supplied, and what its value should be unravelled abruptly. What was expected of a host and what was expected of a guest ceased to be apparent. And yet, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, perhaps even in its midst, as one set of relationships disintegrated, there were glimpses of another kind of being-with-others. A kind of 'throwtogetherness' amongst all the tearing apart, to borrow a term from Doreen Massey (2005: ch.13).

Many tourists, if they were lucky enough to be unscathed, joined the emergency relief effort. They may not have known exactly what to do, or even dressed appropriately while they were trying to do it, but they held out helping hands (Rigg et al, 2005). Some volunteered at hospitals and in morgues. Others handed over money, clothes and medicines at the hotels where they were staying (The Hindu, 2005). Or took up collections on return home, like the British tourist in Sri Lanka, carried several miles inland by surging waters, who set about fundraising for the people of the village where he finally came to ground (The Observer, 2005).

At the same time, people in the affected regions reached out to each other, across many kinds of barriers. Journalist Amit Varma (2005), who travelled through the state of Tamil Nadu in the days and weeks following the tsunami, posted a story on his weblog about a wedding in the Muslim village of Parangipettai, a ceremony which was postponed after the waves struck nearby Hindu villages. Mobilising under the Jamaat – their local organisation, villagers set out to help their neighbours.

They took all the veg biryani that had been prepared for the wedding feast, and went and fed it to the affected people. From that day until the day we met them, a week after the tsunami, they fed breakfast and lunch to the affected people, making either lemon rice or veg biryani. They mobilised their funds superbly, and were well networked through mobile phones. If any village ran short of food, one phone call was all it would take to bring a volunteer rushing over with more food... Interestingly, even after the government set up its own operation, a few days late, the local people still requested the Jamaat to keep feeding them, and the Jamaat agreed (unpag.).

In Malaysia, Alice Nah and Tim Bunnell (2005) report, news of the devastation across the strait triggered a new rapport in the previously fraught relationship between

Malaysian nationals and displaced people from Aceh province. Many Malaysians approached Acehnese refugees to offer consolation over the tsunami, and to discuss their more general predicament, while local Islamic groups worked with refugee community leaders to organise disaster relief. More generally, evidence and anecdote suggests that throughout the afflicted region, before organised relief arrived and sometimes well after the official relief effort was underway, it was neighbours and untrained local volunteers who provided vital assistance. As an Indian respondent reported in a review of the effectiveness of aid directly after the tsunami “All kinds of cooked food reached us and it was in excess,” (cited in Thomas and Ramalingam, 2005. p. 46).

Then there were the donations from the rest of the world, which UN emergency co-ordinators confirm were unprecedented in scale. Enough money was pledged by members of the public and by governments to cover the relief effort. More than enough, in some cases. Without even launching an appeal, the medical aid organization *Medecins Sans Frontieres* received so much money in the days following the tsunami that it had to stop accepting donations. When donors were asked if their offerings could be diverted to other humanitarian crises, over 99% agreed. From a total of around \$110 million received, this enabled some \$85 million to go to other sites of need, including Niger, Darfur and the Kashmir earthquake (Batha, 2005).

But perhaps the most remarkable stories are those of the hospitality extended by local people to their seasonal visitors. Returning travellers reported that amidst the collapse of the tourist infrastructure they were well looked after, or were treated even better than paying guests (BBC News, 2005). Many had been driven great distances by local people so they could reach airports to make their way home. And there were stories of locals who helped their visitors in the search to locate families and friends, even before they sought out their own loved ones. Warmth and light, it might be said, no longer traded but given freely between bodies.

As time passes and the relief and recovery effort comes under increasing scrutiny these earlier stories seem to belong to a more innocent age. But are they any less precious for that? My interest here is in the question of how to respond – as a social scientist – to the generosity elicited by the tsunami. How to respond in a way that does some sort of justice to these gifts and to the suffering which sparked them, in a way that respects ‘the disastrousness of disaster’ and the generosity of the gift (see Guyer, 2006. p. 90). If this calls, in the current context, for a ‘geography of generosity’ - an approach we might assume involves tracking, mapping and analysing causal chains of event and response, I like to think it also invites something else. Something we might simply call a ‘generous geography’.

Every discipline, I suspect, has an element of responsiveness, a desire to answer calls or address needs, nestled somewhere close to its core. But how each might bring this generous trace to the surface, how or to what extent it could make something more of it, undoubtedly varies across the board. In this paper I take it that a long term interest in understanding, mitigating and avoiding disasters is one of the generous inclinations that have helped shape geography. I also pick up the thread of a more explicit engagement with human vulnerability in some recent geographical writings, an emerging concern that is learning from and beginning to speak back to a number of other disciplines or intellectual lineages connected by an interest in the way embodied selves relate to each other. Such work addresses questions of how bodies suffer, how

their boundaries are breached and their bearings are lost, and how such events serve both to set people apart and throw them together.

While the uptake of these themes into geography has much to do with the discipline's current enthrallment with the body and all its constitutive practices, there is still much that could be said about the heterogeneous forces which act on and through living beings. Including, or especially, from my point of view, the role played by extreme geophysical events. Given the dual physical and human foci of their discipline, we might expect that geographers were hardly in need of the tsunami's terrible reminder of the forcefulness of earth processes. Or were they? In the first sections of this paper, I explore some responses by human geographers and fellow critical thinkers to the upheaval in the Indian Ocean, noting a strange, but not inexplicable, reluctance to credit our planet's physical forces with making a real difference to human life. In the following sections, drawing on recent and not-so-recent attempts to come to terms with our corporeal vulnerability, I look at some ways of writing the variability and volatility of geophysical processes into the bodying forth of selves or subjects. In this way, I begin to sketch out a 'generous geography' that might be worthy of the risks and potentials that come with living on shaky ground; a geography that takes to heart the vulnerabilities inherent in earthly existence, and understands itself to be vulnerable to this condition.

## **2. Finding fault**

There was no hesitation, by popular or academic commentators, in pronouncing the events of 26 December a disaster. Few felt the need to define 'disaster'. But beyond this basic consensus came a parting of ways. In the immediate aftermath of the waves, many broadcasters chose to emphasise the brute and indiscriminate power of nature (though most also noted the poverty prevalent throughout the afflicted zone). This 'act of God' storyline was shortly complemented by explanation from physical scientists concerning the dynamic of the tectonic fault-line, the magnitude of the quake, the speed and size of the tsunami, and the varying impact of the waves on different stretches of coast.

Almost as rapidly, 'critical' commentators from within and beyond the affected region made moves to query the 'naturalness' of the disaster and to recast the story in terms of socially-conditioned vulnerabilities.

Writing from within the US humanities, Kavita Philip and Usha Zacharias (2005) explicitly took issue with what they referred to as the 'default assumption': the idea that 'when nature strikes, the calculus of death is random'. Instead they pointed not only to the lack of adequate tsunami warning systems in the Indian Ocean, but to a burgeoning South Asian information and communication system geared for profit-making rather than protecting or enhancing human life. 'The information fiasco in the hour that preceded the waves that hit the Tamil Nadu coast was a classic case of the gaps - structural, not accidental - produced by neo-liberal underdevelopment', Philip and Zacharias concluded (unpag.). Taking ecological issues as his focus, New Delhi-based food and trade policy analyst Devinder Sharma (2005) stressed the harm done by the loss of natural environmental defence systems – specifically the sacrifice of mangroves in the interest of the coastal tourist development and shrimp-farming ventures. His verdict was that the disaster: 'was the outcome of an insane economic system - led by the World Bank and IMF - that believes in usurping environment, nature and human lives for the sake of unsustainable economic growth for a few'

(unpag.). For British political columnist Chris McLaughlin (2005), poverty was the 'common denominator' behind the human cost of this and so many other natural disasters. He proceeded to implicate the US and UK in arms trafficking to Indonesia and other repressive regimes in the affected region: a 'waste of resources which could better be used on social development and political cohesion' (p. 22).

As ways of explaining and accounting for the catastrophe proliferated, a number of geographers called attention to the integrative role their discipline might play - particularly with regard to working across the social and physical dimensions of the event (see Findlay, 2005., Hogan and Marandola, 2005., Philo, 2005., Greenhough, Jazeel and Massey, 2005). In the words of James Sidaway and Peggy Teo (2005), in an editorial for the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*: '26 December 2004 proved to be an astounding lesson in the interconnected physical and human geographies of the Indian Ocean. Topography and geology intersected with society, life and death....' They went on to invite the journal's potential contributors to 'go beyond the (dramatic and disturbing) immediate media coverage of the tsunamis, to unpick myriad geographies of the event, context and aftermath' (p. 1-2).

Well before the Sumatra-Andaman quake, geography had already claimed an exemplary and guiding role in the development of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of natural hazards and their impact. As Susan Cutter put it (2003. p. 6):

In addition to the obvious and considerable contributions from the nature-society interaction perspectives within the discipline (which gave rise to hazards research in the first place), geography has added a technological sophistication to hazards research that is unrivalled among the social sciences. The discipline is rapidly becoming the driving force behind vulnerability science.

However, alongside whatever 'technological sophistication' they might come equipped with, many geographers seem more eager to be identified with a 'critical' stance on hazard and vulnerability. Through a series of moves and junctures that have since been well documented, the geographical study of hazards has shifted away from the environmental determinisms that dominated discursive and practical engagements with extreme physical events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (see Emel and Peet, 1989). In their pioneering work on floods, in the middle of the last century, Gilbert White and his colleagues underscored the range of ways that individuals or communities interpreted and responded to hazards in their environment. While recognizing its advances, later researchers still found this approach overly managerialist or technocratic - too concerned with adjustment or adaptation of human populations to hazards and not concerned enough with the social processes that put people at risk (Pelling 2001., Mustafa, 2005).

The late 1970s and 80s saw the rise of geographical perspectives on hazards that viewed vulnerability as having at least as much to do with the conditions of everyday social life as with the specific physical events that triggered crisis situations. Drawing on Marxist political economy and other radical traditions, these new approaches demonstrated how specific patterns of socio-economic marginalization and powerlessness leave some people living and working in conditions of vulnerability to hazard which the relatively privileged have a much greater chance of avoiding. Surveying the field at the end of the 1980s, Jacque Emel and Richard Peet (1989.p.68) could assert that: 'the geography of social relations ... determines the occurrence and extent of natural disasters'.

A decade and half later, this notion of a physical trigger activating a set of pre-existing social vulnerabilities has become well entrenched amongst critical geographers. The tragedy in the Indian Ocean, closely followed by Hurricane Katrina afforded Neil Smith the opportunity to reiterate its premises (2005 unpag):

It is generally accepted among environmental geographers that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus.

In an editorial in *Society and Space*, Jim Glassman followed a similar line of reasoning, providing the details as they applied to tsunami's victims in the Indonesian province of Aceh (2005: p. 165-6):

...many of the population have lived in conditions of poverty or near-poverty throughout the years of economic boom. Those who lived in small coastal fishing villages eking out a living from the sea were among these, and their susceptibilities to an event like the tsunami are part and parcel of this poverty.

Having observed the burden of suffering falling most heavily on 'the poorest fishing communities in the most ramshackle of seaside dwellings', Chris Philo (2005. p. 443-4) couched it more questioningly. 'Why', he asked, 'is it these people, the planet's most vulnerable due to lacking resources available to others, who are so often the ones 'in the way?'

No-one here, we should note, is denying the magnitude of the geological trigger event. But it is clear that critical or radical geographers still feel obliged to push for the full recognition of the social preconditions of disaster. While such assertions are clearly in keeping with the cognitive and analytical styles characteristic of the modern social sciences, they also manifest the moral-political imperative that has long animated critical inquiry: that which we might call, in the simplest terms, a desire for justice. Benjamin Wisner expresses it succinctly: 'The people in the way whenever a real disaster happens, the poor, the weak, the hungry, deserve better' (cited in Philo, 2005. p. 444).

In an increasingly globalised world, this disposition towards justice more often than not takes the form of pointing to the connections through which some people, in some places do things which impact on other people in other places (Barnett and Land, 2007). In relation to the tsunami and other disasters, as Philo observes: 'the vulnerabilities endured by certain peoples and places are almost always *caused* in one way or another by the acts, malign or unthinking, of others in other sites' (author's italics, 2005.p. 450). And this indeed seems to be where critical geographers are in basic agreement with the various left-liberal commentators I cited above – each of whom seems to be suggesting that a great many of us are implicated in the Indian Ocean tragedy, whether it is as tourists, as consumers of shrimps or the products of the South Asian information revolution, as stakeholders in the arms trade, or as the beneficiaries of any other sector of the global neo-liberal economy.

Neither intent nor any particular resourcefulness, it appears, is required to purvey harm. As Clive Barnett (2006) observes, it is largely taken for granted amongst the

intellectual left that 'ordinary people' engaged in everyday activities are complicit with major power holders in the propagation of inequity and injustice. This too might be viewed as a 'default assumption', and it is one for which geographers tend to profess a special affinity, given their disciplinary aptitude for tracing connection and causality across distance (see Barnett, 2005., Barnett and Land, 2007). In this regard the critical geographical narrating of the tsunami tends to be one in which the event is an occasion for unmasking and disclosing a pre-existing nexus of less-than-desirable social and spatial interdependencies. A set of relationships, it is inferred, that can and should be changed – so that geographies of neglect or 'wounding' give way to geographies of solidarity and responsibility

### **3. Conditioning generosity**

The idea that the duty of critical intellectual activity is to reveal otherwise occluded chains of blame and complicity, as Barnett and Land (2007) would have it, carries with it the implication that most people, most of the time, are inadequately informed of the broader repercussions of their daily deeds. Not aware enough, that is, to feel any obligation to take appropriate remedial actions. Likewise, there is an insinuation that 'we' who are 'here,' habitually disregard the wellbeing of 'others' who are 'there'; an inference that commitment to caring drops away precipitously as it moves offshore or away from home.

But what happens when generosity takes on the guise of excessiveness, rather than insufficiency? And what if it can be seen to be reaching out across continents and oceans, in advance of any intellectual directives or critical admonitions? As we saw earlier, the recurring motif in reports on post-tsunami donorship is one of plenitude, in respect to local and international gifting alike. Earlier accounts of abundant hand-outs of food, superfluous distributions of used clothing and unrestrained monetary donations have since been appended by accounts of an oversupply of replacement fishing boats, of the doubling up of inoculations against infectious disease, and even of an overzealous gathering of information and testimonials from traumatised survivors (Tarrant, 2005., Batha, 2005., Waldman, 2005).

What should we make of this? Left-liberal commentators seem to have moved quickly to refit the moral geography of carelessness and culpability in order to contain the evidence of exorbitant generosity, as speedily as they moved to subvert the 'act of God' storyline. As soon as the extent of public donation and state pledges became apparent, critics raised the question of why this disaster had attracted so much attention, where no-less deserving causes had been left wanting. 'I am bewildered by the world reaction to the tsunami tragedy', wrote Terry Jones (2005 unpag) in an article entitled 'A man-made tsunami' in the UK Guardian a fortnight after the tragedy. 'Nobody is making this sort of fuss about all the people killed in Iraq and yet it's a human catastrophe of comparable dimensions'. As John Pilger (2005 unpag) put it, in the same week: 'The victims of a great natural disaster are worthy (though for how long is uncertain) while the victims of man-made imperial disasters are unworthy and very often unmentionable' 'The other tsunami is worldwide,' he continued 'causing 24,000 deaths every day from poverty and debt and division'.

Later, as the massive relief and recovery effort was subjected to assessment and scrutiny, left-liberal criticism became more pointed. As Mari Marcel Thekaekara put it bluntly in a report in the New Internationalist: 'The Tsunami tossed up unnecessary, conspicuous, vulgar spending' (2005. p. 21). International NGOs, in particular, have



come under assault for their insensitivity to local traditions and political complexities, for their lack of accountability and consultation with local representatives and for their aggressively self-promotional behaviour, while intervening state actors - both local and international - have been charged with capitalizing on crisis conditions to pursue unjust political and socio-economic agendas or to extend military presence in the region (Jeganathan 2006., Korf 2005, 2006., Glassman 2005., Nanthikesan, 2005). With some exceptions (Nah1 and Bunnell, 2005., Greenhough, Jazeel and Massey, 2005) most commentators have been reluctant to entertain any hope that responses to the tsunami may have opened up new possibilities or even had unforeseeable consequences, preferring to focus attention on the ways that the aid effort has reinforced existing structures of inequality and injustice. To return to Neil Smith's account.(2005 unpag):

In communities surrounding the Indian Ocean, ravaged by the tsunami of December 2004, the class and ethnic fissures of the old societies are re-etched deeper and wider by the patterns of response and reconstruction. There, "reconstruction" forcibly prevents local fishermen from re-establishing their livelihoods, planning instead to secure the oceanfront for wealthy tourists. Locals increasingly call the reconstruction effort the "second tsunami".

In this way, critical accounts of post-tsunami donation and aid tend to be continuous with the critique of the structural determinants of vulnerability. Patterns and levels of generosity are, unsurprisingly, attributed to the social location of actors, with the inference that they are distorted in some sense by slanted or occluded visions of global affairs. The implication is that potential donors or care-givers should have been better able to assess the situation, and weigh it against commensurate demands for assistance and attention. Along with reference to 'common denominators' or a 'social calculus' of vulnerability, the repeated invoking of an 'other tsunami' is suggestive that left-liberal intellectuals see the need for a kind of moral accounting at every stage of response to disaster. It infers that disasters unfold within an 'economy': a system that provides common ground for evaluating need and suffering; one that precedes, endures and postdates the particular crisis in question.

It is unlikely that there are thinkers who take vulnerability seriously who would deny its uneven social and geopolitical distribution. And it is just as unlikely that those who take the 'event' of generosity to heart would wish to elevate any aspect of giving or caring to a position above criticism. Who, after all, would not wish to learn from the preconditions and aftermath of this tragedy, so as improve their efforts to assist, now and in the face of disasters to come? But that does not mean we should be comfortable with every aspect of the critical responses we have witnessed, nor assume that they hold a monopoly on radical engagement with destruction and suffering. As I argue in the rest of this paper, there is a need for a supplement, for another kind of story. One that adds and amends but also disturbs the default assumptions of critical engagement.

I take inspiration from a very early response to the tsunami by US writer and activist Rebecca Solnit. Solnit rehearses much of the standard critical framing of the tragedy in the context of the structural conditioning of vulnerability, comparative expenditures and corresponding injustices. But then she steps away, and begins to question the appositeness of discourses of blame and accusation in a time of great loss, before moving on to test the limits of a certain kind of politically-committed critique. In her words (2005. unpag.):

The relief will be very political, in who gives how much and to whom it is given, but the event itself transcends politics, the realm of things we cause and can work to prevent. We cannot wish that human beings were not subject to the forces of nature, including the mortality that is so central a part of our own nature. We cannot wish that the seas dry up, that the waves grow still, that the tectonic plates cease to exist, that nature ceases to be beyond our abilities to predict and control. But the terms of that nature include such catastrophe and such suffering, which leaves us with sorrow not as problem to be solved but a fact.

Solnit has ventured here into the very terrain that so many geographers would willingly evacuate in the coming months and years. She has acknowledged the existence of forces which cannot be subsumed into the predominating model of social critique and the moral geography it imagines. In short, Solnit has identified a kind of excess, a remainder to the moral economy that equates the identification of causal connections with ethical obligation.

Such excess, as Rosalyn Diprose would have it, is not incidental. Rather, it haunts any mode of critical thought and practice which dreams of 'equal and harmonious forces'. Justice, conceived in this way, 'exists by marking itself off from an outside to which it is hostile (Diprose, 2002. p.33). In the case of morally and politically motivated social inquiry, the disavowed exterior is that which is not amenable to change, that which resists critical purchase. Such modes of inquiry tend to be too wary of the pathologies of 'othering' to commit themselves to outright exclusion, preferring to appear hospitable to that which it does not wish to assimilate. As a result, what could be most challenging or most perturbing is passed lightly over, while that which is seen to be conducive to critique and transformation assumes the full weight of attention.

What I have in mind as the object of critical thought's subtle disavowal is the contingency of events, especially those events which rock people's worlds to such an extent that they find it difficult to speak of them. It is those experiences, such as pain and suffering, which seem to resist being compared or catalogued or reduced to a calculus (see Wyschogrod, 1998. pp. 14, 45-6, Levinas, 1987. p.69). And it is a vulnerability which, as Solnit noted, may be reduced or deferred, but is never overcome: a susceptibility that is not simply a failing, a structural fault, or a surmountable hurdle, but is a part of our all-too-humanness. What is being passed over, or too hastily absorbed and processed, I want to argue, is not simply 'nature' – which is often well understood and deeply assimilated into political struggles. But it does include some of the things that natural forces can do: what they can do, in particular, to soft and fragile bodies. And it includes something of how we respond; how the demands of others who have suffered unspeakable events come to 'get under our skin' (Diprose, 2002, p. 132).

In the following section, I return to the question of what is disastrous about the disaster, and what it means to be a vulnerable being. The disaster, I suggest, has a remainder, something which exceeds the calculus of justice and the moral economy of critical social thought. Or rather, the disaster *is* this remainder. And this has repercussions, not simply for the way we think *about* disasters or *about* vulnerability, but for how and why we think at all.

#### **4. Writing disastrously**

What happens when a world - loved and accepted - betrays a basic trust? 'Before the tsunami the sea was my friend, my livelihood, the backdrop to my life' recounts Arjunan, a fisher from Tharangambadi village in Tamil Nadu. 'Now if there is even a slight storm I become afraid that the same thing might happen again' (cited in Kwatra, 2005: p.10). Some of what people lose when disaster strikes, what they miss and what they mourn seems to slip through the grids of intelligibility spun by conventional social analysis, particularly where research agendas and theoretical speculation chose to prioritise the things these people were already deprived of even before the event.

However, recent work in geography and neighbouring disciplines has begun to give more attention to the lived experience of disaster, to the existential and ontological dimensions of acute human suffering. 'Disaster', Kenneth Hewitt observes (1997, p. 41) 'is a disruption and unraveling of spatial or geographic order'. Victims of upheavals and catastrophes, he suggests, lose their sense of temporal continuity and spatial belonging. They come to feel like strangers – not because they have left home and entered someone else's world, but because their own world has left them. They feel estranged from others who have not endured what they have lived through. But more than this, they feel estranged from themselves. As one traumatised survivor of a disaster put it: 'I couldn't stand any more. It was like something was wiped over me and made me different' (cited in Erikson, 1994, p.231).

The idea that the disaster is an event that makes a difference might seem to go without saying. No-one doubts that victims of disaster are transformed: loss of life, loss of loved ones, loss of livelihood and possessions are routinely taken into account by disaster managers and hazard theorists alike. But what kind of difference does the disaster make? Is it really 'difference' if we conceive of the disaster as a making manifest of vulnerabilities that could and should have been visible prior to the event; if the disaster serves primarily to reveal, re-inscribe and retrench pre-existing hierarchies and structures? And for whom is it a disaster, if in the very event of disrupting and unravelling a spatial or geographic order, it turns out to authorise the discourse that speaks of disruption and unravelling of spatial and geographic orders? What kind of difference is it if the writer, the theorist, the researcher - and the stories they tell - remain out of the reach of the disaster's shockwaves; if the darkness that descends on the victim is reflected as light in the eyes of the critical commentator?

Like many other social scientists, researchers specialising in disasters are now reasonably comfortable with the idea that a perfect mapping of their findings onto the complexities of the real world is an unattainable goal. Susan Cutter characteristically acknowledges that 'uncertainty' is part of the reality of physical and social worlds (2003, p. 6). But in keeping with the general tenor of disaster studies, she retains a confidence that ever more integrated approaches will continue push back the boundaries of the unknown and the unpredictable (cf Findlay, 2005, p. 434). From another direction which builds on the insights of Actor Network Theory, John Law (2000) makes much more of the inevitable failure of organizational and representational systems to capture and contain the complex concatenations of events that constitute disasters. And he goes on to attest to the failure of words, to the gap that inevitably opens between traumatic experiences of disaster 'on the ground' and forms of narration that seek to order and make sense of these events (Law and Singleton, 2004). Chris Philo (2005) continues this reflexive turn. Beginning his meditation on the geography of vulnerability by rehearsing what I have taken to be a fairly conventional critical position on identifiable chains of causality and culpability,

he then veers dramatically to consider 'our own intellectual vulnerability' in the face of the disasters that call for our attention.

What, then, if we were to put the disaster up front, upstream instead of downstream, to see it as inaugurating rather than derivative? (see Iyer, 2003, p. 46). What if we were to view shock, loss and disorientation not simply as what might happen to a fully-fledged self or a subject, but as part of the formation - the advent - of selves or subjects? And what if a certain vulnerability were not just something which could befall a researcher or writer, but the very engendering of thought and its projects? This is a challenge taken up recently by Paul Harrison (2007a, 2007b, forthcoming). 'Disastrous' in intent, if not content, his take on the geography of vulnerability digs deeply into an intellectual tradition that has thus far remained largely untapped in disaster studies; that lineage that constitutes the embodied subject in terms of its susceptibility to wounding, its receptivity to others, its 'radical passivity'. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot and others, Harrison takes issue with the predominance of an active, intentional and deliberating subject in contemporary geographical and other social scientific thought: a prioritisation which reduces vulnerability to a 'weakness to be overcome', or at best to junior partner or adjunct of purposive action. 'Exposure, susceptibility, receptivity,' he counters, 'these are not attributes which are added to the subject later on as it were, even less are they abilities which are flexed, rather they define the subject in its incipient natality' (2007a, forthcoming).

Without denying that subjects are always already entangled in relational webs, Harrison looks to the often overlooked moment of the tear in this net, the interruption of relations which is effected by suffering – the unravelling which is the disaster (2007b, forthcoming). Rather than seeing such suffering as signifying or proving anything beyond itself, he follows Levinas in viewing it in all its singularity, as a body's unique and incomparable experience of its finitude in the face of what is visited upon it. Likewise taking a more ontological approach, though drawing on different theoretical traditions, sociologists Anthony Elliott and Bryan Turner delve into the somatic dimensions of human frailty. 'We are prone to wounding', they write, 'because our nervous systems connect us to the outside world with a plethora of pathways to bring us information about our immediate environment but these pathways are also the conduits of our pain and suffering' (2003, p.134). But it might be added, with the thought of Levinas in mind, that the same pathways and conduits that expose our own senses to the flood of painful sensation also lay us open to the suffering of others, whose cries or grimaces may be no less amenable to blocking out or shutting down than any other sensory assault. It is in this way that we find ourselves, prior to any intent or deliberation, 'afflicted' by the plight of another, an affliction that can upset the contours of our world, just as our own pain does.

Following Levinas, Harrison views the radical passivity of this receptivity of one to another, as 'the very event of inter-subjectivity', the scene in which selfhood is constituted through the encounter (2007b, forthcoming). What forges and discloses selfhood, is this experience of being for-another. This is a relation of proximity, in which one is so close as to be moved or touched by the other, close enough to be drawn into extreme intimacy by the feeling of an obligation to do something for the one who appears in need. But it is, at the same time, a relationship characterised by an unbridgeable, unfathomable distance, given that the self knows that it has not lived through, cannot know what it is to live through, the experience of the other to whom they have come to feel bound (see Derrida, 1998, p. 124). In Levinas's own words (1987: 78-9): 'the encounter ...at once gives and conceals the Other'. As Barnett

(2005) has stressed, what Levinas means by proximity or distance in this context is not a simple, measurable degree of spatial contiguity but a more complex sense of difference that manifests itself through an unsurpassable rupture in the continuity of space and time (see Levinas, 1991, p.82). It is about the formation of a bond, a relation that enfolds within itself the condition of strangeness, the non-relation of unshared and incommunicable experience, even as it opens up the very possibility of being-together. Communication, caring, friendship, love - all the basic load-bearing structures of social existence – are made possible by the passivity of an opening of one to another.

Thinking through radical passivity does not offer a template of what to do in a predicament like the tsunami, it does not seek to provide normative injunctions about responsibility in the face of suffering, or guidelines to any discipline setting out to chart the contours of vulnerability and generosity. What it does do is to draw attention to the limits of 'bringing to light' what is happening at the scene of trauma or pain, while at the same time attesting that there is hope in this unknowing. It affirms that in the very impossibility of containing or rendering transparent the encounter with otherness lies the essential openness of the future – the very possibility of being-together with others and being-together otherwise. As Blanchot reminds us, the literal meaning of *dis-aster* is the loss of a star, or the parting from one's guiding light, a loss which is also, paradoxically, a gift (1995, pp. 2, 48). This loss of clarity, for him, is also a disaster for knowledge, confronting us with the inevitable inadequacy of writing, its failure to measure up to, capture or keep pace with the event. But for Blanchot and Levinas alike, the encounter with what is outside of thought – the shock of unknowing when faced with need of the other - is what propels us to try and make sense of the world. 'This incomprehensibility', as Jacques Derrida (1978 p. 98) puts it, 'is not the beginning of irrationalism but the wound or inspiration which opens speech and then makes possible every logos or every rationalism'.

For any mode of intellectual endeavour that feels itself drawn into engagement with the disaster, then, it cannot ever simply be a question of what this discipline or field, or school has to offer those in need. As Chris Philo (2005) cautions - drawing on the work of anthropologist Veena Das, a body of thought that knows too well in advance of the event what it has to give runs the risk of expecting something back for its offerings, a stake in the field, a consolidation of disciplinary authority (see Das, 1995). Those of us who do academic work, then, would do well to listen to local critics of relief projects in the Indian Ocean who took offence at the way that some international NGOs seemed to be using their foothold in the disaster zone as a platform for self promotion. If an intellectual response is indeed a reply to a summoning, if it is an offer of a guiding light, then it is also inevitably, a working in the dark. Not so much a pronouncing or a professing, as a dispossessing of one's body of knowledge, a calling into question through coming up against the secrets and silences of alterity (see Levinas, 1969, p. 171., Blanchot, 1995, pp. 49-50., Diprose, 2002, p.141).

## **5. Unearthing difference**

As Sidaway and Teo so aptly put it, the tsunami was 'an astounding lesson in interconnected physical and human geographies'. But perhaps our task is not only to unpick geographies of the event, but to recognize where our own geographies get unpicked, dispossessed, disorientated by events. To acknowledge where nets unravel, fractures open and silences yawn. In a prominent strain of moralising the geographical

imagination, I have been suggesting, the differential force of volatile earth processes, while routinely acknowledged, are effectively 'neutralised' on account of their resistance to a certain kind of political and ethical purchase. More empiricist approaches to disaster study, on the other hand, are more likely to highlight the hybrid physical and social causation of naturally-triggered disaster: a hybridity which is construed as messy and complex but ultimately conducive to understanding through an integrative analysis. Such integration depends on the assumption that each of the strands it engages with can find its own means of being 'brought to light'; that each constitutive element of the disaster can be made to submit to translation and expression at the hands of its requisite disciplinary or sub-disciplinary specialism.

In the shadows of a 'radically passive' take on disaster and suffering, I want to explore another kind of 'integration' between human and physical geography, one which hinges less on the possibility of a shared knowing than on the condition of a common unknowability. A common fracturing. 'We happen as the opening itself, the dangerous fault line of a rupture' writes Jean-Luc Nancy (2000, p xii) in a characteristic expression of a 'radically passive' notion of the self. The perviousness of any self or body to the disruptive forces around it is often evoked in such geomorphological terms: in figures of fault and fissure, upheaval and seismic shift, rift, chasm, fracture and abyss. There will undoubtedly be other explanations for this wordplay, but I prefer the simple one. Forces which destroy and dis-member on a grand scale get re-membered, they get written into collective memory. In this way they form a reservoir of images to express whatever disturbs and disorients. And this includes expressing themselves - for of course, earth-shattering disturbances remain with us.

I want to come back to bodies. To what happens not only when bodies meet other bodies, but when they face other physical forces; when flesh encounters rock or water or wind. Levinas, as Harrison would have it, is not simply or even primarily a philosopher of ethics, so much as a philosopher of corporeal existence (2007a forthcoming, cf Shildrick, 2002, p.101). He philosophizes about what bodies can do and how they become what they are. If each of us becomes who we are through our liaison with other bodies, an idea of Levinas's developed in depth by Rosalyn Diprose, then the embodied selves we are at any moment are indebted to the bodies around us, and to who have come before us. What Diprose refers to as 'corporeal generosity'... 'is a writing in blood that says this body carries a trace of the other' (2002, p.195). This debt, all that we have borrowed, absorbed, appropriated from others, is too diffuse and too deeply secreted to ever be subjected to calculation (Diprose, 2002, p. 54., Butler, 2004., p. 46., Chalier, 2002, pp.118-9). The past, conceived of in terms of an abundance of encounters with alterity is destined to remain 'immemorial, unrepresentable, invisible' (Levinas, 1998, p.11).

But is this unfathomable past simply a matter of give and take between *bodies*? While he is careful not to posit a ground which is more primordial than the experience of proximity with another being, Levinas constantly alludes to the elemental forces which both nourish and perturb corporeal life. As I suggested at the outset, he acknowledges the importance of the energies which sustain life; 'fuels' which are not simply functional necessities but are part of the 'plenitude of existing' (Levinas 1969, pp.110-3,) However, there is also an intimation that such forces have a capacity to undermine and overwhelm human life, and in so doing expose the finitude of the human. Thus Levinas directs our attention '...behind the form which light reveals into that materiality which...constitutes the dark background of existence' (cited in Iyer, 2003, p 51).

For Levinas, it is the invitation into the insoluble mystery of another body that brings a warm breath of infinitude - a whiff of the beyond, the unfinished, the forever in-creation - which is always already prising open the human experience of finitude. (see 1969, pp. 207). Levinas's contemporary Georges Bataille (1988, 1991), as we have seen, also appreciates the generous and generative receptiveness of one body to another, but he makes much more of the naked exposure of every living being to the volatility of the cosmos. It is not so much the summons from the other who has suffered a disaster that stymies our plans, as Bataille would have it, as it is the unpredictable, unintelligible movements of earth and sky themselves. All plans, projects, intellectual ventures included, are at the mercy of elemental forces beyond our control. In the words of Nick Land (1992, p.32), Bataille - as a writer, a thinker - feels himself to be living on '...the molten terrain of a dark communion, binding him to everything that has ever convulsed upon the earth'. For Bataille, then, a glimpse of our infinitude, our continuity with the rest of existence, comes in the moment we encounter material forces which overpower us. As he declares (1988.p.95): 'the complex, the gentle, the violent movement of worlds will make of your death a splashing foam. The glories, the marvels of your life are due to this resurgence of the wave which was tied in you to the immense sound of the cataract of the sky'.

Coursing through the work of Nietzsche, Bataille and Gilles Deleuze, amongst others, is a boisterous strain of thought which posits a 'monstrous' cosmos: a dynamic and changeable universe that impacts upon embodied human existence. Impacts immediately, that is, without the necessary intercession of 'the social' that human geographers and fellow social scientists routinely demand. Thus Deleuze (1994, p. 219), in an early work invokes a 'turning and wounding gravitation capable of directly affecting the organism'. In later writings he goes on to explore the interplay of multiple and heterogeneous 'strata', including the biological, the geological and the cosmic, which are each credited with the capacity to intervene in human life - in any order, in any combination, with or without socio-cultural mediation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.69).

Written in a very different register, but with some convergent implications, there is a proliferating body of scientific and archaeological literature which argues for the episodically decisive role of cataclysmic terrestrial and extraterrestrial events on the course of human history (see Palmer, 2003, see also Clark, 2005). In a different register again, and with a political sensibility usually lacking in research which affords a constitutive social-historical role to geophysical events, Mike Davis (1998, 2001) has built up an impressive body of work exploring the momentous ways in which the periodicities and singularities of dynamic earth processes can intersect with the changing trajectories of social life. Deliberately inverting the directional flow of conditionality so often taken for granted in social science or cultural studies, he concludes that (2001, p.279): 'there is an extraordinary amount of hitherto unnoticed environmental instability in modern history'.

In the process of excavating overlooked convergences of physical and social forces, Davis (2001) also opens a window on human suffering of almost unspeakable scales and intensities. Suffering we might say, that can and should be made more visible, but which nonetheless defies comprehension. And it is in this regard that, without necessarily returning to a deterministic or transparent model of the social, we might revisit the notion of a generative but enigmatic opening of selves: one that happens 'upstream' of the emergence of discernible socio-cultural identities and structures. Levinas's English translator, Alphonso Lingis, an innovative theorist of corporeal

existence in his own right, has sought to merge the idea a constitutive vulnerability and receptivity to other beings with an ontology of carnal openness to an excessive materiality. In a fertile fusion of ideas from Levinas and Bataille, Lingis has human beings acquiring their sensibilities and dispositions not only from other people and other life-forms but also from their encounters with a geophysical otherness. 'Emotions', he muses (2000, p.18): 'get their force from the outside, from the swirling winds over the rotating planet, the troubled ocean currents, the clouds hovering over depths of empty outer space, the continental plates shifting and creaking....'

Effectively, Lingis sheds the residual religious overtones from Levinas's epiphany of the 'shimmer of infinity' glimpsed in the face of the other, in favour of more earthy excesses. 'We face each other', he announces, 'as condensations of earth, light, air, and warmth'<sup>1</sup> (1994: 122). His is a vision of geomorphological processes, elemental reactions and cosmic energies not as the *arche* or substrate of identity but as active, ongoing forces of differentiation: a perspective which appears to be less a smuggling back in of environmental determinism than an abyssal opening of alterity into a groundless materiality (see Kearnes, 2003). Or what we might see as Derrida's (1981: 333-4) sense of the: 'bottomless, endless connections and ...the indefinitely articulated regress of the beginning' pushed to its logical outcome. And just as the generousities of intercorporeality keep their secrets, their 'incalculable remainder, so too would it seem that the 'gifts' of materiality retain their enigma, their 'elemental obscurity' (Diprose, 2002, p 54., Iyer, 2002, p.10).

Taking our cues from Lingis, then, it might be said that when a 'you' and an 'I' face each other over the insuperable divide of the tsunami - or any other disaster, large or small - we not only enact something entirely novel, we also each bring with us the residue of our past calamities. We are the storms we have weathered, the quaking of the earth we have ridden out, the infections we have stomached. We are an immensity of small sedimentary changes, punctuated by episodes of upheaval. And we are also the bodying forth of all the guidance and help that has allowed us to live through the tsunami, droughts, fires and hurricanes of our past, generousities that may have enabled some of us to live on at the expense of others.

It is not simply that these traces may be too deeply buried to unearth, too snarled to tease out and untangle. It is also that they are as much about what is not there, what will never be, as they are about truths hidden within. Who we are, what we have become, the relations that have shaped us, are haunted by absences, by the non-relation we have with all those others who could not be-together with us: the ones who did not survive or never had a chance to be born, the communities that were extinguished, the evolutionary lineages that flickered out. This is the past that was never present: 'the past (that) once was its future possibles, not those that can be realized but those that could have been realized' (Wyschogrod, 1998, p.173).

In this way, the disaster – or what she refers to as 'the cataclysm' - always already fissures our everyday existence, historian Edith Wyschogrod insists (1998). Whether we are conscious of it or not, it leaves its trace in our communal life, our historical narratives, our modes of reasoning (Wyschogrod, 1998: xvi, 154). The kind of disaster which concerns me here irrupts at the juncture between vulnerable bodies and a volatile cosmos, leaving its mark on a human history that always, inevitably, enfolds something of its unruly exterior. It is a 'disruption and unraveling of spatial or geographic order' which can never be wholly re-raveled or restored, nor clearly unpicked and untangled. This does not mean that we should abandon the quest to merge the analytical resources of human and physical geography, it does not imply



that we should cease our efforts to reach an integrative understanding of the heterogeneous causes that gave rise to the event we designate a disaster. But it does suggest that this project has an enigmatic engendering, that its genesis lies in a receptiveness to alterity that itself escapes the rigorous and critical imperatives of analysis. It intimates that thought is a gift of the disaster, and that it preserves within itself something of this disastrousness. And it implies that human and physical geography need to supplement their analytical collaboration with another kind of liaison: one that bears witness to the gaps, ruptures, and non-relations that run through and between both halves of the discipline. The physical and the human, not simply linked by identifiable causal connections, but by absences and unknowables that 'fissure' their way across disciplinary divides.

How then to proceed, once we have situated ourselves on the edge of conceptual and literal abyss? How to go on responding to the singularity of December 26 2004?

## **6. Expressing gratitude**

A rapid assessment report on the tsunami jointly produced by the Sri Lankan Green Movement and a UK-based academic disaster and development research centre began with the following words, which preceded an announcement that the information they were providing was free for anyone to reproduce, by any means, for whatever purpose they wished:

The Disaster Management and Information Programme firmly understand that every one has drunk from other people's wells and has been nourished by other people's ideas, and therefore is happy to feed the hunger or satisfy the thirst of people they may or may not ever encounter (DMIP, 2004. p.3)

Generosity, in whatever medium it appears, begins with a welcome. Such generosity nourishes itself on gratitude (Frank, 2004, p.142). And gratitude is boundless. Beneath the flow of words is the tapping of water from another's well, the well which is topped up by countless drops of rain percolating through the pores of the soil and the silent ebb of subterranean streams.

Gratitude is an outflowing of enjoyment in existence, a flow we cannot consciously turn on or off, any more than we can decide not to feel the pain that seeps through the receptors and pathways of our nervous system. Gratitude just happens, though all the effort that has been devoted to theorizing a non-indifference to the pleasure and pain of others suggests a sly hope that its passage might be smoothed. Levinas (1989. p. 82) writes of the gratitude we might come to feel for our 'place in the sun' - as a kind of incalculable indebtedness to all those others who have cleared paths for us or forsaken their own claim to the warmth and light we currently enjoy. Perhaps, in a more or less diffuse way, this is how some visitors felt about their hosts - before the waves surged across the beaches and through the hotel gardens and foyers. What floats gently beneath the surface of accounts of the tragedy by tourists is an appreciation for the hospitality they received - before, as well as after, the tsunami. It is a warmth of feeling that seems superfluous to the contractual obligations that, as any clearheaded analysis would tell us, structure the tourist economy. As if these guests simply felt gratitude for having shared someone else's sun, and thankful for the support and sustenance that made this possible. As well as just being grateful to be alive.

To take into account the unaccountability of generosity and gratitude is not to ignore those aspects of our relatedness to others that we can calculate - that we can measure up and find wanting. In fact, as Derrida (1995) and others have argued, responsibility demands such an accounting, in order that it is effective, that it does what it wants to do for those it wishes to help (see also Spivak, 1994). It is just that any generosity worthy of the name demands more than this. It demands that we accept responsibility not just for what we have done – or what can be proven or pointed out that we have done – but for who we are. And how we became who we are (see Gatens and Lloyd, 1999, p. 81., Massey, 2004, pp. 9-10., Chalier, 2002, p.123). 'To be responsible is always to have to answer for a situation that was in place before I came on the scene' as Lingis (1998 p. xx) would have it. 'Responsibility is a bond between my present and what came to pass before it'.

What came to pass before the tsunami is both known and unknowable, comprehensible and unfathomable. How some of us came to be reclining on distant beaches, or had money and wardrobes of clothes to give, can be explained in terms of global economies whose flows can be identified and computed. But these economies, which can be disastrous even in their smooth operation, have other disasters lodged deeply and not so deeply in their histories. They have taken advantage of trauma and disorientation, reaped benefits from the moments when other bodies have been wounded and weakened by forces beyond their control. And they have also been the beneficiaries of generous receptions. The very fact that today's economies have become globalised, the precondition to the casual itinerancy enjoyed by international tourists, rests in part on the guidance and sustenance offered historically by a host of local peoples to those who would make the whole surface of the planet their space of mobility. Before anything resembling an economy can establish itself, there must be what Diprose (2002, p. 141) refers to as 'a gift of the possibility of a common world'. A gift which enables those far from home to survive in zones and latitudes which might otherwise prove disastrous for them.

From the perspective of a 'generous geography', then, we might view globality itself as revolving around innumerable gifts and receptions. That all the earth's surface now presents itself as potential places in the sun, for a few of us at least, is something for which we could feel a vast and immeasurable gratitude. A gratitude expressed as generosity in times of need; in the face of disasters both chronic and sudden. And this generosity, we need to acknowledge, will fall short, overshoot or stray from its target, this being the inevitable fate of the gift in all its guises (Frank 2004, p.2). To front up to the inherent insufficiency of giving is also to invite a response from those who are on the receiving end, such as we have heard from individuals and communities afflicted by the tsunami. For if generosity is truly an opening of oneself, then it also makes the one who gives vulnerable. The donor too must be prepared to feel hurt, to be chastened, criticised, even rejected. Only in this way might they - we - learn to give responsibly, as well as responsively.

Such lessons, painful and searching, are the gift of the disaster - the event which ends the world and starts it turning anew. 'The disaster', which, in the words of Blanchot (1995, p.1), 'ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact'

*It was such a strange day. The sun was shining and it was warm. Then the tsunami came and destroyed everything. Afterwards when I looked out across the wasteland, I couldn't help thinking that it was strange that the sun was still shining.*

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Aside from its Levinasian inflection, the formulation draws almost verbatim on a passage from Gilles Deleuze which reads 'We are made of contracted water, earth, light and air - not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed' (1994, p.73)

<sup>2</sup> Cited in British Red Cross (2005, p. 6)