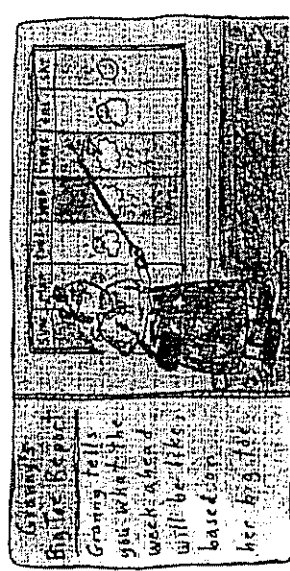


# THE WEATHER CHANNEL'S NEW FALL LINEUP



© The New Yorker Collection, 1998 Rex Chast, from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

## Desiring the Weather: El Niño, the Media, and California Identity

Marita Sturken

*Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera. We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves whatever it gets. Californians invented the concept of life-style. This alone warrants their doom.*

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Weather is not what it used to be. It is no longer something one goes outside to register, that one experiences on the ground and in the flesh. It has become, rather, a technological experience, seen from satellites and endlessly monitored on television and the Internet. What was once the site of interest for farmers and fishermen has become the source of pleasure and obsessive viewing for urbanites and suburbanites. What was considered to be a boring, uneventful news item has become a primary, if not quintessential, aspect of contemporary cable television. What was understood as a natural phenomenon is now the source of technological fantasy.

Thanks to Dana Polan and Lauren Berlant for insights on an earlier draft, to Dean MacCannell for helpful comments at an American Studies Association panel, to Caitrin Lynch for editorial advice, and to Anu Mandavilli for research assistance. Research for this paper was funded by the James Irvine Foundation and the Southern California Studies Center (SC2) at the University of Southern California. Thanks to Michael Dear and SC2 for this support.

*Public Culture* 13(2): 161–189  
Copyright © 2001 by Duke University Press

Yet, weather fascinates precisely because it appears to be a stable phenomenon of history. The turn of the millennium is defined by technological change, political upheaval throughout the world, economic volatility, and the increased globalization of culture. This postmodern and postindustrial experience is accompanied by an anxiety coupled with optimism not unlike the modern experience at the last turn of the century. In this context, the weather is a source of fascination precisely because of the comfort it can appear to provide—comfort at the unchanging routine of rain, clouds, and sunshine interrupted by an occasional weather event. The weather's capacity to be both tremendously mundane and spectacularly dramatic is key to its emergence as a source of viewership pleasure. Within the gaze of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century technology, the weather has been transformed from a simple indicator of natural forces into a phenomenon of entertainment. Today's weather is not to be experienced so much as watched and consumed.

The primary events that have signaled the new weather as entertainment have been the particularly severe hurricane seasons of the 1990s, which produced significant damage on the East Coast; the El Niño of 1997–98, followed by La Niña, which began in 1998 and dissipated in 2000; the rise of the Weather Channel as a staple of cable television; and the spate of weather books in the late 1990s for armchair disaster watching, such as Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* (which became a film in the summer of 2000) and Erik Larson's *Isaac's Storm*—both of them about catastrophic storms—and Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear*, an analysis of Southern California as the site of weather, natural, and social disaster.<sup>1</sup>

Of these events, the El Niño of 1997–98 was perhaps the most anticipated, thanks to new technologies of measuring water temperatures in the Pacific Ocean, and it was the event most centered on California. In this essay, I focus on this particular El Niño event in the broader context of the new construction of the weather. Termed “the climate event of the century,” the 1997–98 El Niño produced a rash of predictions, anxieties, commercial ventures, and dire warnings about the potential demise of the California coastline. As such, it revealed not only the construction of weather as entertainment but also the role played by the weather in a liberal discourse of political denial. The media coverage of this El Niño event made visible the weather's function as a site for desire, both displaced

1. Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men against the Sea* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Erik Larson, *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (New York: Crown, 1999); Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998). Wolfgang Petersen directed the film version of *The Perfect Storm* (2000).

desire in its many forms and the desire of the spectator's gaze. The embrace of El Niño as an event of meaning demonstrates the ways that contemporary discourses of weather serve to alleviate contemporary postmodern anxieties about fragmentation, rapid social change, and lack of meaning.

### Controlling the Weather: The Rise of Weather Media

Throughout history, the relationship of humans to the weather has been dictated by narratives of control. Weather has long been understood as the primary symptom of nature, the way that nature speaks to its occupants. Nature has been defined historically in both religious and gendered terms, with centuries' worth of analogies of nature as female and science/technology as male.<sup>2</sup> Natural disasters have been understood as the result of man's fall from nature, and hence a form of punishment, as well as the work of an unforthcoming and vengeful female nature.

One of the primary narratives governing the weather is that of revenge. Originally a Christian narrative about the weather as a punishment for sins, this story has evolved in contemporary environmental politics into the weather as nature's anger at humans for all the ills they have perpetrated upon it.<sup>3</sup> The idea of nature's revenge thus provides a contemporary secular theme for the weather: nature's “fury” is aimed at the negligence and indifference of humankind toward the environmental consequences of its actions. Its current manifestation is the compelling argument that the weather upheaval of the late twentieth century is the result of global warming caused by pollution.

Control of the weather has often been understood in terms of replicating its actions. Much of the scientific understanding of weather has come from experiments of simulated weather, which range from, for instance, Francis Bacon's sixteenth-century attempts to artificially create snow, rain, and hail under experimental methods to contemporary computer simulations.<sup>4</sup> However, narratives of the weather ascribe to it particular powers of spectacle and viewership precisely

2. See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

3. See Langdon Winner, “The State of Nature Revisited,” in *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 127.

4. Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 185. The techniques of weather observation actually have a much longer history in China, where there are weather records dating as far back as 1216 a.c. In particular, the Chinese understood early on the relation of the moon to the tides. See Colin A. Ronan, *Science: Its History and Development among the World's Cultures* (New York: Facts on File, 1982), 167.

because it is understood as uncontrollable. A fascination with chaos theory's "butterfly effect"—the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings over China can affect the development of winter storms over the Atlantic Ocean a few days later—indicates the thrill of weather as an unpredictable force. The fantasy of controlling the weather by actually changing it has never been realized, and it is precisely this uncontrollability that situates the weather as a site of displaced desire.

Controlling the weather also takes the form of measuring its activity, defining its source, and naming it. Within nationalist discourses, weather is most often defined as coming from elsewhere. In the western United States, weather is understood to come from the Pacific and Asia, and in the Midwestern and eastern states, it is seen to arrive from an undifferentiated territory above the border (otherwise known as Canada). The naming of weather phenomena (whether for climate variations, such as El Niño and La Niña, or for hurricanes and typhoons) and the creation of logos (Storm Track 97, El Niño Watch, and so on) serves to domesticate and familiarize weather. In the case of El Niño, the name gives this periodic event of warming Pacific waters a dynamic personality, one it cannot maintain when it is defined by science with its other name, ENSO: El Niño-Southern Oscillation.<sup>5</sup> The name *El Niño* comes from nineteenth-century Peruvian fishermen, who noticed that fish became scarce as waters warmed off the coast in December. Because of this occurrence at Christmastime, the fishermen termed this phenomenon "El Niño," which is Spanish for the Christ child (and more generally for a male child). The warm ocean conditions are not only associated with this effect on fishing but also with more general effects on weather conditions, often causing rain in dry areas and drought in normally wet climates. In most years, El Niño's impact is limited to the western South American coast, but larger El Niño systems move north and cause changes in weather systems worldwide—among other things, bringing winter storms and cold temperatures to Southern California. La Niña refers to El Niño's reverse, with waters cooling off the Pacific coast and producing equally unpredictable changes in weather. A La Niña followed the 1997–98 El Niño into 2000 and was referred to as El Niño's "ormery" little sister.<sup>6</sup>

5. In 1966, Jacob Bjerknes, a scientist at the University of California at Los Angeles, discovered the relationship between the El Niño effect of warming Pacific waters and the Southern Oscillation, which is a change in the air pressure between the eastern and western Pacific. The term ENSO thus refers to the combination of both effects, which do not always occur together. See Joseph Moran and Michael Morgan, *Meteorology: The Atmosphere and the Science of Weather*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan College, 1994).

6. See Ellen F. Licking, "La Niña Gets Ormery," *U.S. News and World Report*, 27 July 1998 (online version).

This Spanish nomenclature allows El Niño to be defined as a foreign entity that is visited upon the United States. Just as the "Asian" or the "Hong Kong" flu (or the West Nile virus) reinforce the sense of siege among Americans toward diseases that come from elsewhere (replicated in media portrayals of the 1990s Asian economic crisis as the "Asian contagion"), the 1997–98 El Niño was read in the popular media in ways that allowed it to remain foreign in origin. In California, the fear of an approaching El Niño, which is understood to arrive from South America and Mexico, has inevitable associations with xenophobic concerns about immigration. Hence, the Spanish name, which provided much fodder for newspaper headline writers and cartoonists, was also a metaphor for the fear of the constant flow of illegal immigrants into Southern California and fears about the impact of those immigrants on the economy and social services.

Defined as coming from elsewhere, yet with California as its ultimate goal, the weather story of El Niño began with an extraordinary set of predictions about both the past and the future. El Niño was given credit in retrospect for having contributed to the Black Death of the 1340s and the French Revolution of 1789. In addition, fall 1997 predictions stated that it could potentially cause the following: the starvation of 1 million people in Indonesia; a hundred-year flood in Los Angeles; a drought that could kill as many as 25 million Africans; a huge flood in Somalia, the survivors of which would be threatened by poisonous snakes, crocodiles, and hippos; the migration of record numbers of rats into Los Angeles homes; and plagues, locusts, and other disasters that will produce future global unrest.<sup>7</sup> An increasingly complex media environment in which the weather is a profitable global, national, and local story fueled these predictions.

The emergence of weather media in the late twentieth century provides a shift in the concept of weather control. The science of meteorology, which focuses on weather prediction, is a contemporary version of centuries of Western science that attempted to, in Bacon's words, "penetrate" nature in order to unveil "her" secrets.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the proliferation of weather media is based not so much on the idea of controlling weather through prediction as on creating the *experience* of control through monitoring the weather—via live broadcasts, satellite images, and endless readouts of scientific data about what the weather is doing.

7. These predictions come from a variety of news sources, including the *Los Angeles Times* and Cable News Network (CNN). They were compiled on the Web site The Official El Niño Hotline of DOOM! ([www.primenet.com/~rfwatts/elnino.html](http://www.primenet.com/~rfwatts/elnino.html)), which collected one thousand predictions about El Niño/La Niña by September 1998. (This site is no longer available; I last accessed it in spring 1999.)

8. Francis Bacon, *The Masculine Birth of Time*, quoted in Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 170–72.

The rise of weather media is predicated on the weather being part of "hard" news. As long as the weather was "soft" news, it was of minimal interest. Until quite recently, the softness of the weather report was provided for the most part by "weather girls" who gave the local forecast and told a joke or two. David Letterman still gets joke mileage out of the fact that he began his career doing the weather for local news in Indiana. The weatherperson was also the source of comedy because even the technology came at their expense as they pretended that they were actually pointing at a weather map rather than a blue screen, often missing the crucial spot. A stereotype of the female news anchor is the former weather girl who worked her way up the network ladder, a story that is told in such films as *To Die For* (Gus Van Sant, 1995) and *Up Close and Personal* (Jon Avnet, 1996).

The expansion of cable and the advent of satellite technology in the 1980s and the increasingly high-tech aspects of meteorology have transformed the weather from a local into a global story and have made it a central part of hard news.<sup>9</sup> The proliferation of multiple cable channels, set up for narrowcasting to targeted audiences, has produced not only several twenty-four-hour news channels in which weather is a regular story, but also, in 1982, the Weather Channel, devoted to the weather twenty-four hours a day. Satellite technology has allowed for both an increasingly sophisticated tracking of weather systems and a broader dissemination of the weather story, with the capacity to show live footage of weather around the world. The Weather Channel and national and local news stations have all invested in complex and expensive systems of weather radar imaging systems, such as Doppler radar. These high-tech gadgets offer new forms of visualizing weather in ways that allow it to appear technologically contained. They include a range of three-dimensional imaging techniques, multicolored radar imaging of precipitation, and complex mapping systems that can identify the weather on a particular street corner. It is crucial to these devices that the images they generate are more interesting when there is dramatic weather. In other words, such a device can seem like a poor investment in a place such as Southern California where the sun shines relentlessly for nine months a year. I have seen Los Angeles television meteorologists on the air regularly scan up to Montana on their mapping systems in order to show rainfall, which is the most visually arresting effect that can be imaged on their three-dimensional systems. In this new

9. The use of satellites to gather weather data began in 1966. See Jack Fishman and Robert Kalish, *The Weather Revolution: Innovations and Imminent Breakthroughs in Accurate Forecasting* (New York: Plenum Press, 1994), chap. 4.

media environment, the weatherperson is at one with the technology rather than at its mercy.

### The Weather Channel and Weather Citizenship

The existence of the Weather Channel and the proliferation of news channels have created the need and desire for weather stories. Many hours of airtime have to be filled, and weather drama is necessary to fill them. In this context, the Weather Channel is the pinnacle of contemporary weather media, the ground zero for all weather watchers. It is also a study of weather within a discourse of citizenship. With its schedule divided into one-hour time slots during which there are features such as the local forecast, national report, report for travelers, storm watch, and "weatherstyle," the Weather Channel sends the message that the weather is the connective thread of global and national culture. Indeed, its Web site Weather.com sports the slogan, "Weather. It's something we all have in common."

In recasting the story of the weather as hard rather than soft news, the Weather Channel explicitly recodes the modes of its telling. This is no longer a human interest (or weather girl) story (though the Weather Channel has several women meteorologists)—it is a story of science. The meteorologists who are regulars on the Weather Channel have a distinctly nonentertainment style. They tend to be conservatively dressed, stiff before the camera, and not coiffed by Hollywood standards. As *Newsweek* reports, "From its start in 1982, The Weather Channel has been pelted with snickers. When It Rains It Bores, read one headline. The male meteorologists looked like they were wearing outlet-mall suits and the women wore dresses a size too large, critics wrote. All that may have been true, but the viewing public came to want weather on demand. Buoyed by big weather stories, like Hurricane Erin last year, the channel has grown into one of the nation's 'must have' cable channels."<sup>10</sup> The anti-style of the Weather Channel deploys stereotypes of nerdy scientists precisely in order to signify no-frills hard news. This story is told with elaborate weather maps, through complex imaging technologies and expert testimony—it is weather encoded with the authority of science.

While the idea of the Weather Channel may have seemed like a joke in the early 1980s, nowadays, with 15 million viewers a day, it seems spectacularly prescient. Like other successful narrowcasting cable channels, the Weather Channel thrives because it has a very loyal audience. And perhaps *loyal* is too mild a word.

10. Larry Reibstein, "Weathering Heights," *Newsweek*, 22 January 1996, 28.

The channel has a fanatical following among what it calls the "weather involved" or "weather weenies," who constitute 20 percent of its audience, yet 40 percent of its ratings.<sup>11</sup> Weather-involved people watch the channel for a few hours several times a day. They are, by any standard, addicts, and not simply to the weather but specifically to the Weather Channel television experience of the weather. As devotees of the Weather Channel see it, the dull weather days are a comfort and the dramatic weather days are the best television they can get. Weather fandom also extends inevitably to the Internet, not only to the Weather Channel site but also to an array of institutional sites that share what used to be information for the experts only. It is also possible for weather watchers to have breaking weather news "on the go." Recently, AWS (Automated Weather Source) created "WeatherBug," which will alert computer users with a weather icon when severe weather has been forecast.<sup>12</sup>

In 1998 the Chiat/Day advertising agency made a series of ads for the Weather Channel that played off its appeal to weather-obsessed viewers by saying to them: You are not alone. One popular ad features two guys watching the channel in a bar. One has his face painted blue (for cold fronts) and the other red (for heat waves), and as the weather fluctuates they shout and proclaim victory as if their team had just won. This idea of Weather Channel watchers as *fans* of the weather borrows both on stereotypes of men as fanatic sports fans and on the image of the nerdy male scientist/meteorologist for whom the weather is the ultimate thrill. (Chiat/Day tried to convince the Weather Channel to set up in airports real-life versions of the bar—known as "The Front"—featured in several of the ads, with weather-themed drinks and, of course, televisions featuring the Weather Channel.) In their survey research for the campaign, Chiat/Day asked regular viewers to go without weather reports for a week and found that they were traumatized by the experience. According to Jerry Gentile, creative director of the account, "These people were just sort of broken. They could not get their lives together without watching the weather. They had to know. They had to have control. They couldn't just look out the window."<sup>13</sup>

The Weather Channel fan culture involves chat groups on its Web site, in which fans of the channel speculate about the lives of the studio meteorologists and, as the Weather Channel calls them, the OCMs (on-camera meteorologists

who are out in the field). Writing for the *New Yorker*, John Seabrook notes that the OCMs are hugely popular among locals when they arrive to cover weather news. One satellite truck operator told Seabrook, "These Weather Channel guys are treated like frigging royalty. Usually local people treat the media like scum—vultures preying on a disaster. But local people love these Weather Channel guys. When we were in North Carolina for [Hurricane] Dennis, people were coming to the truck with plates of ribs, cold drinks, pie, you name it. It was amazing."<sup>14</sup> It is thus part of the relationship of the Weather Channel to its consumers that it covers the mundane day in and day out, unlike its broadcast competitors for whom weather signals only disaster. The Weather Channel hired a psychologist to analyze the appeal of the channel, and he concluded that viewers "form a bond with forecasters largely because they are dependable, a human utility that will never be in a bad mood."<sup>15</sup>

In the increasingly technologized story of the weather, the weather reporter remains a crucial human element. The physical body of the on-site weather news reporter must by convention be subject in uncomfortable ways to the weather. Hence, while the "real" information about the weather and its impact may be coming from satellite images and helicopter news footage, the signification of the real seems to demand a surrogate body that can feel and speak the weather corporeally. Crucial to the television experience of weather is the image of the news reporter standing in wind and rain for the eleven o'clock newscast, with his or her poncho in a state of disarray, hunched over a microphone.

It is also the role of the on-site weather reporter to affirm the liveness of television. There are many conventions of television news programs that aim to give a sense of urgency to news that is only marginally immediate, such as the live reporting of events that have no intrinsic value as live footage. For instance, during the winter of 1997–98, Los Angeles news stations reported on the bad weather and winter storms by running clips of the more spectacular footage acquired during the day—of houses falling off cliffs (one house teetered in Laguna Niguel for weeks under the relentless twenty-four-hour gaze of television cameras before it finally gave way and fell down the slope), mud slides, and rescues from fast-running rivers—interspersed with live footage of various rain-drenched reporters throughout the region, each essentially on camera to state, "Yes, it's still raining." These scenes of reporters in the rain had no intrinsic news value, yet were a staple of each newscast. When the city of Santa Monica con-

11. Marc Fisher, "Soaking up the Atmosphere: Some Folks Think the Weather Channel Is Dry, but Fans Say It's Hot," *Washington Post*, 27 May 1998, D1.

12. Bonnie Rothman Morris, "All the Weather You'll Ever Need," *New York Times*, 1 June 2000, D7. The WeatherBug Web site is <http://www.weatherbug.com/aws/>.

13. Fisher, "Soaking up the Atmosphere," D1.

14. John Seabrook, "Selling the Weather," *New Yorker*, 3 April 2000, 46.

15. Fisher, "Soaking up the Atmosphere," D1.

De

structured several artificial dunes (or berms) along the beach, ostensibly to keep winter storms at bay, these became favorite sites for local news reporters to stand during their broadcasts.

The weather reporter must by convention be very excited about the weather. In *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993), this is Phil Connors's (Bill Murray's) crisis of faith that the film must resolve, since he is such a devoted weatherman that he talks of everything in percentages. (Murray has stated that his own obsession with the Weather Channel was an inspiration for certain scenes in the script.)<sup>16</sup> His temporary loss of interest in the weather report is evident on *Groundhog Day* when he sarcastically reports, "This is one time when television really fails to capture the true excitement of a large squirrel predicting the weather." The role of the weatherperson is thus contingent on having an intensely charged relationship with the weather. After all, it's worth noting that the only other profession that comes to mind for which people change their names (such as Frank Field, Storm Fields, and Dallas Raines) as signifiers of their work is pornography.<sup>17</sup>

The body of the weather news reporter is, of course, situated in a discourse of desire. Weather Channel fans speculate on-line about the meteorologists as celebrities and, in the case of the women, take note when they wear short skirts. It is commonly noted that the language of weather description is highly sexualized, and weather watching is often depicted as a substitute for sex. Cartoons, such as the one by Roz Chast at the beginning of this essay, present weather watchers as so sexually repressed that they can only discuss the weather—indeed, for them, the weather is sex. Fans of the Weather Channel are consistently represented in the general media as people who have little or no excitement in their lives—for whom weather forms the ultimate excitement.

Nowhere is this relationship of weather and desire more explicit than in the film *To Die For*, when Suzanne Stone Maretto (Nicole Kidman) works her way into the psyche of Jimmy (Joaquin Phoenix), a sixteen-year-old student, through her flirtatious weathercast, which ends with her saying, "I'll be with you again tomorrow evening, rain or shine." As he watches her, Jimmy fantasizes about her personalizing the weather report for him. Later, when he is interviewed in prison after killing Suzanne's husband at her request, Jimmy states, "I never really gave a rat's ass about the weather until I got to know Miss Maretto. Now, I take it very

16. Bill Murray, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, 3 February 1999.

17. I am grateful to Jim Campbell for this point.

serious. If it rains, or there's lightning or thunder, or if it snows, I have to jack off."

Yet, it remains too simple to ascribe serious weather watching merely to a displaced sexuality. The sexual undertones of the weather are clearly offset by the sense of comfort and routine that is provided to viewers by the Weather Channel—weather as wallpaper or weather as Zen. Its ongoing presence, its reliability—not simply the sense it provides of a reliable forecast but rather the fact that it is always on, always reporting, always there when one can't sleep at night—and its no-nonsense fare provides a sense of something stable in a chaotic media environment and an unstable world. On further examination, weather prediction reveals itself to be a blend of science, eroticism, and sentiment, one that constructs citizens as participants in the production of weather narratives.

Weather is also one of the means through which people situate themselves in the world, not only as local citizens but as national and global citizens. In cold weather climates, such as the Midwest, for instance, the capacity to survive long cold winters is an important aspect of local pride, as is the sunshine of the Southwest and California. Today, satellite technology is a central aspect not only of how the weather is visualized but also of how viewers locate themselves regionally, nationally, and globally. A satellite image situates the viewer from a point of view in space. In that most local news weather maps define weather within a hundred-mile radius, this emphasizes a regional situation for viewers. But for many viewers of cable channels such as the Weather Channel, this emphasizes a positioning within the nation and the globe. This is one of the consequences of the fact that, as Jody Berland puts it, we now view the skies looking down, rather than up.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is remarkable on the Weather Channel how rarely one sees weather at ground level. Satellite images not only situate us geographically, they also offer both a broader narrative of global unity and planetary connection and a full range of aesthetic pleasures.<sup>19</sup> Like photographs of space, satellite photographs demonstrate a pleasure in large-scale mapping and fulfill the modernist

18. Jody Berland, "Mapping Space: Imaging Technologies and the Planetary Body," in *Technoscience and Cyberculture*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons, and Michael Menser (New York: Routledge, 1996), 124.

19. A new company, AstroVision, plans to put on-line in 2002 a Web site that will offer live continuous satellite images of the planet to subscribers. The press release for the Web site—which asks "Tired of the same old TV and weather reports?"—proclaims that "AstroVision will deliver unique real time coverage of atmospheric and terrestrial events, including weather such as hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning, and major catastrophic occurrences like fires and volcano eruptions" (as noted September 2000 at <http://astrovis.com>).

promise of the photographic camera to see beyond the human eye. As Berland writes, "For satellite views of the earth's surface show us not only the weather (if you are trained to read them) but also the following: this is one planet, one life, one world, one dream. This is the view of the globe from the eye of god. . . . This is the gorgeous, metaphysical triumph of the technological sublime, displaying itself in perfect harmony with the arcane laws of nature."<sup>20</sup> The technological achievement of the satellite image is its capacity to establish a singular perspective from space at which the weather consumers are invited to place themselves as omniscient viewers.

The construction of the weather citizen is also specifically about the activity of weather watching as one of civic duty. Here, weather media taps into a long tradition of weather volunteerism. Over the last century, the National Weather Service has deployed thousands of volunteers to measure their local weather in its Cooperative Weather Observer Program. This activity of recording data was envisioned from the onset as a patriotic activity, inspired by the writings of Thomas Jefferson, who had imagined a "republic of yeoman farmers, all gathering and sharing agricultural data about storms and the dates of the first and last frosts, all for the good of the country."<sup>21</sup> While many of the weather stations are now automated, there remain 11,000 volunteers today. Weather observation activity is also incorporated into local news shows in which viewers often call in from around the region to report on events in weather emergencies—an activity that is presented in the weather newscast as an act of citizenship, particularly when the volunteers are young.

The tradition of amateur weather observation, with its responsible citizen who provides information to fellow citizens, has evolved into the contemporary global weather consumer. Participation in chat groups on Weather.com, which features many pedagogical elements such as a glossary of weather terms, is often couched in terms of the civic duty of weather monitoring through the consumption of weather media. The Weather Channel also tells a global story in its hourly forecast, with weather newscasters scanning the planet in a few sentences, in order to construct the weather media consumer as one with the privilege to participate in global citizenship. Andrew Ross writes that the Weather Channel is deliberately scripted to talk to the viewer as a consumer, rather than as a worker, constructing the weather viewer as a middle-class consumer of leisure activities: "On the Weather Channel, there is no weather-for-work, only for leisure and consumer

20. Berland, "Mapping Space," 129.

21. Kirk Johnson, "Nature's Whims, All Duly Noted," *New York Times*, 30 June 2000, B6.

time. . . . In the Weather Channel's world, people do everything but work; weather affects how they 'drive' to work, and travel to work if they are 'business travellers,' but it has no bearing on their actual work environments, which are assumed to be immune to weather. . . . Ideal Weather Channel 'citizens' are assumed to be comfortably off, white-collar, with cars, boats, vacation options, families, and gardens and homes that require extensive upkeep."<sup>22</sup> Weather prediction is a commodity, not only as a staple of the media industry but as the means to insure the safety of much business activity and to protect the material goods of particular lifestyles. In fact, in September 1999, weather futures were officially listed as a commodity on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, and many brokerage firms are establishing weather desks.<sup>23</sup> Central to weather's value is the belief that technology now allows us to predict what it will do.

#### Weather Disaster and the Politics of Prediction

Much of the history of weather observation and prediction has been the translation into scientific and technological language and devices of the so-called folk knowledge of farmers, fishermen, and lighthouse keepers and the contributions of amateur weather observers.<sup>24</sup> The idea of weather observation as a form of national cohesion and connection, in response to the external threat of weather, has also been a part of the burgeoning weather bureaucracy and business of the twentieth century. The National Weather Service (NWS), which was established in the 1970s, followed the Weather Bureau, which was created in 1870 and initially administered by the War Department and later by the Department of Commerce.<sup>25</sup> The open and accessible information of the NWS has been superceded by commercial weather services, in particular Accu-Weather, which sells its information to many television stations.<sup>26</sup> There are now more than one hundred private companies competing in the commercial weather forecasting industry. (The Weather Channel uses satellite and radar images from the National Weather Service.)

Today, large sums of money are invested in weather prediction, and the use of

22. Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991), 241.

23. Seabrook, "Selling the Weather," 51.

24. See Robert Marc Friedman, *Appropriating the Weather: Vilhelm Bjerknes and the Construction of Modern Meteorology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 164.

25. See Donald R. Whitnah, *A History of the United States Weather Bureau* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), and Ross, *Strange Weather*, 226.

26. Ross, *Strange Weather*, 226.



computers to chart weather patterns has created an increasingly mathematical model of weather forecasting. In 1997, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) established an International Research Institute with \$18 million to provide early warnings, through the use of Cray supercomputers, of El Niño and other climate variations that influence drought, floods, and other destructive weather patterns. This investment of funding, which primarily aids business and government interests, places a huge premium on prediction. The El Niño of 1997–98 received a great deal of attention precisely because scientists have much more sophisticated prediction systems, in particular the TAO (tropical atmosphere/ocean) high-tech buoys that span the equatorial Pacific Ocean, which were put into place since the last serious El Niño of 1982. The TAO buoys monitor wind, humidity, and water temperature as far down as sixteen hundred feet and transmit this information by satellite to NOAA.<sup>27</sup> This has allowed certain regions of Peru, for instance, to anticipate winter storms and adjust flood control systems.<sup>28</sup>

It must be pointed out, however, that prediction is limited in its impact, even at the level of business. Most weather prediction remains short-term and narrow in scope. Although weather prediction is now considered to be about 85 percent accurate, this does not mean that meteorologists can predict where a storm or tornado will hit. Even the range of computer-based predictions of the impact of the 1997–98 El Niño could not target exact areas of impact. Seabrook notes that the intense round-the-clock coverage of the approach of Hurricane Floyd in September 1999 did little to help prepare for the storm; indeed it may have had adverse effects on preparation. He writes, "The National Weather Service's Floyd forecast provoked the largest evacuation in American history, and it turned out that very few of the people who left their homes needed to go. Almost all of the expensive beach houses that you saw on television were unharmed; it was the farmers inland who were wiped out by the flooding that followed the storm, and most people weren't prepared for that."<sup>29</sup>

The weather media's emphasis on prediction, which is fueled by technology, also elides the degree to which people throughout the world are differently impacted by weather because of class and economic differences. The prediction of potential tornadoes will be useless to those who can only afford to live in a

27. See Curt Suplee, "El Niño/La Niña: Nature's Vicious Cycle," *National Geographic*, March 1999, 85.

28. See "Tracking El Niño," *Nova*, Public Broadcasting System, 13 October 1998. The PBS Web site, [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), has an extensive discussion of El Niño in relation to this program.

29. Seabrook, "Selling the Weather," 46.

trailer in northern Florida, just as the long-range information that impending monsoons will be extreme can do little to save the lives of those in India and Bangladesh whose homes will be destroyed. Hence, the contemporary imperative for accuracy in weather prediction and the need to make weather a science have ultimately had little impact on the effects of weather on the lives of most people. This imperative is fueled by commercial interests, and it is much more indicative of shifting social values rather than science's capacity to improve lives.

In the United States, there has long been a military connection to weather prediction. Of the human endeavors that necessitate weather observation—such as farming, fishing, building, and traveling—waging war is of course one, and the science of meteorology has been heavily influenced by the needs of the military and the space industry. Ross notes that the legitimization of meteorology as science corresponded with the beginning of the aeronautical industry, which required "accurate information about the atmosphere." He adds, "The new meteorology proved a vital military asset during the Great War, and weather forecasting soon became a lucrative commercial service for air travel after the war."<sup>30</sup> In addition, according to Berland, continuous satellite-generated weather forecasts create a consumer market for satellite surveillance services that would otherwise be completely funded by government and military agencies.<sup>31</sup> In this light, weather prediction technology is not only inextricably tied to military needs, but serves to underwrite them as well.

What kind of knowledge does the technology of weather prediction produce? The number of weather media consumers for whom accurate forecasts are essential to labor, production, and travel is actually quite small. For the typical Weather Channel consumer, knowledge of impending weather serves primarily as a matter of convenience in relation to travel and leisure activities or as a form of viewing comfort. It is worth situating the compelling interest in weather prediction within a broader context of the project of science. In other words, it is the scientific discourse of weather technology that allows it to be seen as essential (essential enough to merit a twenty-four-hour television channel). The Weather Channel's must-carry status is the result of the coding of weather prediction as knowledge that is crucial to everyday life. Yet, it could be argued, this is a form of knowledge that not only has little impact on people's daily lives but also functions as a deterrent to political action.

In the case of disaster coverage, a different set of dynamics is put into play.

30. Ross, *Strange Weather*, 228.

31. Berland, "Mapping Space," 135.



Weather disasters are, of course, spectacular television, and they also serve to affirm particular concepts of global unity and community cohesion. A weather disaster—such as an El Niño-inspired flood, landslide, forest fire, or ice storm—is a news story and a site of public fascination precisely because of the ways in which it confers an identity (either local or national) upon the mass public. Michael Warner argues that the mass media has a special relationship to mass disaster because it is “a way of making mass subjectivity available.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, disaster constitutes a reassurance about the existence and desirability of the mass subject. Warner writes that disaster coverage is about injury to an “already-abstracted” mass body, one that negates injury to the individual subject. Yet not all weather disasters play well in the new technology of weather viewership. Seabrook and others have noted, for instance, that heat and drought, arguably some of the most devastating weather problems worldwide, tend to get underplayed if not ignored in weather coverage precisely because they don’t make for good television or satellite photos.

In addition, there is no doubt that an emphasis on weather observation effaces political concerns related to the weather. Weather coverage never discusses the political complexities of who is more vulnerable to weather disaster than others. It has been noted by many critics that an emphasis on prediction consistently elides environmental issues about the impact of human and business activity on the ecology of the planet. The Weather Channel never discusses the current controversy over global warming; indeed, some meteorologists told Seabrook that they are discouraged from discussing it. Political writer Molly Ivins has criticized the media for the way in which it covered the 1997–98 El Niño without discussing global warming, which she believes was at least partially responsible for the record drought in Texas in the summer of 1998. Ivins attributes this omission to a successful “public relations campaign” by the American Petroleum Institute to discredit scientific evidence of global warming.<sup>33</sup> The nature story of weather prediction thus serves to screen out the politics of disaster and the question of agency.

In the case of El Niño, the focus on the weather in the 1997–98 news season both produced particular narratives and obliterated others. In California, the focus first on the potential arrival of El Niño and then on the weather events themselves allowed a particular form of local narcissism to be easily played out,

so that even the threat of rain succeeded in erasing other world events (which in that year included famine in North Korea and the war in Kosovo) from news programs. The El Niño story was presented through a technoscience discourse that allowed it simultaneously to appear as complex and in need of constant interpretation, and as a very simple story of cause and effect, of civilization versus nature. As a news story it was decidedly not about politics or social problems, but a story without blame. This was a story of nature and nature’s wrath, which has few if any specific culprits, even when nature’s fury may be aimed at humankind in general. Hence, the fact that the weather impacts different people in dramatically different ways because of the sturdiness of their homes and their accessibility to transportation and medical care (in Southern California, this can be seen most obviously in the ways in which winter storms that have minimal impact in San Diego and Los Angeles can destroy thousands of homes on the hills of Tijuana just across the border) could not enter into the simple narratives of El Niño stories.

While television may have been a central news provider for the El Niño story, the Internet was also a source of El Niño information and debate. Many Web sites devoted to the weather and the El Niño craze were put on-line in the winter of 1997–98, and, as is common on the Internet, they ran the gamut from fan sites to official high-tech scientific sites. The Web sites on El Niño demonstrate the ways in which the Web can be an important resource for information as well as the perfect forum for obsessive personalities. Local officials—and weather fans—increasingly use the Web to get up-to-date and in-depth weather analysis from sites operated by the NOAA, the Scripps Institute, and other organizations.<sup>34</sup>

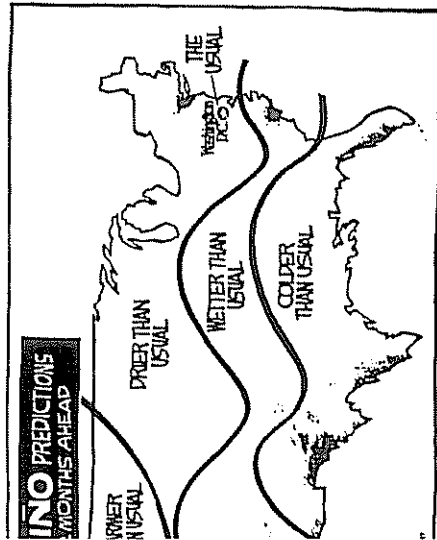
Personalized El Niño sites focused in particular on the story’s hype and on the creation of lists. Typical among these, for instance, was the El Niño Hotline of Doom ([www.primenet.com/~rfwatts/elinio.html](http://www.primenet.com/~rfwatts/elinio.html)), run by Los Angeles resident Hugh Stegman. Stegman, who has been interviewed about his site in the media, is a quintessential Web site bricoleur with a libertarian slant.<sup>35</sup> As a kind of ongoing rant about the media, he used the site to create—with the aid of Web participants—a list of El Niño hype. The site included, for instance, a list of verbs the *Los Angeles Times* used to describe a rainstorm (barrel, blow, chew, explode, flood, gnaw, hit, plunge, pour, push, ram, rip, roar, screech, shove, slam, soak, split, swamp, swat, sweep, swipe [savagely], and whip). Stegman’s site, like

34. See Sreenath Sreenivasan, “Forecast for the Internet: More El Niño Web Pages,” *New York Times*, 16 February 1998, D3.

35. Bill Briggs, “Arc Warm Currents of El Niño Generating a Storm of Hot Air?” *Denver Post*, 14 December 1997, D1.

32. Michael Warner, “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 248.

33. Molly Ivins, “Debate Dries Up on Global Warming,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1998, M5.



many Web sites, occupies a border between information and personal obsession, demonstrating the ways in which the Web legitimates behavior (keeping excessive lists, ranting about an official, fantasizing out loud) that might be construed as aberrant in another context, media or otherwise. (He eventually ran out of steam in September 1998, when his list of predictions hit the goal of one thousand.) Yet, Stegman's Web site also demon-

strates the ways that the Web can provide an illusion of participation and citizen action while obscuring political analysis. Stegman's site was fueled by anger at the media for its unconscionable focus on the El Niño story long before a drop of rain fell in the region. He and his fellow participants thus understand the Web to be a means of talking back to the media and a means of alternative production to the mainstream. The participatory illusion of the Web is thus based upon the notion that expressing opinion constitutes action, if not political engagement. But if the individualization that the Web can foster easily fits a myth of resistance through personal opinion, it also shows the ties of new technology to commodification. Indeed, the Web's appeal to the individual is often little different than an appeal to individual consumers through, in this case, the selling of preparedness.

In fall 1997, the fact that El Niño had the potential to create damages of significant economic impact upon Southern California was seen by local government officials as an impending burden and expense, yet was read by many local businesses as a potential boon for business. Cartoonists and headline writers produced a broad array of El Niño-inspired humor, all of which played off its Spanish nomenclature as well as its omnipresence. El Niño became "El Hypo," and editorials proclaimed it to be "La Oportunidad" and "El Niño—the O. J. Simpson of the Weather Channel."<sup>36</sup> In cartoons, El Niño was established as firmly entrenched in the American vernacular.

Slogans with an air of comedic importance also announced the arrival of El Niño in what could be termed the "Chicken Little" approach: "El Niño is com-

36. "La Oportunidad," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 October 1997, A18.

ing!" (electronic readout on a gas pump); "El Niño-ize your car (before it's too late)" (automobile repair shop); "Why does El Niño keep coming back? It's the cheese" (California cheese ad); "El Niño Margarita—I Survived El Niño on the glass" (Acapulco Mexican restaurant). At various local universities, El Niño also became a means to prod faculty about deadlines, with memos declaring "get your book orders in early, since El Niño could delay their shipment."

El Niño was the theme of fall 1997 sales. The voice spoken by these ads was one of anxiety coupled with a demand that citizens adequately protect themselves. The fear of an El Niño winter thus provided work and profit for roofers, sand suppliers, and hardware stores. The range of El Niño-inspired advertisements demonstrates the extent to which the fear of natural disaster can be applied to all areas of commerce through the selling of preparedness. The idea of preparedness not only borrows on both military and Cold War civic discourse, it also offers a sense of reassurance in the idea that one could possibly be prepared in life. To attach to a product the signified of preparedness is to tap into larger narratives of human anxiety—and thereby to state that it is possible to be prepared, among other things, for the arbitrary nature of life. Hence, the appeal of preparedness is precisely in the way that it can accommodate larger fears about death. It hardly needs to be stated that in California the primary fear of natural disaster is not about winter storms, floods, or even fires, but about earthquakes, the natural occurrence for which there is at present virtually no prediction capacity. The reassurance that Californians may have attained in preparing for the winter of 1997–98 by fixing their roofs and cars can thus be transposed onto the overriding fear of the potential "big one" that hangs over Southern California like a curse.

Yet, the narrative of preparedness does not simply operate at the level of privatized commercialism. It allows commercial businesses to speak the language of civic government and to place themselves in the protective voice with which governments speak to citizens in times of disaster.



Municipal governments in Southern California used the El Niño weather event as a means of reassuring their citizens of the functions of local government. In this light, the creation of the artificial sand dunes on the beach in Santa Monica can be seen not only as a minor obstacle for winter storms (in a serious winter storm, which, by the way, did not occur, they would have had little effect) but also as a performance to assure those who visit the beach and live near it that the government was doing something to protect them.

Several local businesses produced El Niño pamphlets for customers, in which they effectively spoke the language of the civic. For example, the local Von's Supermarket chain collaborated with the local NBC news station, KFWB news radio, and the American Red Cross on a pamphlet entitled "If El Niño Visits Southern California . . . We'll Be Prepared!" The pamphlet bears all the signifiers of civic participation—a place to list important telephone numbers and an emergency checklist—while it stresses the essential participation of NBC, KFWB, and Von's: "Lock your windows, doors, and turn off the utilities. If NBC4 or KFWB 980-AM predict heavy winds nail plywood over the windows. . . . Your local Von's markets are ready to prepare you for El Niño—they're a great resource for the nonperishable food, toiletries and other supplies you'll need."

The contemporary experience of citizenship is, of course, that of the citizen-consumer. Indeed, U.S. citizens are interpellated as citizens more effectively through advertising than through the traditional forms of electoral politics. Clearly, promotional tactics such as these are intended to speak to potential consumers as if the purchase of preparedness items or the viewership of the evening news is part of their role as citizens. Just as the Weather Channel constructs viewers as national and global citizens, television news viewership—in particular in times of disaster—constructs viewers as members of both local and national audiences. When businesses speak the language of the civic, they are thus couching consumerism in terms of duty. Interestingly, though, this duty is conceived as being different for citizens in different locales: if Californians are entreated to consume tactics of preparedness, citizens elsewhere are encouraged to consume California's disaster.

### California and the Narrative of the Apocalypse

Weather has long been central to apocalyptic narratives. Bad weather is seen invariably as an indicator of a world out of balance and a time of impending

doom.<sup>37</sup> Such narratives usually focus on specific locales, among which California ranks high. The central role of California in El Niño narratives is only partially attributable to the fact that California has been seriously damaged by past El Niño winter storms. California residents, like those in the rest of the country, see California as a site for natural disaster, or rather, as naturally a site of disaster. Hence, the idea that California will be damaged, if not destroyed, by natural disasters, or perhaps deserves to be destroyed by them, underlies many El Niño narratives. This apocalyptic narrative of California has been a primary theme in science fiction literature and film. It situates California, in particular Los Angeles, as a place on the edge of the abyss, teetering into the Pacific Ocean.

Unlike other parts of the country or the world that are subject to constant natural disasters, California is understood to be apocalyptic rather than merely unlucky. Even though Florida and southern coastal states are routinely hit by serious hurricanes resulting in billions of dollars of damage, there is no apocalyptic narrative attached to that region. Although India is regarded as the primary site of natural disaster in the world and people might imagine that it is "naturally" such a site, it is not depicted as the privileged place where the end of the world will begin.

The image of California teetering on the edge of disaster is, of course, not derived from El Niño but from earthquakes, which play a particular role in apocalyptic narratives precisely because they remain, despite geological understandings, deeply mysterious in origin. A serious winter storm can cause death and damage, but it is understood as a more intense version of a "normal" weather event. An earthquake, however, is always an anomaly. In other words, because earthquakes are the result of geological phenomena, they are not part of the weather but rather of a broader set of physical phenomena that are linked to the earth's status as a planetary body. An earthquake, like astronomical phenomena such as asteroids and solar anomalies, points to general properties of planets and the universe that are at the root of basic human anxieties about the meaning of life.

Doomsday scenarios for California, of the fringe religious, literary, and Hol-

37. One of the most recent examples of apocalyptic weather predictions is *The Coming Global Superstorm* (New York: Pocket, 2000) written by two conspiracy theorists, Art Bell and Whitley Strieber. The book asserts that global warming will precipitate a huge shift in the Gulf Stream, which will result in dramatic climate shifts that will create a new ice age in a period of months and kill the majority of the world's inhabitants. It is written in a cinematic style that is clearly geared toward adaptation as a Hollywood film.

lywood kind, also include the prospect of volcanoes, another primary element of apocalyptic narratives. Like earthquakes, this scenario can take on the quality of the routine. In December 1997, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a front-page article on how the potential eruption of Mammoth Mountain, an active volcano in the Sierras, would affect the water supply of the city.<sup>38</sup> This kind of story has the effect of normalizing disaster coverage at the same time that it plays into Southern California narcissism—the effects of such an eruption on Northern California and the Sierras is never discussed, nor is the highly problematic history by which Los Angeles acquired water rights to the region.

California is seen as the site of the impending apocalypse not only because of its earthquake-prone status but also because it is defined as the site of the future, with Los Angeles as the quintessential postmodern city. Because it is in relative terms a new city—one that came to be recognized as a national and global force only in the mid- to late twentieth century—and because of its design as a city of freeways and automobiles, Los Angeles has been consistently defined as a city of postmodernism in opposition to the modernism of cities such as New York and Chicago. Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, which is, in Mike Davis's terms, "Los Angeles's dystopic alter ego," served to establish this image of Los Angeles as an icon of postmodern space.<sup>39</sup> The apocalyptic narrative of a doomed future is thus attached to the city that signifies the future.

Declarations of the apocalyptic obsession with Los Angeles focus not only on its propensity for natural disaster but also on its supposedly smug and complacent lifestyle. This allowed El Niño coverage to fixate on California as the site of El Niño's ultimate destination. In other words, despite the destruction in South America and the drought-induced forest fires in Indonesia, the primary news story was that El Niño was meant for Californians. This revealed two forms of local arrogance: both a sense of entitlement—the right to build on beaches and hillsides where there are annual fires and landslides, even if it's just for a swimming pool—and the feeling that precariousness makes one special. This staking out of the land is thought to certify a particular kind of daring and rugged individualism—a taunt to nature.

Finally, the narrative that California deserves what it gets comes under the guise of a moralistic stance about consumerism and popular culture. This is a puritan narrative that sees Los Angeles as the symbolic site of Hollywood, and

38. Jeffrey Rubin, "Water Supply at Risk if Mammoth Erupts," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 1997, A1, A14.

39. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 359. It is ironic that Davis notes Scott originally intended to shoot the film in New York, but the costs were too high.

hence the source not only of a particular brand of upscale liberalism but also of crass television and film productions—a locale of rampant consumerism, conspicuous consumption, and greedy Hollywood operators. While a conservative view, this is also an East Coast position of intellectual arrogance and Old Left snobbery, for which Los Angeles is both anti-intellectual and lowbrow.

Perhaps the best-known argument that California is asking for the disasters that are visited upon it is Davis's controversial book, *Ecology of Fear*, which was released at the end of the 1997–98 El Niño season. Davis is a central political figure, indeed until quite recently a local hero, of Los Angeles, whose previous book *City of Quartz* is a bible of the political analysis of the city.<sup>40</sup> *Ecology of Fear* argues that the very existence of Los Angeles is an affront to nature, and that nature will take its revenge upon the city for its arrogant assumption that it can defy centuries of drought, fire, and seismic activity. Citing dire statistical evidence (much of it contested) about impending earthquakes, the increased incidence of mountain lion and killer bee attacks, the overbuilt hills that are routinely subject to wildfires, the overuse of water in an area that has had a six-hundred-year drought in the past, and the underreported incidence of tornadoes in Los Angeles, Davis paints an image of spiraling destruction at the hands of nature. He writes: "This all boils down to an unhappy but obvious proposition: the continuing clustering of disaster on 'ordinary' or extraordinary scales will inevitably erode many of the comparative advantages of the Southern California economy. . . . What is most distinctive about Los Angeles is not simply its conjugation of earthquakes, wildfires, and floods, but its uniquely explosive mixture of natural hazards and social contradictions."<sup>41</sup> In arguing that "cataclysm has become virtually routine," Davis correlates the economic strife and racial tension of Los Angeles with the relentlessness of natural disaster in Southern California. At the same time, he effectively holds up the narrative that California and Los Angeles deserve what they get. The culprits in his view are the city officials, developers, and wealthy residents of the city who have gated themselves in, have built expensive homes on the beaches and fire-prone hills, and have the arrogance to believe that their wealth will protect them from natural disaster.<sup>42</sup>

40. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).

41. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 54.

42. Davis's book has been the subject of considerable local controversy, with several reporters accusing him of bending the facts and writing an exaggerated and hyperbolic treatise. Although his style and accuracy deserve scrutiny, the intensity of this debate is more attributable to a conservative response to his class critique. See, for instance, an extended front-page story in the *Los Angeles Times* that accused Davis of inventing statistics and making up the details of news stories. Ted Rohlfich, "Seer of L.A. or Blinded by Its Light?" *Los Angeles Times*, 13 April 1999, A1, A22, A23.

Davis's book is an example of how politically disabling the story of disaster as told through science invariably is. Despite its leftist political claims, *Ecology of Fear* offers a paranoid narrative that ultimately screens over the story of social disaster with one of natural disaster. Like weather media, Davis's book is enamored with scientific statistics and the story of nature, which then overpowers its argument about how the city planners and developers of Los Angeles, motivated by greed, placed the lives of millions of residents in the path of routine disaster. Indeed, Davis has just released a new book, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, that takes this analysis of weather science one step further. The book argues that El Niño climate changes interdicted in deadly ways with imperialist politics in the devastating late-nineteenth-century famines of China, India, and Brazil, resulting in more than 50 million deaths. As in *Ecology of Fear*, Davis reads the weather's impact through the framework of politics, arguing that "ecological poverty" — created in these countries through colonialist oppression — worked to create the contemporary Third World and its particular "vulnerability to extreme climate changes."<sup>43</sup>

Davis's fascination with natural history and the love of data culminates in *Ecology of Fear* when he ends the book by analyzing a satellite image of the heat of the Los Angeles riots. Here, one can feel that technology's rendering of this image is ultimately for Davis a kind of thrill. In reiterating that the destruction of Los Angeles has been depicted throughout the century as a "victory for civilization," Davis seems unintentionally to embrace the position that the only "solution" is to leave town.<sup>44</sup> In fact, he himself did leave town after publishing the book; he now lives in Hawaii.

The idea that California deserves what it gets because of its conspicuous wealth; its status as the primary source of popular culture production in the world; its relentless sunshine; and its reputation for New Age philosophy, body worshipping, and mindless leisure activity relies, of course, on stereotypes of the actual residents of Southern California. At the same time, the sociogeography of

43. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), 310.

44. I have to say that I experienced the same paranoia and desire to move out of the state after reading the first chapter of *Ecology of Fear* that I felt immediately after experiencing the Loma Prieta earthquake, and I think that this is precisely the kind of reaction that Davis intends from a middle-class resident such as myself. Davis's next book, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (London: Verso, 2000), was apparently a response to criticism that he was declaring a predominantly Latino city to be uninhabitable.

Davis  
Southern California means that weather phenomena such as El Niño have a tendency to wreak the most havoc on upscale neighborhoods in the hills and along the beaches. Whereas in much of the developing world disaster appears to be the province of the poor, who live in unstable structures on flood plains or hillsides subject to mud slides, or whose subsistence living is easily disrupted by drought and excessive rains, in Southern California the most perilous living areas — such as Malibu beaches and the Hollywood Hills — are the most coveted. Delight in watching California disaster coverage is thus in part about the pleasure that exists for ordinary citizens in seeing celebrities sifting through the refuse of their destroyed beach houses and the resulting comfort viewers derive from witnessing the problems of those who seem to have it all. Hence, watching disaster footage is often a form of class vengeance.

The two narratives that California is the site of the future apocalypse and that it deserves this as punishment for having "invented the concept of life-style"<sup>45</sup> are joined by a third, which is that this propensity for natural disaster is crucial to California identity. Here, California narcissism includes its belief that it is special in the world of natural disasters. Los Angeles-based science fiction writer Steve Erickson states, "Navigating catastrophes is our stock in trade in California. . . . The End of the World is California's middle name; it's in our job description as a place. . . . Where else are they going to end the world, Wisconsin? . . . The very occupation of California — a fractured, partially liquefied terrain of arid deserts, hostile mountains, dense woods and craggy seashores — is an act of recklessness; and like all acts of recklessness, it's motivated by both the hubris of transcendence and the rapture of self-annihilation. . . . Take our apocalypse from us and we are nothing."<sup>46</sup> Erickson defines the status of California as "The Moment of the Held Breath," when the hot and dry Santa Ana winds blow in the fall and "everyone from Malibu to the Palisades to the Hollywood Hills holds his or her breath waiting for the wrong match struck at the wrong moment." If, as Erickson states, Californians, and in particular Los Angeles residents, pride themselves on their disaster status, so much so that it is essential to the regional character, then the coverage of the 1997–98 El Niño necessitated a narcissistic approach. Although El Niño was portrayed in the media as a global event, which had broad-reaching impact throughout the world, coverage of the event made clear that California was its ultimate site of meaning.

45. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 66.

46. Steve Erickson, "Cloudy, Chance of Annihilation," *New York Times*, 16 September 1997, A31.

Again and again, these apocalyptic narratives of natural disaster and the weather function as a means of eliding politics and class. In defining Los Angeles and Southern California through an array of media-generated stereotypes, the gleeful story of Los Angeles's deserved demise erases class differences and ignores the fundamental differences by which people experience disaster because of their economic status. Yet, at the same time, even as it wants to engage with such political questions, Davis's book offers such a persuasive argument—with its love of data, statistics, and science—for the proposition that Los Angeles should not exist in "natural" terms that it constitutes another form of nontrans-formative politics. Simply put, if *Ecology of Fear* makes one want to get in the car and immediately drive east, then it offers little understanding of what a noncapitalist intervention into disaster politics would mean. The scientific discourse of disaster prediction, precisely because of its criteria of what constitutes knowledge, produces narratives that do not allow for individual agency or political analysis.

These narratives are ultimately about the question of survival—the fear that we will not survive, the desire to survive, and the inability to say what it means to survive in the context of daily life. In the story of the weather and the survival of dramatic natural disasters, the viewers of weather media are asked to reassure themselves that they can survive the everyday difficulties of life as they know it. This is part of the pull of the Weather Channel, its relentless ongoing presence that insures, in some sense, a future. The story of weather disaster is about finding meaning in survival.

In the winter of 1997–98, the fact that El Niño was the reason for everything became a kind of shared public joke in California. Bad moods, ant infestations, changes in world economics, all were attributed to El Niño. While there is a level at which this can be read merely as a kind of collective humor, it was also part of a larger struggle for meaning. El Niño was not simply a potentially destructive weather system; it was a master narrative to which all changes could be ascribed. As such, it can be understood as fulfilling the role of a conspiracy narrative. In conspiracy narratives, all events are connected, there are no coincidences, and everything is subject to a master plan, orchestrated by unseen forces. While it is commonly understood that conspiracy theories tap into the anxiety of people's lives, I would argue that they also provide comfort in portraying elements of life as components of a larger structure. Conspiracy theories allow people to vent their frustrations at their feelings of powerlessness at the same time that they can provide a mixture of anxiety and comfort in conceiving how power works. A

conspiracy narrative thus creates meaning through connection. As such, El Niño became the *über* explanation for all events, which produced various meanings: California is receiving its comeuppance for its complacency, an angry nature is wreaking revenge on the world for its indifference, the apocalypse is at hand, and the world is connected through its weather.

It is the very establishment of meaning, some meaning, that matters. In creating an overreaching narrative for the weather, El Niño provided an explanation for that thing which is perceived to be the most uncontrollable, the most arbitrary, and the most chaotic. It established a continuum of events across the world, from the drought and forest fires in Indonesia to ice storms in Canada, from West Coast storms and mud slides to fires in Mexico and the tornadoes and hurricanes in Florida. The message was more than a simple one of global unity—nature has a coherent story and we are all connected by weather/nature—it was a story that made sense of the irrational aspects of tragic events, the violence of difference, and the arbitrariness of death. Hence, viewing El Niño through the media's lens became a form of witnessing. This was weather with a purpose, and, as such, an indicator of a larger purpose in life. As witnesses to El Niño, viewers were not only able to exercise their voyeuristic tendencies in seeing tragedy and disaster wreaked on others, they also were allowed to feel like witnesses to history, witnesses to the end of the twentieth century, and, finally, witnesses to some moment of significance.

The weather is the site of a production of knowledge that functions as a means to erase political agency and to substitute the activity of witnessing in its place. Watching it becomes the central experience; indeed it subsumes all other experiences. The weather viewer feels connected to the world of weather twenty-four hours a day, with the Weather Channel as a place where one is safe and protected by technology. The weather citizen is interpellated within a set of narratives that range from the duties of consumerism to the vagaries of fate. The weather, we are told, is uncontrollable, dramatic, and exciting, yet science has given us the capacity to predict it. The government and the media have it under control. Prediction, it is stated, will save us. Prediction, a form of knowledge that is short-lived and of limited capacity, is seen as a shield against the future. If only, we are asked to think, we could be prepared.

#### Coda

My father is a serious viewer of the Weather Channel, and, as I learned while writing this essay, so are the fathers of many of my friends. When I visit my parents, I expect to see the familiar weather maps and scrolling local forecasts on the television throughout the day. But the Weather Channel did not make my father a weather fan. I grew up in a household filled with gadgets and new technologies—electric toothbrushes, carving knives, and blankets; complicated alarm, telephone, and intercom systems—among which weather devices, such as barometers and rain gauges, were always a part. Yet, it seems as if he had been waiting for the Weather Channel to be invented, so perfectly has it become a part of his weather-watching routine.

When I was young, I of course experienced my father's interest in gadgetry as a form of control and felt the need to rebel against it—to deliberately forget how a system worked or to refuse to read the endless instruction sheets given to me on the household devices. As I got older, I was able to see that behind my father's desire for control was a much more complex set of needs and concerns, an understanding of the arbitrary nature of weather, and the desire to protect his family from it. If you can know what to expect from the weather, than you can handle the rest. You can watch out for others.

In his essay "The Weather Channel," Steven Vincent defines his father's daily viewership of the Weather Channel as a form of nostalgia for a world without politics: "Actually, my father's fascination with The Weather Channel is quite complex, I realize. Call it a *nostalgia for the irrational*: a yearning for a world where nature—and not the cacophonous demands of women, the poor, minorities—reigns supreme. . . . Until recently, sports provided him with this retreat into the natural. But with their increasing politicization—the strikes and free agents and enormous salaries and owners moving franchises at the drop of a stadium bond-issue—the purity and naturalness of the games are gone. What's left but weather?"<sup>47</sup> I now see my own father's weather watching as a gesture in the face of a world that is out of control in both the modern and postmodern sense. As a man of modernity, my father monitors the weather where his children are throughout the day. Although I live twenty-five-hundred miles away, I know that he knows what the weather in California is every day. In this light, monitoring the weather is about love, the expression of concern for those whom we know that we ultimately have no power to protect. I see him, among the widely scat-

47. Steven Vincent, "The Weather Channel," *North American Review* (March/April 1997): 6.

tered and unseen community of aging fathers and retired businessmen around the country, watching the Weather Channel every day, keeping the forces of the unpredictable at bay.

**Marta Sturken** is an associate professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), *Theima & Louise* (2000), and, with Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2001).