

CACOPHONY OF DISASTER

INTERPRETING HOUSTON'S MANY VOICES IN HARVEY'S AFTERMATH



ROBERTO E BARRIOS

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4:00 - 5:20 PM • Honors Commons, 212 M.D. Anderson Library

Roberto E. Barrios is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. During the last 20 years, he has conducted research on post-disaster reconstruction and mitigation in Honduras, New Orleans, Southern Illinois, Southeastern Mexico, and Houston. His research has been published in a number of academic journals, including: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *Human Organization*, *Disasters*, *Identities*, and *Anthropology News*. He is the author of *Governing Affect: Neoliberalism and Disaster Recovery*, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

Anthropologists define disasters as processes that are given form (who is affected and how, what is destroyed) and magnitude (number of fatalities, quantity of material loss) by human practices that enhance the socially disruptive and materially destructive capacities of geophysical phenomena, contagious diseases, and technological “accidents.” Furthermore, the effects of catastrophic events often manifest along socially created fault lines of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Consequently, disaster anthropology upholds the possibility that a single catastrophic event may be experienced very differently by the members of a community depending on their socio-economic positionality.

In its aftermath, Harvey was often represented in mainstream media as an “equal opportunity disaster,” suggesting that the magnitude of climate-change related rainfall brought to Texas by the hurricane effectively flattened socio-economic differences. This presentation uses ethnographic data gathered in four areas of Houston from October 2017 to January 2019 to make the case that the catastrophe triggered by Harvey was anything but an equal opportunity disaster. Instead, this disaster extended well beyond the temporal boundaries of hurricane-triggered floods, and Houstonians continue to experience this catastrophe, its antecedents, and aftermaths in very different ways depending on their social positionalities.

Department of **Comparative Cultural Studies**

Seminar Series: **The Politics of Difference**

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