Natural disasters of one kind or another have dominated the news for much of the past year. Hurricanes in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean, wildfires in California, and earthquakes in Mexico have served as jarring reminders of the power of natural forces to dismantle human infrastructure, disrupt human affairs, and claim human lives. They also remind us that natural disasters are never simply natural events. Whether urban sprawl and the loss of wetlands in the Houston metropolitan region or the long-standing economic crisis in Puerto Rico and its neo-colonial political status, recent events highlight that pre-existing conditions and human actions taken before (often long before) and after shape the impact of disasters in fundamental ways. They reveal that factors such as race and class often play a significant role in how people experience disasters and how they recover from them. And they raise new questions about human responsibility for some aspects of natural forces, specifically to what extent human-induced global warming is intensifying the power and scope of “natural disasters.” Such questions and debates may appear particularly modern, but in some ways they are updated versions of a discourse that dates to the beginning of European colonization efforts in North America and the Caribbean during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

European colonists who migrated to the New World not only encountered a new climate, as Karen Ordahl Kupperman illustrated in a classic essay published several decades ago, they also found themselves in a new world of disasters. Some disasters were entirely novel for colonists, such as the hurricanes that swept across various colonies with a violence far surpassing that of the worst storms of Europe or West Africa. The Taino word hurakan not only entered European vocabularies, but the storms became a defining symbol of all that was different and dangerous about the physical environment in colonies such as Barbados, Jamaica, and South Carolina. As one commentator stated, “an European can form no just idea of a West India hurricane.” Other disasters—earthquakes, floods, droughts, fires, blizzards, insect infestations—were not unfamiliar to colonists in
a general sense, but often seemed far more powerful, intense, or frequent in the New World than in the Old. In both cases, and as is the case today, natural disasters played a significant role in the lives and fortunes of individuals and societies throughout the colonial era. News of calamities circulated widely, drawing attention (and at times aid) from people throughout the Atlantic world. Moreover, disasters often had major economic consequences for those who survived them and raised fundamental questions about the cause of such death and destruction.

Large-scale natural disasters in colonial British America came in a variety of forms. Then, as now, hurricanes routinely battered the Caribbean islands and southeastern mainland. The first English colonists on St. Christopher had barely begun to establish a settlement when a hurricane blew across the island in September 1624, wiping out their crude structures and initial tobacco crop. A “wonderfully horrid and destructive” hurricane hit lowcountry South Carolina in 1686, the first of many during the period of English colonization. The worst year for colonists was 1752, when back-to-back storms in September pummeled Charleston and the surrounding plantation zone. Alexander Hamilton’s account of a 1772 hurricane that lashed the Leeward Islands famously helped propel him to college in New York City. The most devastating hurricane in the early modern period struck Barbados and the Lesser Antilles on October 10, 1780. The storm still ranks as the deadliest in history, claiming the lives of between 20,000 and 30,000 individuals, many of them enslaved Africans, as well as numerous French and British sailors stationed aboard warships during the American Revolution. On Barbados at least 2,000 and as many as 5,000 slaves perished, and the storm caused over £1.3 million in damage to fields and plantations (the equivalent of roughly $230 million in today’s dollars). Great storms occasionally battered colonies farther north as well, but in the eyes of Cotton Mather and many other observers, they seemed less frequent and less intense than their counterparts in the Caribbean and southeastern lowcountry.3

Other calamities also took their toll. John Winthrop Jr. lost some 1,100 sheep and numerous cattle and horses during the “Great Snow” of 1717, a series of four storms in eleven days that dumped between three and five feet of snow across New England, with drifts in some places as high as sixteen feet. The snows significantly “diminished” Winthrop’s estate along with many others in the region. Virginia planters in the James River basin suffered considerable losses when a “Great Fresh” (flood) cascaded down in May 1771. Dozens of people and hundreds of cattle drowned and thousands of hogheads of tobacco washed away from storehouses along the river.4 Fires, often called “The Great Fire” in their respective colonies, repeatedly burned colonial towns, often resulting in significant losses. Charleston’s “Great Fire” in 1740 caused damage estimated at £200,000 to £250,000 sterling, while Boston’s “Great Fire” of 1760 burned some 349 buildings and destroyed property worth at least £53,000. Over 200 families lost their homes.5 Earthquakes, too, rattled colonies at various times, generating tremendous fear among many. One of the most memorable shook the eastern seaboard from New Hampshire to Maryland on November 18, 1755. Beyond its geographic scope, the timing of the earthquake, coming so close to the Great Lisbon earthquake on November 1 of that year, made it appear particularly significant in the eyes of many colonists.

Although less dramatic than other disasters, drought was another major calamity in the colonial period. The role of drought in the horrific suffering at Roanoke and Jamestown is well-known to historians, but perhaps less appreciated are the ongoing economic challenges posed by prolonged dry periods. A lack of rain in Jamaica, Barbados, and the Leeward Islands often withered sugarcane in the fields and by extension reduced sugar exports to Britain. In the Carolina lowcountry, S. Max Edelson has argued that “the dual threat of drought and flooding was the driving force behind technological innovation in planting,” as planters sought ways to irrigate their fields from tidal rivers to reduce their vulnerability to unpredictable rains.6

While all colonists experienced hardships in the wake of major calamities, as is the case today, social and economic factors shaped the impact of disasters in significant ways. Wealthy merchants and planters frequently suffered great financial losses, but they often had access to credit—and in some cases, insurance—that aided efforts to recover and rebuild, while poorer colonists at times struggled to hold on to their property. Numerous small farmers in Barbados, for example, who lacked credit were forced to sell out to wealthier sugar planters following a hurricane in 1675. Those at the bottom of the colonial social hierarchy, enslaved
Africans, felt the effects of large-scale disasters most severely, particularly when hurricanes, drought, and insect infestations damaged provision fields. Poorly fed in the best of times, enslaved Africans often faced famine conditions in the wake of disasters. Writing during an ongoing drought in June 1726, one overseer in Nevis reported “many Negroes and stock lost for want of provisions and water,” a bland accounting of what must have been terrible suffering. Prolonged drought, multiple hurricanes, and disruption to trade stemming from the American Revolution during the 1770s and 1780s combined to produce a “crisis in slave subsistence” and heightened mortality across much of the Caribbean.7

As colonists calculated their losses and struggled to recover from various calamities, they also looked to make sense of these events. Some sought explanations in the movement of the stars, and astrologers at times foretold (or attempted to foretell) when great calamities would strike. Likewise, Carib Indians in the Leeward Islands informed early colonists that rings around the moon indicated the number of days before the onset of a hurricane, and such knowledge remained in circulation for decades. Other observers sought to explain the natural forces at work in disasters, drawing on classical knowledge and their own experience with particular events. Variations on Aristotle’s theory that earthquakes were linked to underground vapors and explosions, for example, appeared in publications and letters across the colonies from Massachusetts to Maryland to Jamaica. In other cases, the novelty or intensity of New World disasters pushed colonists and others to embrace a Baconian emphasis on observation and experience. “I have no intention to disparage the Authority of the Ancients, but I cannot . . . think that all Science is only to be sought for in the Urns of the Dead,” wrote one seventeenth-century commentator. Knowledge about hurricanes was “not to be had in Colleges or Books, but must be fetch’d fro[m] both Indies.” Such sentiments grew increasingly prominent over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.8

Most colonists, however, viewed natural disasters through the lens of providentialism. Hurricanes, earthquakes, blizzards, and other events were acts of God sent to punish sinful humans or warn of a worse fate if they did not reform their ways. No need to look for abstract natural forces at work in various...
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calamities, ministers and others routinely reminded their audiences. The cause of any disaster was simple: human sin. Thus a hurricane that blasted Virginia in 1667 was just retribution for colonists’ “evil way[s],” the 1752 twin hurricanes in South Carolina a mark of divine “displeasure against [colonists’] Transgressions,” and the plagues of caterpillars that descended across Virginia fields in 1728 and 1729 a “punishment” for “an offending people.” Regardless of the devastation, many writers emphasized, the damage could have been worse had an angry God not shown some compassion to his wayward followers. 

Because of the link between human sin and God’s wrath, the proper response to various calamities required victims to humble themselves before God. Local officials routinely called for colony-wide fast days in the aftermath of disasters. Colonists abstained from food, work, and all other recreations. Ministers offered special prayers and called upon listeners to recognize their responsibility for the present misfortune and to seek forgiveness. Fast days were generally affairs of the moment, called in response to specific events, but major disasters sometimes assumed a central place in colonists’ larger ritual calendar. June 7, for example, remained a public fast day in Jamaica for at least a century following the great earthquake of 1692. The practice of turning to a fast in the wake of disasters continued well into the nineteenth-century in the new United States as well. When cholera broke out in 1832, governments in eleven states declared a fast. Citing concerns about the separation of church and state, Andrew Jackson declined to proclaim a national fast in 1832, but Zachary Taylor recommended one when cholera returned to the United States in 1849.

That colonists generally viewed disasters as providential events did not foreclose investigations into the natural forces at work in various calamities or questions about whether other factors contributed to the level of destruction. This was particularly true across the eighteenth century. Building upon earlier work, natural philosophers continued to investigate the “secondary causes” (God being the “primary cause”) by which the winds swirled, the earth trembled, or prodigious rain fell (or did not fall). These writers did not deny that God could at any time directly send forth floods, fires, and earthquakes to warn and to punish, but they suggested that in most cases, God worked through established natural processes that were observable and understandable by human intellects. Such investigations often prompted stern rebukes from ministers who cautioned against too great an emphasis on natural as opposed to divine forces. Recognizing that natural forces may be at work in some earthquakes, Increase Mather nevertheless bluntly reminded his listeners in 1705, “There never happens an Earthquake but God speaks to men on the Earth by it: And they are very stupid, if they do not hear his Voice therein.”

Interestingly, amid debates about primary and secondary causes, colonists also recognized that their own actions contributed to the level of destruction in various calamities. This was especially true in the wake of urban fires, in which cramped streets and mostly wooden structures provided ready fuel for flames to spread rapidly. Local officials frequently debated widening streets and requiring brick and stone as building materials as a means of reducing the threat of fires, although such measures often proved too expensive to be practical. A similar discourse followed hurricanes, which often caused greater damage to wooden structures than to those built of stone or brick and prompted debates about various reconstruction strategies. Colonists also critiqued actions that exacerbated the impact of a particular hazard. One Bostonian noted that a great number of the chimneys damaged during the 1755 Cape Ann earthquake were in parts of the town built on “low, loose Ground, made by Encroachments on the Harbour” (i.e. landfill). Likewise, while many were quick to see the devastating 1692 earthquake as just retribution against Port Royal’s population of pirates, prostitutes, and profaners, others with local knowledge of the town’s development offered a more nuanced assessment of the damage. They noted that much of the
town that had sunk into the harbor had been built on landfill created over the previous two decades. “On this sandy Neck of Land did People build great heavy brick houses, whose weight, on so sandy a Foundation, may be supposed to contribute much to their Downfall,” wrote one observer. Whatever the cause of the earthquake, some colonists accepted a degree of responsibility for the level of devastation.12

While these common understandings of disasters formed part of a shared culture of disasters across colonial British America, important regional differences also existed, giving rise to what might be termed regional disaster subcultures. In the Caribbean, the frequency and ferocity of various natural hazards altered colonists’ ideas about what constituted a major disaster. Because earthquakes routinely rattled several parts of the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, colonists there gradually viewed earthquakes, particularly those that caused minimal physical damage, as routine and expected, not as wondrous or unusual events. One telling example occurred when a recently arrived English minister named Emmanuel Heath sat down with John White, a local political leader, in a Port Royal tavern on June 7, 1692. When the ground began to shake, a terrified Heath turned to his companion and asked what was happening. “It is an earthquake, be not afraid, it will soon be over,” White replied, “very composedly.” White turned out to be a bit too premature in his assessment, as a few seconds later the shaking intensified and half of Port Royal collapsed in one the great disasters of the early modern Atlantic world. His initial response, however, reveals the extent to which Jamaicans had come to accept minor earthquakes as part of island’s physical environment.13

A similar attitude developed regarding hurricanes across the Greater Caribbean. The frequency of storms in the region, their seemingly limited geography, and that they struck in a well-defined season between July and the end of October, all seemed to undermine the idea that the storms came directly from the hand of God to punish sinners. Truly disastrous events—the Great Hurricane of 1780, for example—continued to hasten reflection of human sin and divine power in the Caribbean, but many “lesser” storms passed without any sustained moral reflection.

In contrast to the Caribbean, the mainland suffered relatively few earthquakes or hurricanes. In New England, the relative infrequency of these calamities, combined with a more prominent religious culture, meant that when events did occur, many colonists viewed them as fraught with meaning even if the impact was relatively minor. The 1727 earthquake, for example, caused little serious physical damage, but local ministers published at least thirty sermons warning their listeners and readers to heed God’s message. And many did. The earthquake stimulated a religious revival in several towns in northeastern Massachusetts that, according to Erik Seeman, “brought unprecedented numbers of new members into many churches.” Similar attitudes marked responses to calamities in the Chesapeake as well throughout much of the eighteenth century. The relative infrequency of events like hurricanes and earthquakes there meant that, in Kathleen Murphy’s words, “providential interpretation[s], though under challenge, persisted alongside both a growing body of knowledge about the mechanical laws governing natural phenomena and an increasing emphasis on moral rationalism and order.”14

By viewing disasters as caused by larger natural forces and thus beyond the scope of human affairs and unrelated to human choices, individuals and societies evaded any responsibility for suffering.

Thus, while providentialism provided the primary lens for interpreting calamities across British America, colonists also sought to understand natural process at work in such events and many recognized that human choices contributed to the damage and suffering. In one form or another, such responses suggested a perceived relationship between human action and natural calamities. Natural disasters were not, as one Maryland minister reminded his listeners in 1755, “Blunders of Chance, or the Blind Effect of unintelligent Fate.” Such attitudes would develop later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the rise of science and secular
thinking that viewed disasters as “acts of God” only in a rhetorical sense. By viewing disasters as caused by larger natural forces and thus beyond the scope of human affairs and unrelated to human choices, individuals and societies evaded any responsibility for suffering and engaged in what Ted Steinberg described as “one great exercise in moral hand washing.” The increased awareness in recent decades that natural disasters are never simply natural events and that human activity is exacerbating the strength and impact of disasters represents yet another shift, one that, in a way, brings us full circle back to the early modern period. Our sins and offenses may be different, but in recognizing a link between natural disasters and human actions, we find ourselves in the company of many our colonial forbearers.

ENDNOTES

8. R. Bohun, A Discourse Concerning the Origine and Properties of Wind, with an Historickall Account of Hurricanes and other Tempestous Winds (1671), 2–5.
9. Strange Newes from Virginia, being a True Relation of a Great Tempest in Virginia (1667); Sophia Hume, An Epistle to the Inhabitants of South Carolina (1752), 6; Lt. Governor William Gooch to the Duke of Newcastle, July 24, 1730, in Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series (1860), 221–22.
11. Increase Mather, A Discourse Concerning Earthquakes, Occasioned by the Earthquakes which were in New England (1706), 8.
13. Rev. Emmanuel Heath, A Full Account of the Late Dreadful Earthquake at Port Royal in Jamaica; Written in Two Letters from the Minister of that Place (1692).