Proposal Copeland Colloquium 2013-2014

“Catastrophe and the Catastrophic”

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We propose that the Copeland Colloquium for 2013-14 take as its theme “Catastrophe and the Catastrophic.”

For the last several years several of us have been meeting and reading together on this theme. We have hosted two visiting faculty members who have offered courses on catastrophe, and we will be offering a jointly taught colloquium course on this theme in the spring of 2013. We hope to focus and extend our ongoing work by organizing and hosting the Copeland Colloquium.

Large-scale disaster has emerged as a defining feature of our times. From New Orleans to Haiti, Bhopal to Fukushima, we appear to live in an “age of catastrophe.” In each instance, catastrophic events offer powerful reminders of the fragility of social and institutional architectures, making painfully evident vulnerabilities in our social organization that might otherwise remain invisible. In this regard, catastrophic events possess a revelatory quality: by disrupting the operation of fundamental mechanisms and infrastructures of our social order, they lay bare the conditions that make our sense of normalcy possible. And just as such events seem to mark a destructive end, they simultaneously herald new possibilities.

This proposal represents an important step in our ongoing effort to develop a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to the study of the catastrophic, one that has thus far engaged humanists and social scientists to explore the way humans make meaning in anticipation of, and in response to, catastrophes. We see great possibilities of extending this interdisciplinary collaboration to include colleagues from environmental studies as well as from the natural and physical sciences and would hope to use the Copeland as a vehicle for doing so. Thus conceived, this project aims to bring together scholars of literature, history, anthropology, law, politics, biology, and environmental studies to analyze the roles catastrophe plays in our imaginative lives, the challenges it poses for representation, the medical, legal, and political tests
posed by disaster as well as the role catastrophe and the catastrophic play in creating a more resilient world.

Discerning the meaning of catastrophe stands at the center of an array of religious, literary, political, legal, and medical traditions. Across these traditions, catastrophic events represent both a challenge (to representation, to man’s faith in God, to the rule of law, to the limits of science, to the viability of biological life) and a site of intense hope and creativity. In this regard, catastrophe can be approached as a moment of manifestation – a crise revelatrice that simultaneously exposes what had been previously veiled and exposes the limits of human capacity to master our world.

From Oedipus Rex to King Lear, from Voltaire’s poem “On the Lisbon Earthquake” to Camus’s The Plague, from Eliot’s Waste Land to the apocalyptic vision of Hieronymus Bosch, from Pushkin’s The Bronze Horseman to Don DeLillo’s White Noise, the effort to represent the catastrophic, as well as its role in various imaginings of our relationship to God, nature, and the state, is a longstanding and contentious one. In art and literature the catastrophic becomes the springboard for inquiry into the destructive underside of human behavior or its resilient, recuperative potential. Indeed, for some critics, one measure of the quality of art and literature is its capacity to represent the catastrophic.

Imaginings of the catastrophic and apocalyptic also have a long religious history. Across innumerable religious traditions, such events raise fundamental questions about the meaning of human suffering and the role of suffering in the living of ethical lives. Where some catastrophes may confirm one’s ethical commitments, others – such as mass exterminations in the name of political causes – invite us to think about the nature of evil and to test the limits of our ethical commitments. Some contend that this invitation is impossible to respond to, that catastrophe exposes the limits of our capacity to understand evil or represent the suffering that catastrophe engenders. Are there some events, e.g. the Holocaust, for which no system of human representation can be adequate or that require us to rethink the nature of our moral understandings?

In the modern era there has been a progressive shift of emphasis from a consideration of disasters as “acts of God” – unpreventable and largely unforeseeable events that allow no useful preparation and produce no liability – to a growing perception of catastrophes as human-made affairs. With this shift, human suffering and the limits of representing the catastrophic have entered into political and scientific debates about the technical management of risk. At the same time, more than in any other era, catastrophic events have become global phenomena – where the misery of disastrous events attracts humanitarian responses from throughout the world. Not unlike literary attempts to represent the catastrophic or religious efforts to make sense of suffering, we find in these responses a deep-rooted desire to decipher the meanings of disaster.

Contemporary efforts to make sense of catastrophic events show that patterns of damage and suffering that disasters generate follow fault-lines with a distinctive social history. Catastrophic
events introduce a radical level of discontinuity in everyday life, but the trajectory of their impact responds to ongoing patterns and configurations of our social organization. Disasters have institutional and political genealogies, often with a distinctive national character. Moreover, there is a social distribution of the exposure, vulnerability, and suffering associated with catastrophes. As the sociologist Kai Erikson writes, “If one were to draw a map of places in which disasters are most likely to strike, we would also be sketching at least an approximate map of places in which the vulnerable are most likely to be gathered.”

Although catastrophes may end up exacerbating inequalities and discriminations, they can also serve to make the plight of vulnerable and underprivileged groups strikingly visible – by making inequality manifest in the rawest, most unadulterated way, as inequality with respect to bare survival and physical suffering. It is difficult to forget the iconic photographs commissioned by the Farm Security Administration of victims of the “Dust Bowl” and the floods that afflicted farming communities in 1930s America, or the more recent footage of New Orleans residents unable to flee Hurricane Katrina. In each case, it took a catastrophe to make visible the otherwise “normal” and precarious living conditions of deprived and discriminated groups.

This colloquium will invite applications from scholars whose work will help us understand catastrophe and the catastrophic at a time when our societies are directing an unprecedented level of resources and ingenuity to anticipating and mitigating catastrophic events. We will use the Copeland to engage the College in a year-long effort to examine the role of catastrophe in art, literature, religion, law, science, and politics. Among the things we hope to do with the Copeland Colloquium is to explore the history of catastrophe and responses to it within multiple cultural, political, and religious contexts and legal, political, and humanitarian responses to catastrophe during times when the sudden, discontinuous, and disastrous event has become, perhaps paradoxically, a structural component of our political imagination. We will reach out to colleagues across the campus and to students in producing a colloquy that we believe will be important both at Amherst and in the world beyond the college.

**Program and Budget**

In the 2013-14 Copeland Colloquium, we would like to host four fellows. They might include philosophers, historians, artists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, literary and cultural theorists, and scientists interested in catastrophe and the catastrophic. Some fellows may be nominated by us and some may be identified by other members of the Amherst Faculty. But we intend to advertise and invite applications both nationally and internationally.

During the year each fellow would give at least one public lecture, which we would publish online in the form of a working paper. We would invite them to speak in our classes, arrange for them to offer workshops in various departments, work with them to organize a “teach in” on

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catastrophe. They would play a crucial role in our ongoing conversation. They would, in addition, help us organize and host a one-day conference on our theme to which we would invite six additional scholars from outside Amherst, again from a variety of disciplines.

We would also like to continue the Copeland practice of holding regular lunches with the fellows, advertising and inviting interested students and colleagues to join us to talk generally with our fellows but also to engage in discussion about some concrete and topical issue related to our theme. At these lunches fellows would present their work, we would share our work, and we would read and discuss articles/essays of common interest.