

# into the fire

Disaster and the Remaking of Gender

SHELLEY PACHOLOK

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## INTO THE FIRE

### Disaster and the Remaking of Gender

In August 2003, one of the largest wildfires in Canadian history struck near Kelowna, British Columbia, and the surrounding Okanagan Valley. The fire covered over 25,000 hectares and the devastation was unprecedented: millions of dollars in property were lost, 26,000 people were forced from their homes, and much of the historical and natural landscape was destroyed.

Environmental disasters occur with increasing frequency around the globe. The enormous consequences of these catastrophes are well documented, especially the economic, human, and physical tolls that are wrought on the stricken communities. *Into the Fire* looks at the social and political dimensions of disasters – including social inequality, power relations, and possibilities for change – focusing on the Kelowna fire and how gender relations were simultaneously sustained and disrupted among those who fought the fire. Shelley Pacholok demonstrates that crises like this provide fertile ground for studying many aspects of social organization, as well as challenge common assumptions and ideologies related to gender. Drawing on media accounts and interviews with firefighters, Pacholok examines not only the experiences and portrayals of male firefighters, but also those of women taking on “masculine” tasks and responsibilities such as repair, rescue, and income-generating activities. Thoughtfully engaging yet theoretically sophisticated, *Into the Fire* reveals how disasters bring traditional patterns of gender relations to light and often serve as catalysts for social change.

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## Preface

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Disasters are an increasingly regular occurrence in the global landscape. The Indian Ocean tsunami, the Haitian and Chilean earthquakes, the Tohoku (Japan) triple disaster, Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, the Russian heatwave and fires, and Superstorm Sandy provide but a few examples. The devastating consequences of these catastrophes are well documented, especially the economic, human, and physical tolls that are wrought on the stricken communities. Recent discussions in critical disaster scholarship focus on the *social* causes of disasters, arguing that these events are neither natural nor inevitable but are the result of the political choices made about people, land, and other resources (Mileti 1999; Schuller 2008). Many predict that global warming, rapid urbanization and development, increasing population and wealth, environmental degradation, and neoliberal policy reforms will increase the frequency and intensity of disasters as well as their human and economic costs (Briceno 2009; Brunsma, Overfelt, and Picou 2007; Enarson 2000; Enarson and Hearn Morrow 1998b; Etkin 1999; Quarantelli, Lagadec, and Boin 2006; Wisner 2009). These risks are borne disproportionately by poor people the world over (Beck 2006; Lewis and Kelman 2012). Attending to the social and political dimensions of disasters – including social inequality, power relations, and possibilities for change – is of crucial importance as we turn the page on one of the deadliest disaster years in recent decades. It is to this task that I turn my attention here, exploring the ways in which relations of power and social inequalities are manifested in the wake of disaster – in particular, the possibilities for disrupting the everyday production of gender.

Before proceeding further, I must explain how I came to this rather weighty topic. Feminists have long maintained that personal histories

and positionalities necessarily inform the work that researchers do. In the interest of honouring this reflexive tradition, I disclose at this early juncture my interest in disasters as more than purely academic; I have a personal connection to catastrophic events, one that began somewhat serendipitously almost twenty-five years ago.

## **Black Fridays**

*Edmonton, Alberta, 31 July 1987*

The heat and humidity were stifling; the sky, a greenish hue. The weather was odd, I thought, as I rushed to pack my bags for a weekend trip. I planned to leave after work that day, and as I navigated the free-way traffic on my way to the office, my thoughts turned to the weekend ahead. I was upbeat, carefree, and, like most twenty-somethings, blissfully unaware of my own mortality.

In the early afternoon a thunderstorm watch morphed into a severe thunderstorm warning, and then, at three o'clock, a funnel cloud appeared south of the city. Sequestered in my cubicle and unaware of the ominous forecast, I waited impatiently for the workday to end so that I could commence my long drive. Less than thirty minutes later I was sprinting to the back of the building in an attempt (slightly misguided) to protect myself from what I would later learn was an F4<sup>1</sup> tornado. With only seconds to spare, I dashed into a small office in the centre of the freight dock and scrambled under a desk. I crouched in fear, waiting as one waits for the impact of a bone-breaking fall. Without warning the power went out, leaving the office cloaked in darkness.

The building took a direct hit. As the tornado passed overhead, the roar was deafening – louder than a jumbo jet and infinitely less familiar. The sound enveloped my body, vibrating, pulsing in its intensity, and then there was silence.

When I opened my eyes, I saw only sky. The roof had vanished, ripped from the steel beams, now grotesquely twisted, that had once supported it. Looking down, I saw my coffee cup, somehow intact and clutched tightly in my hand. I gingerly pressed my fingers to my scalp; I could not tell where my hair ended and the mud began. I stood up. My clothes were soaking wet, the fabric impregnated with mud (I remember exactly what I was wearing, right down to my shoes). Bits of detritus were embedded in my skin, but I was not injured. Some of my colleagues were not as fortunate, having been tossed like twigs from

the building, trapped under the weight of the roof's steel beams, or wounded by flying debris.

As I tried to make sense of the scene before me, I realized I was not alone. A co-worker who had also sought shelter in the office helped me to scramble through a shattered window. With two colleagues I manoeuvred my way around a broken concrete slab to terra firma. I began to walk away from the building, wading through ankle-deep water and climbing over rubble as I went. The parking lot, now a misnomer, was devoid of vehicles. I quickly scanned the perimeter. My car was nowhere in sight. Live electrical wires lay on the wet asphalt like poisonous snakes. A broken propane line hissed angrily, spewing its noxious fumes into the damp, thick air. I waited there, for how long I do not know. Never in my life have I so desperately wanted to get away from a place. Eventually I was offered a ride in the back of a pickup truck to a nearby residence. In haste I took it.

That day, forever known to locals as Black Friday, Edmonton was left to mourn the deaths of twenty-seven of its residents, twelve of whom had lost their lives in the industrial area where I worked. The tornado left a path of destruction forty kilometres long, indiscriminately targeting industrial buildings and suburban homes, oil tanks, railcars, transit lines, and livestock. People were trapped in and under buildings, hospitals were flooded, electric power failed, and fires burned. All told, the 400 km/h winds caused over three hundred million dollars in losses. Three hundred homes were completely destroyed, and thousands were damaged. While less visible, the psychic scars were equally tangible for some. A handful of my co-workers went on medical leave, some never to return. Others self-medicated with alcohol and other drugs; one could find the solace of sleep only with a radio by her side.

The following week I returned to work, with others who were able, to sort through what remained of the company's documents and equipment. A year later, the organization was housed in a newly constructed building, and life had returned to its normal rhythm. In time, my career goals shifted, and I moved on to graduate school, but the tornado stayed with me. It will always be part of my personal biography, a piece of who I am. To this day my pulse quickens in fierce summer storms.

*Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, August 2003*

More than fifteen years later, during a family visit to the Okanagan Valley, a forest fire broke out on the south end of Okanagan Lake. Each

day, with growing unease, my family and I looked south from our vantage point at the flame-coloured sky and the rapidly expanding smoke plume. In a few days the entire valley was blanketed in smoke, and ash fell like snowflakes from the smoke-thickened air. Fire reports became increasingly ominous, each day bringing more disturbing news of the fire's growing intensity. The tally of losses to forest land mounted, and then, less than a week after ignition and fuelled by dangerous 75 km/h winds, the fire razed thousands of hectares of forest and hundreds of houses in a devastating twenty-four-hour run. On this Black Friday the city of Kelowna and its residents reeled in shock.

The media coverage of the disaster was extensive. Scouring the newspaper reports, I found myself predictably dismayed by the losses but also reflexively drawn to the people and their stories. I felt a certain kinship with those chased by the flames, powerless in the face of Mother Nature, and forced to confront their own mortality. Black Fridays connected our lives across time and space.

So it was that two disasters and a brush with death provided the soil in which the seeds of this research were sown. My personal connection kindled a curiosity in disasters, which later became an academic interest in the potential for change generated by such events. As a critical sociologist I have a keen interest in social inequalities, and as a feminist I have a personal and political stake in examining the ways in which gender is implicated in relations of inequality. Disasters reveal hidden power relations (De Wall 2008; Vale and Campanella 2005) and socioeconomic disparities (often tragically), but, by destroying the "matrix of custom" (Prince 1920:20), they also create opportunities for change. In this book I undertake a post-mortem case study of the Okanagan Mountain Park fire, exploring the ways in which the disaster disrupted everyday gender interactions and meanings and the implications this had for social relations and inequalities.

The language is intentionally morbid. The fire exterminated vast swaths of vibrant forest and the wildlife harboured there; the blistering heat sterilized the once fertile soil over which it passed. But the fire also threatened to terminate the customary gender privileges that one group in particular – firefighters – had long enjoyed, and it is to this mortal propensity that I turn my attention.



# Acknowledgments

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To say that this book is the result of a collective effort is an understatement. I can only briefly describe here the tremendous support that I received while carrying out this work; had I been less fortunate, the journey would have been undoubtedly more arduous.

I am grateful to a number of scholars, each of whom sharpened my thinking in different ways. Tim Curry has a knack for identifying timely and relevant topics and put me on to the idea of studying fire. I also thank him for his enduring sense of humour and for reading early drafts of this work. I am indebted to Townsend Price-Spratlen and Steve Lopez for encouraging me to push my analyses in new directions and for providing innovative suggestions for ways in which to do so. I have shamelessly incorporated some of their ideas here. Steve's incisive, in-depth feedback was particularly important in shaping the concluding chapter and in crafting the findings from the fifth chapter into a journal article. I would also like to thank fellow graduate students and faculty members at the Ohio State University, including those in the Gender Working Group. Gillian Ranson's enduring support and enthusiasm for my work carried me through this project from beginning to end. In particular, her thoughts on the framing of the manuscript and her judicious read of early chapters were invaluable. Tracey Adams, paper discussant at the 2009 Canadian Sociological Association meetings, also deserves mention for getting me thinking about the difference between undoing and redoing gender and what it means for change – ideas that percolated for months and which now appear in elaborated form in the last chapter.

Two anonymous reviewers gave thoughtful feedback on my article "Gendered Strategies of Self: Navigating Hierarchy and Contesting

Masculinities" (2009), which appears in revised form as chapter 5. My thanks go to Wiley-Blackwell for permission to reprint this article and to Ashgate Publishing for permission to use material from "Interviewing Elite Men: Feminist Reflections on Studying 'Up' and Selling Out," in *Studying Up, Stared Down: Challenges in Re-directing the Academic Gaze* (edited by Luis Aguiar and Chris Schneider, 2012), which appears in the appendix herein.

Later versions of the manuscript profited from the efforts of two anonymous readers who offered feedback on everything from my arguments to the prose. Their provocative and sophisticated insights were instrumental in moving the book forward and in linking it more closely to the field of disaster studies. This book is so much the better for their guidance. I also thank the editors at the University of Toronto Press, Virgil Duff and Doug Hildebrand, and the reader on the press review committee for enthusiastically endorsing the manuscript.

I am further obliged to a host of colleagues who exhibited a keen interest in this project. Fellow faculty members at the University of British Columbia (Okanagan) regularly enquired about my progress, provided press-related advice, and listened patiently to my endless questions. My friend and colleague Ilya Parkins generously doled out warm words of reassurance at just the right moments. While I was on sabbatical, the Centre for Research on Life Course and Vulnerabilities (LIVES) at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, gave me a collegial home base and the necessary time to complete the manuscript. Special thanks go to co-director Laura Bernardi for ensuring that my stay was an intellectually stimulating one, and to my tireless mentor, Anne Gauthier, for galvanizing her extensive academic connections so that my sabbatical plans could come to fruition. I have also had the incredible good fortune of connecting with leaders in the field of gender and disaster whose cheerleading efforts strengthened my resolve to get masculinities more firmly situated on the radar of disaster researchers.

Deep gratitude is expressed to my loved ones who nurtured my spirit throughout this journey. A big hug goes to each of my family members for their love and support, for reminding me of the important things in life, and for regular doses of levity. I am especially indebted to my parents for providing my first interview contacts, food, lodging, transportation, and every other kind of assistance imaginable during my fieldwork.

Writing can be isolating work, and I thank my friends for luring me out of my writing cave into the world of the social, for providing

nourishment when I needed it most, for putting up with my disappearing acts when deadlines took priority over everything else, and, above all, for the laughs.

Words cannot do justice to the contribution of my partner, Trevor, who bore at length my single-minded focus, periods of stress and self-doubt, and need for solitude. Thank you for your patience, your sacrifices, your sensibility, and your capacity to love without question or judgment.

The fieldwork for this project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. A UBC Okanagan Publication Production Grant provided financial support for the index. The top-notch photographs are courtesy of photographers Evan Batke and Cory Bialecki who kindly agreed to share their work.

Finally, as Elaine Enarson graciously observes, "The greatest debt of all researchers, of course, is to those who say yes when we ask for their time and ideas" (2012, x). In this spirit, I thank all of the research participants who volunteered their time, shared their fire experiences, and responded without complaint to my probes on sensitive personal topics.

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# INTO THE FIRE

## Disaster and the Remaking of Gender



# 1 Black Fridays

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Life becomes like molten metal. It enters a state of flux from which it must reset upon a principle, a creed, or purpose. It is shaken perhaps violently out of rut and routine. Old customs crumble, and instability rules. There is generated a state of potentiality for reverse directions.

(S.H. Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change*)

There was no sun on the day I made my first trip to the regional forestry office. Known for its hot, arid summers, the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia was uncharacteristically cool that year. As I started my two-hour commute, I wondered what the day would hold. Since it was overcast and chilly, the possibility of new fires was diminished, and the chance of finding firefighters at their base was reasonably good. After two weeks of interviews and fieldwork elsewhere, I had become accustomed to last-minute schedule changes and to empty offices, the firefighters having been called to a fire or another emergency. On this day, however, everything started smoothly. Shortly after ten o'clock I arrived at the base, doughnuts in hand, and was relieved to find people milling about. I chatted briefly with the office assistant and a forest protection officer whom I had interviewed several days earlier.

A few minutes later Jack,<sup>1</sup> a long-time veteran of the forest service, arrived and announced that he was ready to start our interview. I followed him to his office, a space that was overflowing with an eclectic array of photographs, posters, prank gifts, and fire manuals, and he proceeded to explain the importance of humour for workers' morale. We talked for more than two hours. Through laughter and tears he described the personal costs associated with his line of work and



highlighted its various technical and organizational aspects. He also talked at length about the Okanagan Mountain Park fire,<sup>2</sup> relaying the sequence of events, the public perceptions and misperceptions of the fire, the personal toll on firefighters from the large losses, and the lack of recognition of their efforts.

Later that afternoon Jack invited me along on a helicopter ride over an area burned by one of the last wildfires of the previous summer. I jumped at the chance, and we quickly walked the short distance to the base. After a brief safety demonstration we boarded. I found my way into one of the back seats and secured my headphones and seat belt. As the rotors reached full speed and we lifted off the tarmac, I felt a surge of excitement and anticipation. We ascended quickly, and as we soared high over Skaha Lake and continued south down the valley, the beauty and ruggedness of the terrain came into full relief. Vaseux Lake glittered below, midnight blue against the ruddy clay and sandstone bluffs that encircled it. Our pilot, in search of California mountain goats, deftly navigated the craft through deep, narrow canyons and precipitous outcroppings. It was difficult to imagine that only twelve months earlier this same valley had been ravaged by devastating wildfires.

In the summer and fall of 2003, wildfires in British Columbia had caused widespread damage to forests, wildlife, animal habitat, homes, suburban neighbourhoods, and tribal lands, damage that was unparalleled in recent decades. From a monetary and safety perspective, the costs were enormous – upwards of \$6 million per day in the month of August (Canadian Press 2003). Also, tragically, one air tanker and one helicopter crashed, killing three firefighters. Of the hundreds of fires occurring that year, the Mountain Park fire in the Okanagan Valley was especially destructive.

### **The Making of a Firestorm**

Fire is a natural part of the forest ecosystem in British Columbia (BC Ministry of Forests, Wildfire Management Branch 2010c). It is thought that, prior to European settlement, wildfire burned five hundred thousand to one million hectares<sup>3</sup> of land annually. In the dry interior of the province, where the Mountain Park fire occurred, low-intensity fires once swept through on a five- to fifteen-year cycle, preventing ground fuels<sup>4</sup> from accumulating to the point where they could cause more intense, less suppressible wildfires (Keller 2002). When the BC Forest