

Queering Disasters: Embodied Crises in Post-Harvey Houston

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Abstract

This project addresses how neoliberal expansion complicates disaster recovery for queer communities in an urban context looking specifically at how disasters, disease, and marginalization operate as interlocking systems of oppression for queer people in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017. This research draws upon anthropological studies of disasters, urban studies, critical medical anthropology, and queer theory to employ a queer political ecology that combines understandings of disasters and diseases as socio-political and ecological phenomena with queerness as a set of culturally constructed vulnerabilities that carry embodied effects. Starting from the understanding that disasters more heavily impact groups that already face some form of social or economic marginalization, this project focuses on the Montrose, Houston's most prominent queer neighborhood, as a community that has struggled with gentrification prior to Harvey as well as the impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In this context, this project explores how interrelated structural and environmental crises are exacerbated not only by Hurricane Harvey but by neoliberal social and economic policies during the disaster recovery process.

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Introduction

Often, in public discourses, conversations around disasters focus on the natural hazard while paying little attention to conditions that otherwise inform experiences of the event (Adams 2013:10). However, as global climate change continues to feed into an environment prone to extreme climatic events, activists in afflicted areas are attempting to change the narrative to focus on how disasters exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities and how neoliberal policies operate in these contexts. My goal for this project is to investigate how neoliberal expansion complicates disaster recovery for queer communities in an urban context. To do so, I explore the ways by which disasters, disease, and marginalization can operate as interlocking systems of oppression for queer people in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, which devastated Houston in 2017. In this research, I draw upon anthropological studies of disasters, urban studies, critical medical anthropology, and queer theory to employ a queer political ecology approach that combines understandings of disasters and diseases as socio-political and ecological phenomena with queerness as a set of culturally constructed vulnerabilities. In this framework, I define ecology as including the built and natural environment. For the purposes of this project, I use the term “queer” in reference to people as an umbrella term to signify any person or group that experiences systemic discrimination and marginalization as the result of a non-normative sexual or gender identity. I choose to use this term instead of “LGBT+” or other identifiers in most cases because many of the LGBT+ people involved in this project, including myself, identify as queer to deemphasize our specific sexual and gendered identities to instead focus on the political entanglements of being queer. I use the term “queer” in this way to highlight the active political and social struggle that queer people are engaged in as well as the radical transformations that can emerge from that struggle. Subsequently, I also use “queer” in queer political ecology to

conceptualize how queer marginalization and sociality are embodied processes, meaning queerness carries biological consequences. Doing so allows me to think about how queerness interacts with both the built and natural environment and how queer bodies themselves are facets of the environment. Through this definition of queer political ecology, I utilize syndemics as a framework within medical anthropology to draw together these embodied aspects of queerness and of marginalization to map out their interactions within urban processes and disaster and to understand their compounding detrimental effects on people's bodies. Thus, the goal here is to understand disasters beyond heteronormative and cisnormative (cis- as in reference to people whose gender identities align with their sex assigned at birth) assumptions, to question the universality of certain heterosexual and cisgender experiences, and to lay bare the ways in which gender and sexual politics construct and instruct our lives.

Starting from the understanding that disasters more severely affect communities already experiencing some form of social marginalization, this project examines how existing forms of social inequality already placing queer populations at a disadvantage in Houston were further exacerbated by the disaster and its recovery process (Adams 2013). By highlighting the material and social realities of queer people and how gender and sexual politics affect the experiences of disasters, my hope is that this project succeeds in "queering" the dominant approaches within disaster studies that are often based on heteronormative paradigms. I specifically highlight how post-disaster gentrification exacerbates the on-going crisis of housing insecurity among queer people and how the health needs of queers affected by HIV/AIDS are impacted by disasters given the community's persistent relationship with the epidemic while paying attention to how queer people build and rely on systems of mutual aid in the absence of institutional and structural support during the disaster recovery process.

Background

In August of 2017, a category 4 storm struck the city of Houston, TX. The heavy rains and floods damaged much of the city while displacing whole communities. During the summer of 2018, I participated in a small research team with Dr. Raja Swamy working on an NSF-funded project looking into environmental racism in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Interview data confirmed for us that, like most disasters, the effects of Hurricane Harvey are still felt years after the storm. By the time that we started our research, many historic neighborhoods had gone through radical transformations, mostly as a result of properties being bought up to fuel redevelopment in those areas. Prior to the storm, the steady gentrification of many of Houston's neighborhoods was already observable (Podagrosi and Vojnoic 2008; Podagrassi et. al. 2011; Qian 2011; King and Lowe 2018). Some scholars have observed that even some middle- and upper-class areas of Houston have experienced a form of supergentrification where that are radically transformed for a more exclusive elite class (Podgrassi et. al. 2011:1913). In a report from the Houston-based Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Wendie Choudary, Jie Wu, and Mingming Zhang (2018) state that neighborhoods consisting of renters with low incomes and low access to higher education are particularly susceptible to being targeted for redevelopment. This is especially true for communities of color that are often renters living in underserved neighborhoods and thus have limited pathways for social mobility. Although the report from Choudary et. al. (2018) draws from data from 1990 up to 2016, upon reflection during the wake of Hurricane Harvey, they argued that gentrification and housing insecurity would intensify as damage from the storm was leaving many neighborhoods susceptible to redevelopment. Lower-income homeowners or renters who could not afford to repair their homes were being forced out

of their neighborhoods, and the rapidly rising cost of living was continuing to force lower-income households to relocate.

It was during this project with Dr. Swamy in 2018 that I started developing my own research questions and became interested in the Montrose neighborhood. Affectionately referred to as the “Gay-borhood” by native Houstonians, the Montrose is the historic core of Houston’s queer community. Originally established in the 1920s as a suburb, by the 1970s, gay men began moving into the neighborhood, gentrifying it, and replacing the old Greek community that lived there (Qian 2011; Collins et. al. 2017). According to narratives that I gathered while in the field, by the time that gay men began moving into the Montrose, the neighborhood was mostly populated by elderly Greek widows, and the two communities existed symbiotically although the details of how were not made clear. Many of the gay men would move in with the widows and take care of them until they eventually passed.

Discrimination and antagonism from right-wing conservatives encouraged the queer community then to consolidate their political and social power. To secure representation in the local political system, queer Houstonians used bloc voting strategies by moving to the Montrose, thereby consolidating their political power and creating an enclave (Collins et. al. 2017:77). In recent years, the Montrose’s vibrant atmosphere and appeal has drawn new renters and developers. Land-use patterns in the neighborhood show a large mixture of residential and commercial areas (Qian 2011). As businesses with no ties to the queer community enter the area, bringing with them a new crowd of middle-class consumers, queer people are increasingly pushed out. In 2014, Houston Pride was moved from Montrose to downtown due in part to complaints from new residents (Downing 2014). This move was met with protest from many of the community’s long-time residents. For the Montrose, the problem of gentrification was

prevalent before Hurricane Harvey, and this project seeks to investigate the ways that it has grown since.

Research Questions

Before the devastation wrought by Hurricane Harvey, Houston's queer population was entrenched in a decades-long struggle to defend its rights to the city, as a combination of social conservatism and neoliberal urban planning sought to promote gentrification of the Montrose (Qian 2011; Collins et. al. 2017). During Houston's real-estate boom in the 1990s, affordable housing units in the Montrose were steadily replaced by high-rent apartments and townhouses. This wave of gentrification-led redevelopment over the last three decades has led to an increase in the cost of living in the area putting a strain on lower-income queer people. Here, I investigate the processes and dynamics of post-disaster gentrification on a queer community, paying close attention to how the process particularly affects lower-income queer people who were already dependent upon unconventional means of support, such as queer community resources and various forms of mutual aid. Along this line of questioning, I will interrogate what it means for queer Houstonians to assert their "right to the city," given the city's entanglement with global capitalist production.

While post-disaster recovery for the queer population of the Montrose has been a struggle to stave off redoubled efforts to gentrify the neighborhood, members of the community simultaneously must contend with the exacerbated problem of access to already scarce resources. Access to adequate medical resources was an on-going issue for Houston's queer population especially for those who were grappling with the long-term health and social consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As such, many queer individuals have been relying upon communal solidarities and mutual aid in the face of public ostracization and stigma. Drawing upon a queer

political ecological approach, I will examine the effects of the exacerbated social instability brought on by Hurricane Harvey on access to HIV/AIDS-related health resources for residents of Montrose.

Research has shown that enclaves like Montrose were created by queer communities as a refuge, and these communities often act as chosen families for those who have experienced rejection from blood relatives (Weston 1997; Ramirez Valles 2011; Compton and Baumle 2012). As evidenced in previous disasters like Hurricane Katrina, stigma against queer people affected access to resources that were essential for recovery (Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014). Faith-based aid groups, housing programs that focus on traditional households, and cissexist or otherwise queerphobic medical care are among the resources or services that are inaccessible to queer individuals recovering from disaster (Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014). I will investigate how queer strategies of communal solidarity and mutual aid have provided alternative channels for support in the years since Hurricane Harvey while also paying attention to how gentrification and displacement have affected these networks.

Literature Review

Disaster studies

Public understandings of disaster focus mostly on a singular event, the natural hazard. For anthropologists such as Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996), disasters are defined by their human impact. Hazardous events such as earthquakes or tornadoes that do not affect people are simply basic elements of nature. In Oliver-Smith's (1996) words, "disasters signal the failure of a society to adapt successfully to certain features of its natural and socially constructed environment". Disaster literature refers to this inability to adapt to the environment as a

“vulnerability” (Oliver-Smith 1996; Faas 2016). Thinking in terms of vulnerability allows researchers to contest the aspects of disasters that are deemed natural and question the role that humans play in constructing them (Faas 2016). Critical disaster scholars are thus concerned with the unequal distribution of vulnerability across varying populations, particularly among socially, politically, and economically marginalized groups.

Disaster studies today is rightly concerned with the impacts of neoliberalism in the constitution of disaster vulnerability (Johnson 2011; Adams 2013). As the prevailing economic philosophy since the early 1970s, neoliberalism privileges privatization and the growth of the private sector while restructuring and deregulating the ways in which industries interact with the environment, cutting back social spending, and pushing back against gains made by labor and social struggles (Johnson 2011). While this ideology promises that a free market guarantees a successful and efficient society, neoliberal policies have wreaked havoc on societies and the environment, producing outcomes that are unsustainable for either (Johnson 2011; Adams 2013).

Inequalities in the disaster experience and the subsequent recovery efforts as a result of neoliberal strategy can be observed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2004. Prior to Katrina, New Orleans was a major economic hub with colossal levels of wealth inequality. Many lower-income households, predominantly consisting of people of color, lived near the levees as the real estate in these high-risk areas was cheaper. Johnson (2011) argues that these communities were made vulnerable due to the Army Corps of Engineers’ outsourcing the construction of these levees to private contractors in a move to save money by reducing the quality of the levees. Vulnerability to disaster is thus not a random and natural distribution but one that is human-made and is the direct consequence of profit.

The recovery effort for Katrina was perilous for many lower-income (predominantly African American) households and rife with inefficiencies. Adams (2013) argues that these inefficiencies were due to a political and economic system that prioritized profits and the needs of industries at the cost of providing better aid for those affected by Katrina. While upper-class households, many of whom lived far away from the levees, had access to resources and were able to call on their social connections for help in rebuilding their homes and businesses, many lower-income families re-experienced a form of disaster via displacement and inadequate resources from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (Adams 2013:57). Delays in the recovery process for these vulnerable populations resulted in physical and mental ailments due to stress and exacerbation of preexisting conditions (Adams 2013:95). Though suffering for the lower-class people that were most impacted by Katrina continued for years after, national media sources generally considered New Orleans to have recovered as soon as its businesses and markets were once again operational. The national media moving on from New Orleans and Katrina illustrate the discrepancy between thinking of disasters as temporally confined events versus disasters as moments in which on-going and pre-existing systemic issues, such as housing insecurity and environmental racism, are further exacerbated.

New Orleans' experience with Hurricane Katrina is instructive for several reasons. New Orleans and Houston are both metropolises sitting near the Gulf Coast and are thus vulnerable to hurricanes and floods, and both cities were undergoing neoliberal, pro-market policies prior to their respective disasters that have also left lower-income communities at risk. Houston's lack of zoning laws and tendency to favor industry and development makes it an environment much like New Orleans (Qian 2011; Choudary et. al 2018). Analyses that denaturalize the making of Hurricane Katrina through a critique of neoliberal, pro-market development policies serve as a

useful point of reference for the patterns in Houston in the wake of Hurricane Harvey (Johnson 2011; Adams 2013).

At the same time, critiques of heteronormative paradigms within existing Katrina literature help to inform my own research questions. Gary Richards (2010:521) argues that public discourses regarding Katrina in New Orleans were shaped by conservative Christian lenses that understood the city as a site of queer salaciousness and deserving of destruction. At the same time, Katrina destroyed the physical homes of queer people thereby problematizing the “closet” and forcing open the private lives of many queer people as storm waters flooded out people’s sex toys, pornographic magazines, and the like (Richards 2010:522). By arguing for a view of the city as a queer site, and of homes as closets, Richards situates queerness as deeply integral in shaping the disaster experience despite the lack of disaster literature that focus on these topics.

Urban Studies

The unequal distribution of vulnerability in Houston has been studied in terms of environmental racism (Bullard 1994). A key driver of the unequal distribution of vulnerability in Houston is the city’s trajectory of economic development that has prioritized various industries led by the world’s major fossil fuel corporations, as well as a host of real estate and construction industries (Bullard et. al. 2014; Podagrosi et. al. 2011; Collins et. al. 2017). Because of the economic relationships that it has through these mega-corporations, Houston could be classified as a global city, a concept from urban studies that describes cities playing major roles in global capitalist production, sites through which labor and production are spatially organized and articulated with markets (Oswin 2019:6). Thinking of these cities as conduits within a global economy allows scholars to interrogate the relationship between neoliberal, global markets with

urbanization and city planning (Oswin 2019:7). In a city like Houston, social policies such as urban development or zoning are pursued with a specific type of economic development in mind. A unique lack of zoning laws combined with an aggressive political drive towards profit via industry means that Houston's geographical and social landscapes are warped at will by commerce and industrial powerhouses (Podagrosi and Vojnovic 2008; Podagrosi et. al. 2011; Qian 2011; Collins et. al. 2017; King and Lowe 2018). Many of the lower-income neighborhoods are located close to toxic sites such as industrial production plants or refineries (Qian 2011; Bullard et. al. 2014).

While Bullard's research brings attention to the impacts of these policies on communities of color, other researchers have also shown that queer communities such as those in the Montrose are also victims of environmental injustice via exposure to carcinogens (Bullard 1994; Richards 2010; Bullard et. al. 2014; Gorman Murray et. al 2014; Collins et. al. 2017). For the Montrose specifically, the lack of zoning laws has resulted in a neighborhood with land use that is simultaneously residential and commercial (Qian 2011).

The gentrification experienced by many of Houston's poorer neighborhoods prior to Harvey has since increased in intensity (King and Lowe 2018). Much like in the case of New Orleans, post-disaster gentrification has added more pressure on lower-income communities. Without aid to repair damaged properties, poorer households are forced to sell off their properties to developer. Unable to pay higher housing costs, renters are evicted from their homes, often to make way for new construction (Johnson 2015). Given the trajectory of gentrification in many of Houston's neighborhoods prior to the storm, Houston exhibits similar patterns to New Orleans in terms of post-disaster gentrification under the logic of revitalizing the areas damaged by flood waters (Podagrosi and Vojnoic 2008; Podagrosi et. al. 2011).

Specifically, regarding the Montrose, officials are working to reorganize the neighborhood as an area for commerce and tourism (Qian 2011; Choudary et. al 2018).

Queer Urbanity

In cities like Houston, queer theory helps to push analysis past the fallacy that tensions behind gendered and sexual politics exist solely within a “heterosexual vs. homosexual binary”, though that may have historically helped to shape contemporary social structures (Cohen 1997; Oswin 2019:10). Instead, it is necessary to view problems of resource access, recovery, community, and health, as rooted in the pro-business attitudes of the city. Studies in urbanity are critical for this research project not just because of the context of Houston but because of how intricately linked urbanity is with queer theory. In her research on queer urbanity in Singapore, Natalie Oswin (2019:13) discusses how cities act as sites for gender and sexual possibilities, as well as regulation. Whereas cities are a space defined by modernity, Oswin argues that queerness is thus tied to urbanity due to the possibilities for queer identity through modernity. Oswin draws this idea from similar arguments such as those made by John D’Emilio (1983) on how queer identities have historically emerged under capitalism. The ways in which labor, specifically gendered labor, are organized under capitalism allows for identities to be formed beyond ideas of sexual desire, and cities like Singapore or Houston, as major capitalist centers, thus act as a nexus for queer expression (D’Emilio 1983; Oswin 2019).

In addition, cities as a physical space allow for queer sociality, how queer people interact and form relations with each other (Oswin 2019). Drag bars, cruising sites, political advocacy groups, and pride boards for example are aspects of queer sociality that are made possible in the city by having a mass of queer people physically within the same geographic space, something that proves difficult within rural contexts (Gray 2009:4). Thus, a queer right to the city carries a

double meaning for queer people. It involves the right to a physical home as well as the right to a relational community, such as the Montrose, both of which become threatened by processes of disaster or displacement. However, the latter of the two becomes more fragile once the cultural identity of a space like the Montrose is dismantled as is often seen during gentrification, that relational community is difficult to reform (Pull and Richard 2019).

Moreover, capitalism, modernity, and neoliberal policies do not guarantee an equitable standard of living for queer communities. According to Oswin (2019), economic hubs like Singapore shift away from illiberal sexual politics not as an embrace of progressive ideologies but as a strategy to encourage neoliberal economic development agendas. While urbanity and modernity may create gateways for queer expression, they also incentivize a politics that views queer acceptance as a quota to be met in order to appeal to markets. In order for global cities to maintain access to global markets, they must maintain a level of modernity that is often synonymous with a level of tolerance towards queer people (Oswin 2019:11). Dereka Rushbrook (2002:188) argues that cities may promote queer spaces as a strategy for accruing cultural capital, creating an air of cosmopolitanism, or simply appearing “cool.” In the case of many urban spaces such as the Montrose, modernity via a liberal cosmopolitan acceptance of queer identities is filled with many contradictions. Queerness is simultaneously necessary yet expendable. While queer bodies are valued as a niche consumer market, queer identities are transformed into commodities and aesthetics meant for consumption and regulated by marketability (Rushbrook 2002:183). The byproduct of neoliberal development as described by Oswin is an improved standard of living for a few, but rampant poverty, marginalization, and injustice for others.

Home and Queer Domicide

The current body of literature concerned with the heightened marginalization of queer people during a disaster event is small. As such, several scholars have called for a queering of disaster studies in hopes of contesting normative assumptions about the experience of a disaster (Balgos et. al. 2012, Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014, Gorman-Murray et. al. 2014). One of the most repressive aspects of disaster recovery policy is the emphasis on the household and the normative assumptions around what constitutes as a household (Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014). Throughout US history, conservative populist ideologies have focused on the exclusion of queer individuals, particularly gay men and lesbian women, from the concept of kinship (Weston 1991). In her analysis of queer kinship systems, Kath Weston writes that conceptions of kinship, both in the public and in academia, are rooted in the idea that familial ties can only be formed in heterosexual relationships. This strict view of families assumes that queer people are incapable of procreating, parenting, or establishing kinship ties and that queerness itself is the antithesis of the American family. Rejection from blood-relatives is a major driver for queer people to establish kinship bonds with peers and members of their community creating what they refer to as chosen families (Weston 1991). The legitimacy of chosen families, whether they be close friends, lovers, children, or any combination thereof, is heavily contested. Prior to the US Supreme Court's decision in favor of marriage equality in 2015, same-sex partners were not considered next of kin and were often denied critical privileges such as hospital visitation rights (Weston 1991; Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014). Disaster recovery programs that provide aid focused on traditional definitions of families or households thus ignore and delegitimize the various ways in which queer people form kinship bonds (Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014).

In addition to kinship, Gorman-Murray et. al. (2014) emphasize the importance of home making for queer people and the effects of losing their home during a disaster. For many members of the queer community, the making of a home is an act of resistance against heteronormative societies. The home is especially important for queer people as it operates as a space of relative privacy where queerness is protected and can be performed without threat of harassment or violence (Gorman-Murray et. al. 2014). Gary Richards (2010) highlighted the erosion of this boundary for gay men living in New Orleans as Katrina's flood waters washed out their homes and put on display all their private collections of sex toys, pornographic materials, and other queer sexual objects. Foregrounding these complexities, Gorman-Murray et. al. (2014) expand on the idea of domicide – defined as the “deliberate destruction of home by human agency in pursuit of specified goals” (Porteous and Smith 2001) – by describing the omission of queer populations from disaster policies as *queer domicide*.

Queer domicide not only refers to the destruction of homes during a disaster, but the destruction of neighborhoods and displacement of communities as well (Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014). Neighborhoods like the Castro in San Francisco or the Montrose in Houston can serve as extensions of the home for queer individuals (Gorman-Murray et. al. 2014). Expanding the concept of queer domicide to include the destruction or erasure of the neighborhood is important because it breaks away from individualistic ideas of the home and emphasizes the importance of community as a reason for why queer people choose to settle in a place like the Montrose. Thus, gentrification, especially post-disaster gentrification, as a process that displaces and erases the identity of a physical community results in the severance of social networks and the destruction of this extension of the home for queer individuals. Emil Pull and Ace Richard (2019) argue that for lower-income households, gentrification results in domicide because the individual

households are being displaced from their homes. Domicide via gentrification is a structurally violent act that carries many downstream effects as displaced people are forced to move into lower-income neighborhoods and displace others (Pull and Richard 2019). The above authors further highlight the temporal disposessions associated with the gentrification of neighborhoods as historical fixtures for a community are erased, physical landscapes are changed, and social imaginaries are rewritten.

With respect to queer enclaves like the Montrose, there is some tension between the arguments made by Oswin as opposed to Pull and Richard and Dominey-Howes et. al. On the one hand, neoliberal urban development enables, and one might even argue, welcomes queer identity through a deceptively accepting environment that encourages higher income queer residents suited for the sort of consumption envisioned in neoliberal urban development while excluding working class residents. Meanwhile, scholars writing on domicile draw a slightly different picture that sees overt violence in the form of displacement from the home and destruction of identity. Following the arguments put forth by Dominey-Howes et. al. and Pull and Richard, it can be argued that for queer enclaves like the Montrose, gentrification threatens the homes for all residents regardless of class. For lower-income queer people, gentrification leads to domicile through economic pressures such as increased rent and cost of living. For more affluent queer residents that are not as financially constrained, gentrification leads to domicile through the steady erasure of physical and social spaces around the community. What results from these bodies of literature are questions about the nuances and impacts of gentrification specifically amongst queer people.

HIV/AIDS and Syndemics

To get at the question of health for queer people, especially as it relates to HIV/AIDS, I draw from the literature in critical medical anthropology. Critical medical anthropology seeks to understand health and illness from a holistic, biological, sociocultural, and political economic perspective (Baer et. al. 2003). Through this understanding, many anthropologists define HIV as a social disease deeply embedded with cultural, political, ideological, and economic meaning (King and Winchester 2018; Moyer 2015; Baer et. al. 2003). Since the “Age of Treatment” during the 1990s when retroviral treatments for HIV/AIDS were becoming available for those who can afford them, anthropological research on HIV/AIDS has shifted focus to understanding how illness and mortality related to HIV/AIDS are impacted by socially constructed barriers to care as death resulted more so from lack of access to care than from the virus itself (Moyer 2015).

Several ethnographic works have cited stigma as a major barrier to care for people who are HIV-positive (Baer et. al. 2003; Mosack et. al. 2005; Ramirez-Valles 2011; Copeland 2017; Gnauck and Kellett 2017). Stigma from the association between HIV/AIDS and the gay community began in 1981 with the deaths five gay men in Los Angeles. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, queer rights activists focused on the ongoing epidemic and fought hard for the US government under Reagan to appropriate funds towards HIV/AIDS research (Brier 2009). Jesus Ramirez-Valles (2011) provides crucial insight into community efforts to address the epidemic by chronicling the life histories of eighty Latinx HIV/AIDS activists throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, many of whom were queer and HIV-positive themselves. His research showed how homophobia and transphobia negatively impacted people’s experiences with HIV as issues stemming from queer-related stigma such as ostracization from kin, lack of institutional support,

economic disenfranchisement, political pressure, and threats of violence not only acted as barriers to care but exacerbated a decline in health (Ramirez-Valles 2011).

Aside from queer-related stigma, poverty also acted as a barrier to health care. In their work among drug-users living with HIV, Katie Mosack, Maryann Abbot, Merrill Singer, Magaret Weeks, and Lucy Rohena (2005) found that navigating health care was difficult for people from low-income households. The simple act of arriving to a doctor's appointment on time is complicated by homelessness and lack of transportation. It is well recorded that queer people are often financially vulnerable due to being disproportionately affected by housing insecurity and job discrimination (Ramirez-Valles 2011; Dominey-Howes et. al. 2014). This is especially true among queer people of color as the discriminations they face as queer people are compounded by the racism they experience as people of color (Ramirez-Valles 2011). Among the eighty queer Latinx people across various social classes that Ramirez-Valles interviewed, many of those who were HIV-positive and eventually able to stabilize their health came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Ramirez-Valles 2011).

In thinking about how HIV/AIDS as a disease with many social implications may interact with other biosocial conditions, Merrill Singer developed the idea of syndemics during the 1990s. It has had broad applications especially within medical anthropology and political ecology. A syndemic is the synergistic relationship between two or more epidemics. Although often used to describe co-infections, Singer also has used syndemics to talk about interactions between viral and non-viral health issues such as HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. Other anthropological studies on HIV/AIDS have used syndemics to describe the interactions between HIV and the compounding of health issues by factors such as poverty, malnourishment, and environmental racism (Singer 2007). Talman et. al. (2013) use syndemics to conceptualize the

feedback loop produced by poverty, malnourishment, and HIV/AIDS for poor women in sub-Saharan Africa. They argue that each condition produces increased vulnerability to the next leading to a cyclical and synergistic relationship. In addition, when an individual succumbs to disease or starvation, their death creates a financial burden for their living relatives who then become susceptible to falling into the cycle (Talman et. al. 2013).

Researcher Positionality

My interest with the Montrose and disaster recovery for queer people comes from a sense of mutual solidarity. As a queer Vietnamese American, I knew upon starting my graduate studies that I wanted to work on issues of systemic oppression and marginalization, the same systems that have shaped my life. As an undergraduate, I devoted much of my time in student activism, namely on issues of race and sexuality. I view this research as an extension of that work. In addition, conducting research among queer people and people of color is something that is accessible to me. Like many queer people, I imagine myself as part of a global queer community and thus find safety in the often-understood solidarity between queer people. In conducting this research, I worked hard to develop an environment of mutual solidarity with my research subjects. Though I share a sense of identity with my research subjects, we are still different in our specific experiences.

In conducting this research, I have also come to realize that unlike my research subjects, as a representative of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I hold institutional power that many do not possess. Through writing this thesis, I am putting this privilege into practice by having an institution legitimize my words. This privilege is often not afforded to the people I have collaborated with for this project: drag queens, bartenders, sex workers, etc. Through this project, I am hoping to lend my platform to them, the activists and scholars of their own lives.

Methods

Fieldwork for this project started in the summer 2018. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many of my research plans had to be adapted and are rather non-traditional. As such, the insights for this project have been drawn from my experiences in Houston during three research trips in the summers of 2018 and 2019, as well as interview data from participants with whom I have had conversations either through Zoom or telephone throughout 2020 and 2021. Throughout my fieldwork, many participants asked that they be named while others requested that I use pseudonyms to refer to them. The participants for this project were current and former residents of the Montrose neighborhood, community organizers within the city, and staff members from two major community resources in the neighborhood (the Montrose Center and Legacy Community Health). Established as a mental health center by prominent members of the neighborhood in 1978, the Montrose Center is particularly important as it acts as a hub for most LGBT+ resources and organizations within the city.

I also draw from memory and my fieldnotes taken during in-person research conducted in 2018-19. In the summer of 2018, I attended Houston's Pride event in downtown. During my meetings with research participants, I traversed parts of the Montrose neighborhood, both on foot and by car. I visited coffee shops and restaurants during the day and explored drag bars and other features of nightlife at night. Outside of the Montrose, I also have explored many of the lower-income neighborhoods in the city such as Manchester and the 5th Ward, seeing first-hand how communities of color are forced into austerity while living next to the toxic industrial production plants that fueled the city.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, I was forced to conduct the rest of my "fieldwork" remotely. As such, I conducted a majority of my interviews through Zoom and phone interviews.

I made new contacts with people through social media and connections through friends of friends. In total, I have conducted six in-person interviews across three field visits during 2018 and 2019 before the pandemic. Throughout 2020 and 2021, I conducted two interviews over Zoom and seven interviews on the phone.

This part of my fieldwork came with many of its own hurdles. It is much easier for people to ignore email solicitations for interviews on Zoom than for in-person encounters. Many people preferred not dealing with the hassles of Zoom, so those interviews were conducted through phone. In some cases, I have not actually seen what some of my research participants look like thus losing out on some of the more intimate details during an interview such as facial expressions. In addition, asking people to recollect past traumatic experiences also during a traumatic on-going global pandemic presented its own problems.

Organization

The body of this thesis is organized into four chapters. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 each discuss the ethnographic materials that I have gathered during this research, organized by chronological time periods. Chapter 1 discusses the conditions in Houston and in the Montrose prior to Hurricane Harvey. Here, I lay out how people remember the neighborhood and how it has changed over the years. In Chapter 2, I focus on the immediate impacts of the storm. This chapter highlights how members of the queer community in Houston navigated survival during Hurricane Harvey. Chapter 3 looks at how the Montrose has changed in the years after the storm. This chapter looks at the effects of post-disaster gentrification on the neighborhood and its residents while paying attention to the multitude of disasters the Houston has faced since Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Finally, Chapter 4 of this thesis provides the analysis that I have developed through these ethnographic insights.

Chapter 1: Before the Storm

The Beast

My first experience with Houston, TX was on the flight into the city before the plane had even landed during the summer of 2018. I was taken aback by the sheer size of the city and its endless expansion across the landscape. As the pilot was maneuvering us slowly towards the ground, I looked out my window shocked to see how far the suburbs extended. Miles of identical houses stretched to cover the environment. My second experience was during my Uber ride from the airport to the Airbnb where I was going to stay. While on a map, the distance to my destination looked tiny, it was nearly an hour-long drive and cost \$59. I had grown up in large metropolises all my life, and yet, for the first time, I felt slightly overwhelmed with just how big Houston is as a city. At that time, I was a graduate research assistant working on a project to understand the impacts of Hurricane Harvey on communities already combatting environmental racism. I wondered how it is that a city this large could be flooded? But also, how can a city even get this large?

Houston's built environment is a manifestation of its socio-political landscape. Its non-stop development is the product of neoliberal profit-driven reinvestment and expansion. "Nothing is wasted in the city. If a building goes down, a bigger building comes up." Robbie, a Latinx bartender and manager at one of the Montrose's drag bars, tells me as we discuss the pace in which the city has been changing. In previous research on environmental racism in the city, activist often liken Houston and its insatiable hunger for development to that of a beast. The area where much of Houston's hunger for development has been focused on the Montrose neighborhood towards the center of the city. For the queer residents of the Montrose, Houston's

policy of neoliberal expansion and development has proven a major threat to their community as people are priced out of their homes and cultural landmarks are erased.

The Montrose

Of the people whom I have talked to, many have described the Montrose as a space that has always been diverse. The bohemian atmosphere of the neighborhood has been a huge draw for artists and queer people since the 80s. In 2021, I spoke on the phone with Crystal, a white lesbian and a former resident of the Montrose. Crystal had worked in the neighborhood at one of the bars for twenty-two years. I came across Crystal through an article in the local news about her work reviving art shows and markets in the Montrose that remind her of how the area used to be.

“I used to be a renter back then. I rented with my partner. The area was really diverse. It was huge for artists and LGBT+ people. A lot of people who moved to the Montrose came as they were being pushed out of their homes and their families. We used to have Q-Patrol who walked around the neighborhood to help everyone feel safe. It was a space where it felt safe for people like us to just be.”

Typically, for queer people, homemaking is important as the boundaries of the home create a private space where queer people can safely exist without worry of judgement from onlookers. However, for queer people living in enclaves like the Montrose, the idea of home extends past the physical boundaries of their house or apartment. Home includes all the social relations, community spaces, and strange landmarks throughout the neighborhood that create a social landscape where one feels safe. Within the neighborhood, there is less worry of how the way you walk or what you might wear give you away as gay or if your gender presentation

passes enough to be safe. I noticed the difference in how I felt during my interviews in the Montrose as opposed to during interviews that I did as part of my work in other areas of Houston. There was much less mental energy being spent to pass as a straight person. There was no worry if my identity as a queer person would lead to a negative reaction from people with whom I was talking.

Beyond feelings of safety, feelings of inclusion are also important in defining a space as a home. There are many stories of how members of the community at the Montrose have worked hard to be welcoming for queer people. According to Robbie, during the AIDS epidemic, the bar in which he worked installed pink lights everywhere because “everyone’s complexion looks good under pink lights.” Every Thanksgiving, there is a community event to provide a space for people to enjoy the holidays especially if they are not able with their families of origin. Staff at the bars bring food and work to feed members of their community during this time. While there may be rivalries between various bar owners in the neighborhood, there is a strong sense of comradery between workers.

During the summer of 2018, I met Crimson through the Montrose Center, and we talked about his experiences as a Black trans man at one of the newer restaurants in the neighborhood. After graduating high school, Crimson was forced into homelessness after being kicked out of his family when he came out to them. Crimson was one of many homeless youths that were taken in by the Montrose Center. Crimson’s engagement with resource programs within the organization eventually landed him a job that helped him afford an apartment in the neighborhood. Thus, for Crimson, the Montrose and its community represents a new home.

“Places that people are moving to now like the Heights lack a lot of the landmarks that make the Montrose feel like home like, Disco Kroger. It’s called that because they’re

always playing disco music. If you go like after midnight, a lot of times, that's when the drag queens are headed home from a gig and dropping by to pick up groceries. There's also the 24/7 Walgreens. It's a well-established safe space in the community for anyone that needs special medication like hormones or other health needs."

For others like Crimson, something as simple as seeing drag queens or drunk people covered in glitter buying milk or bread at the grocery store signified that spaces like Disco Kroger were safe, that they did not have to police their own behaviors or conceal their queerness at the threat of violence. Whereas in the outside world, queer people are forced to conform to heteronormative standards, within the home that is the Montrose, businesses and public spaces are designed with them in mind.

Changing the Montrose

Even before Hurricane Harvey, gentrification was a threat to the queer community in the Montrose. Several people interviewed recounted the huge number of queer businesses and landmarks that have been closing over the past several years.

Vicky, a Black, straight woman whom I met through a different project back in 2018, was a former resident of the Montrose. Between 2012 and 2017, her rent rose by \$300. According to Zumper, a website that tracks the rent around different neighborhoods, between 2014 through 2017, the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the Montrose fluctuated anywhere between \$1,180 per month to \$1,535. Such extreme rises in rent are backbreaking for lower-income households. For Vicky, a single mother, skyrocketing rent eventually lead to her eviction.

“My rent started at \$1,200, but it went up to \$1,500 by the time I left. The landlord wasn’t really reliable either. The house had mold problems. The pipes were really bad. The septic system was really all messed up. We were getting sick from the gases from the septic system. We got walking pneumonia frequently. During the eviction process, I found that everything was in the landlord’s favor. Evictions causes problems when you’re finding a new place to live too.”

At the time, Vicky lived on the outskirts of the Montrose which she described as rapidly changing. From the perimeters of the neighborhood, Vicky could observe that the Montrose as its queer residents knew it was shrinking as people were being priced out and new residents were moving in.

Robbie, who lived in the heart of Montrose, expressed that he would not be able to live in the neighborhood if he did not have a roommate to help pay rent.

“People that get priced out move outside of the ‘Loop’. Right now, I can just walk to work. But a lot of employees have to drive to work instead of just walking over. A lot of drag queens tend to be moving further out and living together. Their work takes a lot more financial investment in order to keep customers.”

For many Houstonians, the “Loop” refers to Interstate 610 which encircles the central business district of the city as well as neighborhoods such as the Montrose. The loop represents both a geographic boundary within Houston’s landscape as well as a social boundary within people’s imaginary as neighborhoods outside of the loop are typically underserved and perceived as “tougher”.

People who are priced out of living in the Montrose do not generally benefit from the new businesses coming into the neighborhood. Being pushed out into underserved areas leads to more resources spent on commuting through the giant city as well as less access to necessary goods and services such as affordable and healthy groceries or health clinics. This displacement also leads to a fracturing of social networks, a very important resource in times of crisis. Robbie stresses how the history of the Montrose is at risk of being lost. In his eyes, the most precious resource that the Montrose has are its elders. With the impacts of the AIDS Crisis during the 80s and 90s, the queer population of that generation was nearly erased, and those who are surviving today are endangered. A week before I arrived in Houston in 2018, I was informed that a longtime member of the community had just passed due to complications with HIV. Hurricane Harvey had caused major interruptions in his treatment leading to a massive downward spiral in his health. Meanwhile, other queer elders face financial hardships with Montrose's rapidly increasing cost of living. Many people who have spent their entire adult lives in the neighborhood are being priced out, which is especially concerning for those that rely on the systems of aid in the neighborhood to survive.

For residents still remaining in the Montrose and people who still frequent the neighborhood, there is a strong sense that the identity of the Montrose is eroding. The parts of it that made it feel like home for many queer people were disappearing. Crystal sees this with how many of the historic bars in the neighborhood were shut down.

“The Montrose definitely used to be a lot more busy. The bar scene has quieted down a lot. EJ's was a popular gay bar that was turned into a restaurant. Mary's was formerly the oldest gay bar in the area, and it closed down. I think they had an HIV memorial in there. Chances, the G Spot, and the Barn were an all-in-one lesbian bar that closed down. The

Usual turned into a regular bar after the Hurricane. Braz's River Bottom and La Strata were also shut down. When Mary's closed, it was really sudden. The whole area has changed a lot. Houses are being stripped down and turned into businesses or apartments. It's weird to look out and see families with kids. It's almost surreal."

While landmarks like the bars, the Montrose Center, and Disco Kroger may bring a sense of home and identity to the Montrose, so do the more "scandalous" sites throughout the neighborhood. Public hookup spots and sex workers, both of which once defied heteronormative ideals about sex and privacy are slowly disappearing as the gentrification of the neighborhood brings with it the eyes of law enforcement. The Montrose, once seen as a queer, untamed, and salacious space is being made family friendly as new business owners and new residents seek to commercialize and redefine its streets. Notions of queerness are thus put at odds with imagery of children. For long-time residents, seeing families with children represents the anti-thesis of life in the Montrose.

Missing Pride

In my conversations with several members of the Montrose community, many expressed disappointments with Houston Pride being moved out of the neighborhood in 2014. Clark, a white, gay man in his 30's, places the blame on new residents and "yuppies" for complaining about the festival.

"A lot of the straight people were just complaining. They have their families and their day jobs, so they don't want to all of that in the neighborhood. They said it was too loud and too messy, but that's what made this place feel home. I can walk out of my

apartment, head to Pride, and be with friends. Now, I need to watch out when I'm walking through the streets back from the parade."

In summer of 2018, I was able to attend Houston Pride. The festival was held at a park in the center of Houston's business district. Being queer myself, this was a personally significant because it was my first Pride event. Encouraged by the blazing heat, attendees enjoyed themselves by getting drunk and splashing in the park's large pond. While in line to get through the security checkpoint into the event, I noticed that there were not nearly as many anti-gay protestors as I expected. Many of the booths were sponsored either by some major corporation like Budweiser or T-Mobile, or by activist groups such as Black Lives Matter. Throughout the festival, different groups took to the stage including live bands, drag performers, and activist groups. I spent most of my time walking around talking to strangers trying to take in what I could in the chaotic environment. Of the people I met during this experience, a majority were people of color, either Black or Latinx.

Moving Pride from the Montrose to downtown not only alienated queer residents, it was also a major blow to queer businesses. As a bartender, Robbie recounted the days when attendees were pouring in and out of the bars as people were able to pop in for a drink and run back out to the festivities. Now, the Montrose remained relatively empty during Pride as businesses are forced to wait in suspense hoping that after the official festival attendees would bring the party back to the Montrose.

Vulnerable Conditions

Aside from the economic pressures brought on by gentrification in the community, several people interviewed also highlighted other issues that the queer community experiences

not just in the Montrose, but in Houston at large. Crimson pointed out how a large number of queer youths are homeless in the city. Among these homeless youths, drug abuse and unsafe sexual practices are a major concern. Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS remains a constant issue, especially among those who experience the most social marginalization.

In conversations with activists and NGO staff, several people highlighted systemic racism against queer people of color from both within and outside of the community as a point of concern. Differing approaches to addressing racism have led to friction between grassroots organizers versus more “establishment” entities such as the Montrose Center. While the community at the Montrose and the Montrose Center work to build resources for the queer community at large, racial politics within the community continues to leave many queer people of color feeling ostracized from these systems. One staff member at Legacy Community Health also expressed concerns regarding the increase of violence against undocumented people under the Trump administration. As a city within a border-state, the growing presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in Houston has led to increased paranoia amongst undocumented queers, making them less likely to seek aid in times of need.

Even before the storm, the Montrose was a space of contradictions as old residents and new residents clashed over how the space should be defined. For members of the queer community, the Montrose is an historic enclave, a home when home was hard to come by. For new residents and businesses moving into the area, the Montrose represents a new opportunity. The “artsy” atmosphere provides a new frontier for neoliberal expansion as queerness is reduced to marketable aesthetics.

Chapter 2: Facing the Storm

Though the record-breaking flooding of Houston led mainstream media to refer to Hurricane Harvey as an equal opportunity event, the impacts of the storm on the ground varied all across Houston and even within the Montrose. How people navigated the disaster had much to do with their geographic location in relation to flood plains, their financial capacity to withstand a disaster, the aid they were able to access, as well as other factors. According to Robbie, the flooding in the Montrose was not as bad when compared to other parts of Houston. Videos from residents of the flood waters showed that it rose to about shin level. People were able to traverse through most of the neighborhood on foot. However, going in and out of the Montrose was impossible. The roads connecting to the Montrose were completely submerged, and cars were unable to navigate through the waters.

Despite the flooding, the queer bars in the neighborhood remained open. They served both as a base of operations for some members of the community to distribute aid as well as a space for people to come, decompress, drink, and be around members of their community. Kayla was a white, young bartender and anthropology student who lived in the neighborhood who I met in the summer of 2018. In our conversations, she told me that she made it a goal to try and show up to work during the disaster.

“I’m straight, but I feel really close to the community here. The bar I work at, it’s one of the oldest bars in Montrose. People that have been drinking there have been drinking there since the dinosaurs. So, I felt like I had to be there. People didn’t want to be alone inside experiencing all of this by themselves. I didn’t want to. I felt like I need to be there working because people wanted to come drink and have company, and so did I. But, with the Montrose being flooded, so many people couldn’t come because they’re stranded

outside the Loop. Once things got open again, people were rushing back like, ‘Where my family?’ you know?”

Others like Robbie who lived only three blocks away from work were able to wade through the flood waters to get to work. Many people flocked to get to these spaces because of the emotional significance that they had. Going to the bars meant being around chosen family and being around support during a critical and traumatic time.

For Crimson, Harvey compounded many existing struggles related to his traumas as a Black trans person. He had just escaped homelessness having moved to the Montrose into an apartment with a new partner. While Crimson and his partner’s home was not flooded, the roads around their apartment complex were difficult to navigate. They maintained access to groceries and other needs. However, the hurricane did bring a significant mental toll.

“Being trapped in a new home with someone I was still learning to be romantically involved with caused a lot of strain on my mental health. I had a lot of issues with PTSD, anxiety, and depression during that time.”

Crimson expressed a lot of fears that he experienced during the hurricane including fears of losing his city, fears of losing his community, fears of losing a home that he had just secured, as well as fears for his family despite the issues that existed.

Recovery and the Social Disaster

Renters across the Montrose had different experiences based on their relationships with their landlords. For Kayla, who did not experience flooding during the hurricane, the situation was mostly favorable.

“I was living in a four-bedroom apartment then. My landlords, they’re an older family. Their home completely flooded during the hurricane, so we didn’t hear from them for a while. They didn’t come by until like two months after the hurricane to see if everything was ok. It’s like a private landlord kind of deal, and luckily, I had a really good relationship with my landlords, but a lot of people couldn’t say that. If I was late on rent or whatever, they knew that I was a student, so they were very forgiving. That’s very rare to find in a landlord. The current person I’m at [renting from], she doesn’t even live in the state. The property manager is this company, so it doesn’t matter what, everyday you’re late on rent it’s another \$100.”

According to Kayla, individual landlords had been hard to come by for a while as property values in the neighborhood continued to skyrocket pushing individual owners to sell their properties to larger corporations. Renters in these properties did not have the luxury to be able to be late on rent payments. Large corporations had no incentive to be forgiving on rent especially when trying to recoup on damages done to their properties during the storm.

Due to the flooding, the city was placed under a 10 PM curfew for several days until the flood waters receded. For nightlife performers such as dancers and drag queens, this curfew led to much economic strain. Although drag queens are staples in queer bars, many queens’ livelihoods were threatened during this period. Jackson was a white, gay man and a young performer living in the Montrose at the time before they had to move out of Houston due to financial hardships.

“Some of the more established girls were ok. But I was up and coming and trying to make this my full-time job. I had invested a lot of money into my craft, but I feel like Harvey kinda took that away. Between Harvey and the curfew, I don’t think I worked for

about a week. If you don't have a gig to show up to, you can't make money. If you can't make money, you can't pay rent. I had to move out of Houston because Harvey had put me behind on rent once, and I never bounced back from it."

Despite his fears and anxieties, Crimson worked as paid staff at the food pantry at the Montrose Center the day after the storm had passed. Many others in the community did not have the same access to goods and services during the storm, particularly the homeless population. In talking with staff at both the Montrose Center and Legacy Community Health, I was told that this crisis placed a significant strain on those that made up the support system for the queer community in the Montrose. The goal of the Montrose Center was to quickly distribute aid out to the community and to connect disenfranchised populations to resources such as FEMA. The days following Hurricane Harvey were traumatic, and burnout among staffers and volunteers was frequent. People who were experiencing the disaster made up the support system that they in turn also relied on. Fortunately for activists and organizers, the Montrose Center had a plan to address the overwhelming need for help during Hurricane Harvey due to lessons learned from the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on queer people. According to Crimson, the Montrose Center in preparing for future disasters after Hurricane Katrina had worked to place safeguards at different shelters across the city to prevent discrimination and violence especially against trans people. While the Montrose Center mobilized and brought on extra staff, the demand for care far exceeded their capacity. Case workers and mental health counselors were hard to come by as they were being employed by other groups all across the city.

The Montrose Center serves roughly 20% to 40% of Houston's queer population. Thus, they are positioned to notice patterns the fastest. According to staff at the Montrose Center, long-time residents are not unfamiliar with disasters. Houston's position on the Gulf Coast makes it

susceptible to frequent storms and hurricanes. Subsequently, many queer people have had negative experiences with requesting aid during a disaster which is particularly concerning after a major event like Hurricane Harvey. Traditional recovery and response programs are difficult for the community to access. Such programs and services are built around ideas of a traditional family or homeownership which acts as a barrier for queer people living with housing insecurity, non-traditional families, undocumented immigration status, homelessness, and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. This is especially true for aid that comes from religious institutions.

“A lot of residents in the past have had negative experiences with these programs. It’s difficult to be gay, and say, you have a home that has water damage. And suddenly, all of these church people are coming into your home, and they’re seeing your pictures with your partner, or they’re going through stuff that was damaged and they find your dildo or your sex swing. If you’re a drag queen, how do you get insured for dresses, and wigs, and costumes that are part of your livelihood? A lot of people have specific needs like hormones, HIV medication, or even condoms and lube because you know people are still going to be having sex during this time, especially during such a stressful time. So will they have the resources to do that safely?”

Staff at Legacy Community Health also struggled to maintain care for people who were either stranded or displaced from the neighborhood. The storm had damaged numerous affordable senior living facilities across the city. Most notable was a hospice care facility for those who are HIV/AIDS positive. Its destruction led to many in need of care being displaced or even lost as care teams struggled to find where individuals went during the storm. Treatments and care for countless people were interrupted during this time. Meanwhile, workers were

worried about the rise in sexually transmitted illnesses due to an uptick in unsafe sexual practices.

Being Trans During a Disaster

In 2021, I managed to get an interview through Zoom with Diamond Stylz, a Black trans woman, popular podcaster, and prominent activist. Prior to our interview, Houston had just gone through a catastrophic ice storm that left many throughout Texas with no power in freezing temperatures. Today, Diamond is the executive director of Black Trans Women Inc., a national non-profit rooted in social advocacy and empowerment. While her position grants her certain economic privileges to which many of her peers do not have access, that has not always been the case. Diamond had moved to Houston in 2007 and had previously experienced Hurricane Ike in 2008. Back then, she was mostly homeless and relying on sex work and help from “sisters”, or other trans women with whom she had connected. During our conversation, Diamond emphasized the difference in her experiences between Harvey and Ike due to the social and economic capital that she had acquired over the years.

“We make up the bulk of the homeless population. Particularly in the south, particularly in Texas, and particularly in Houston, we don’t have the same support infrastructure that they have in the west coast or New York. I remember when I moved here in ’07, I couldn’t stay at a women’s shelter because they saw me as a threat, and I couldn’t stay at the men’s shelter because they said I was a liability. Then, the LGBT center at the time, it has since changed because of the work of myself and others, I couldn’t get services because I wasn’t HIV positive. And all of that is before any type of event. When you have a disaster, those marginalizations are exacerbated. During Harvey, I was fortunate at the time with my support system. I had a degree and a job which are both privileges

afforded to me that others don't have. I was doing an activist event in Seattle, and they wouldn't let me fly back. So, I was stuck in this hotel, and I was running out of money, but I had a friend step in and help pay for it. During Ike, it was the total opposite. I was an escort at the time, and I had just moved to Houston. I hadn't built a community yet."

For Black trans women, and other marginalized groups, social networks are a form of capital that becomes especially important during times of crisis. Whether you have neighbors from whom you can ask for help or family who can house you during a disaster shapes how one would experience or even survive during crises. Many queer people, particularly trans people and especially Black trans women, by nature of their marginalization, are left socially isolated. Because of their queerness, they may not have built connections with their neighbors or establish a community of support.

"Connections, the privilege of connections are things that trans people don't have. A lot of the times, housing and help goes to people of means. In these situations, your connections to other people will make or break you. And it's hard to make those connections as a trans person. When I told you earlier where I couldn't stay at the homeless shelters when I moved to Houston, who let me stay with them was a trans woman. I was 26 at the time. A young 19-year-old trans woman, she said, 'You can sleep on my couch.' I met her on a chat room. But even then, it was exchange. I had body work done, my breasts were done, and she wanted access to my doctors."

During Hurricane Ike, in the absence of social connections and mutual aid, Diamond was forced to rely on what little privileges she did have to barter for help. In her exchange with the woman that housed her, Diamond relied on her access to doctors to secure housing for herself. During Ike, many people were left without power for weeks, while the apartment she stayed at still had

power. By using their electricity as leverage, the two trans women were able to bargain with neighbors for food and other necessities. Systems of care based on solidarity between marginalized people thus have their limits. Limited resources to share means that there is limited aid to give around.

This was much different from Diamond's experiences during Hurricane Harvey. During Harvey, Diamond was well connected. Her position within different activist groups afforded her space in social networks to which she otherwise would not have had access to. In her time of need being stranded in Seattle, Diamond was able to tap into networks of mutual aid for help. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, Diamond was able to be a resource for other Black trans women in Houston who needed help. For Diamond, more resources led to increased participation in systems of mutual aid.

While the working-class queer residents of the Montrose may operate with a sense of solidarity within their community, that solidarity is not always extended towards poorer trans people of color. Throughout my fieldwork, I heard many references to different trans activists and activists of color that operated outside what one might consider as the establishment setting of the Montrose Center. One woman converted her small home into a shelter to house homeless trans women and undocumented queers during the storm. Another provided direct aid for trans sex workers who were struggling at the time. During Ike, Harvey, and even the ice storm in February 2021, Diamond's networks of support have included primarily other sisters. She stated that sometimes the larger queer community is not affirming and are therefore not a reliable resource. In this conversation, Diamond alluded to the politics of respectability when it comes to needing help. Within these formal networks, aid is often dispensed with a humanitarian logic that

privileges those that appear like they are deserving of help. This logic is often not inclusive towards people of color, sex workers, people with histories of drug-abuse, and the like.

For many Houstonians, weathering the storm proved a traumatic experience. Even among those that did not experience the direct destruction of Hurricane Harvey, the recovery work in its immediate aftermath was grueling as underserved queer people were forced to become the support system for a community of which they were also a part. Despite narratives of communal solidarity amongst neighbors and bar patrons, stories like Diamond's highlight the contradictions within the Montrose as the intersection of racial and gendered politics continue to primarily disadvantage queer people of color. Diamond's experiences with being denied from shelters and not having the same social connections as other people are informed by her marginalization as a Black person under white supremacy. Whereas queer organizations like the Montrose Center straddle the line between being part of the establishment versus being a system of mutual aid, the sisterhoods of trans women of color are more informal and even more fragile.

Chapter 3: The Disaster after the Storm

The Montrose after Harvey

Since Hurricane Harvey, the gentrification of the Montrose has drastically increased. Buildings and homes that were damaged or abandoned during the hurricane or during the months following were quickly replaced by townhouses or new businesses, further increasing property values in the area. Subsequently, rent in the neighborhood has been steadily increasing in the years following Hurricane Harvey. While Hurricane Harvey struck Houston in August of 2017, by the end of the year, average rent in the neighborhood had risen by \$200 (Zumper 2021). In the years following, average rent maintained a steady upward trajectory getting as high as \$1,600 for a studio apartment until the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Montrose's own reputation as a bohemian artist community is one of the many factors drawing "yuppies" into the neighborhood. Attitudes towards this gentrification among the people I interviewed, while mostly negative, also vary from person to person. Robbie believes the city wants more property tax revenue and thus has no qualms about encouraging more businesses to move into the neighborhood. While the Montrose as a space continues to change and businesses flourish, the Montrose the with which Robbie was familiar shrinks each day. Meanwhile, Crystal believes there is hope that the Montrose will maintain its sense of home.

"Places that are closed are always turned into something else. A lot of times, if a gay business goes down, a straight one pops up. Usuals was a lesbian bar before it closed after the hurricane, and now it's just a regular bar. The area is changing really fast.

Gentrification is going to push a lot of people out of the community. But, you know, it's

going to diversify the neighborhood maybe to have all these families coming in. And hopefully, bringing back the art markets will bring back the feeling of the Montrose.”

Other residents do not share that hope. In 2019, I met with William, a white, queer business owner in the neighborhood. In our conversations, he voiced his dissatisfaction over the changes in the neighborhood.

“The Montrose doesn’t feel like the “Gay-borhood” anymore. I’m in my 50’s, and I’ve spent a good portion of my adult life here. I’ve been out and proud here for a long time. It’s disappointing to see how these yuppies just cannibalize our home. My shop has been successful here for a long time thanks to the community, but last year, me and my partner felt like we needed to move to the Heights. I had the means to stay in the Montrose, but most of my neighbors weren’t people I recognized anymore. The bars I went to don’t exist anymore. So why not move and live closer to where my gay friends are?”

Despite his wealth, William felt like he was forced out of the neighborhood due to the changing climate. The space no longer felt like home, and like many middle-class queer residents, he moved to the Heights. A common feeling amongst many of the residents (and former residents) of the Montrose was that the community was dissipating, that there was no longer a centralized hub around which people gathered. While lower-income people were being priced out of their community, middle-class queers moved out feeling like they no longer recognized their home. According to William, few queer business owners have the resilience to remain in the neighborhood.

Losing Community

In January of 2021, gentrification of the Montrose took another victim in the form of the Disco Kroger. Personally, it was jarring to see how quickly the neighborhood has changed considering I learned about Disco Kroger in 2018 as this integral community hub, and it was shut down just three years later. Community members and local new media lamented the loss as Kroger representatives stated that they were forced to close due to not meeting sales quotas, contradicting stories from community members about how busy the space was (Balter 2020; Balke 2020).

On top of old businesses closing and new businesses moving in, queer residents were frustrated with what they perceived as disrespect from new residents. As the community is still angry over Pride being moved to downtown, people like William point out the flagrant disregard that new residents have for the history of the Montrose.

“When that bar with the AIDS memorial got taken down, they replaced it with some coffee shop. I don’t have it myself, but I’ve lost friends and family to AIDS when I was younger. It felt good knowing that we had a space here where we could go remember them. I know some people asked if the new owner could maybe keep up the memorial or maybe just put up a plaque so that people could see, but the asshole didn’t care. To him, we don’t matter. We’re just in the way for him. It just don’t feel like there’s anything left here for us.”

For William, the social and physical erasure of queer people and their history from the Montrose is an act of violence. Having lived through the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 90s and dealing

with neglect from the state, the disrespect that he has experienced from new residents has been emotionally triggering.

Throughout the neighborhood, there are anxieties that the community is disappearing. As a bartender, Kayla has seen how the community in the Montrose has changed as she observed the faces of her clients.

“So many people get displaced. they can come to the bar if they can afford the cab to get there, if they can catch the bus to get there, if they can get the Uber. But so many of them are stranded outside of the Loop. They get stuck alone somewhere with no one else in their communities that they know are affirming let alone gay as well. People who were community staples, bartenders who had worked for twenty years were moving out because their homes were getting more expensive while the living situations were actually worse.”

While gentrification creates economic and social pressures for queer residents to move out of the Montrose, for Robbie, there is a sense that maybe queer people do not need the Montrose anymore. In his view, younger queer people seem to be able to live elsewhere with relative safety unlike during the 80's and 90's. While people still come to the bars, there are less new queer residents moving into the Montrose relative to the number of traditional families and new business owners.

Policing and Safety

A major change that Vicky noticed since living in the Montrose was how gentrification has subsequently made the area feel unsafe. In her view, yuppies moving into the area has led to an increase in violent crimes. As people unfamiliar to the area move in, some become targets for

robberies. The dramatic shift in the Montrose has led to major class disparities among different residents as people new to the neighborhood have made calls for increased policing.

Conversely, Kayla expressed concern over the increase in policing in the area. Having been arrested herself as part of a protest, Kayla has experienced jail first-hand.

“There were all sorts of people in there. It wasn’t really safe since we were all in the same holding cell together. Could you imagine being someone, like a trans woman or something, and being held in the same cell as someone that was potentially dangerous? Part of what made the Montrose feel safe was that it was also safe from police. They’ve never been concerned about safety in the Montrose until people started moving in here, and now they’re cracking down on people like sex workers, or protestors, or undocumented folks, or just anyone they consider indecent.”

As Robbie noted in his interview, policing in the neighborhood has changed the social landscape of the Montrose as the streets are “cleaned up”. I asked residents if they felt like they needed to police their own behaviors as to avoid unwanted attention in the neighborhood and got mixed replies. While some people like Robbie still find safety within the Montrose, others like Jackson no longer feel comfortable being as flamboyant as he felt.

Businesses moving into the Montrose have also changed how people physically navigate the neighborhood. During my time in the neighborhood, I was able to safely walk around the heart of the Montrose where many of the historic homes still stood. However, the streets and roads in areas with more restaurants and cafés were not nearly as pedestrian friendly. As Jackson states, the streets in the neighborhood were not built for the amount of motor traffic that has been flowing through. In the past, people used to stroll on foot in the Montrose because residents in

the neighborhood had access to everything they needed in the neighborhood. Those who could not afford a car were able to walk to get groceries and to head to the bars. In this sense, the Montrose was starkly different from much of Houston which privileges motor traffic. Today, as the Montrose brings in crowds of people, including former residents that still consider the space home, motor traffic continues to clog the streets further reshaping life in the neighborhood.

Mental Trauma

In my interviews, I asked residents, NGO staff, and activists about their perspectives moving forward. The responses that I received varied based on the timing of when I asked this question. In 2018, only one year after the storm, burnout from the recovery effort was still affecting many. Those who responded were cautiously hopeful that the city and the state would recognize their shortcomings in preparing for this disaster. Unfortunately, efforts to mitigate future flooding in Houston have been concentrated in the more affluent residential neighborhoods. In 2021, in the fallout of an ice storm that crippled the state, respondents were less enthused. By this point, Houston had experienced several major storms including tropical storm Imelda as well as other man-made disasters such as an oil tank fire in 2019. Residents have shifted from passively hoping that local government would take adequate actions in managing these disasters. Instead, many of the people interviewed have moved towards demanding that local government take action against industries in the region that contributed to what many activists saw as a constant state of crisis.

This constant state of crisis has taken a heavy mental and emotional toll on Houston residents. Thinking about having to prepare for the next disaster is a constant stressor. Many fear that if a disaster were to derail their lives, they would not be able to recover. For example, both Crimson and Diamond expressed the view that each disaster they survive drains their limited

resources. As Black trans people who were previously homeless, each disaster represents the potential to lose the stability that they have managed to achieve in their lives.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Queer Urbanity and Crises

To begin with the question of Hurricane Harvey's impact on gentrification in the Montrose, I draw upon Oswin (2019) and D'Emilio's (1983) interpretation of urban landscapes and capitalism as permitting queer expression while also regulating and erasing them. The Montrose, as a neighborhood, permits visibility for queer people in Houston. By gathering en masse in a relatively small geographic space in Houston, queer people in the Montrose were able to claim their rights to the city. Through the Montrose, queer Houstonians developed economic power and political agency within the city, even managing to elect Mayor Annise Parker, one of the first openly gay mayors in the U.S., in 2010.

Over time however, that visibility became a double-edged sword. As many residents pointed out, gentrification of the Montrose is fueled by the desire to commodify queer culture and aesthetics while devaluing queer bodies. The Montrose as it exists in Houston's imaginary exists as a new frontier for development. Thus, for queer people living in the Montrose, recovery from a disaster is paradoxical given the social and economic landscape of the neighborhood as well as the priorities of the city. To powerful decision makers in the metropolis and in Texas who view Houston as a global city and a major node in the world's capitalist economy, Montrose is not a historic queer neighborhood, but rather a site of neoliberal, capitalist development. Through this lens, the Montrose is prioritized not as a residential area, but as a new source of potential profit. The feeling of home and safety for queer residents is interpreted as a trendy and marketable atmosphere which city planners intend to use to attract new businesses and generate more revenue. Thus, when Hurricane Harvey damaged homes and historic businesses in the

Montrose, it provided upper-class Houstonians and outside investors with new opportunities to seize land and properties.

For queer residents of the Montrose, gentrification results in domicide, the destruction of their homes. As queer spaces close and community members are displaced from the neighborhood, social networks and feelings of community erode. While literature on the connections between gentrification and domicide usually focuses on the financial impacts of gentrification on lower-income households, in the Montrose, domicide also affected middle-class queer residents of the Montrose. Lower-income queer people make up a significant portion of the residents that the Montrose considered as community. As those people are displaced from the neighborhood, more affluent queer individuals like William were left in a neighborhood they no longer recognized. The imagined boundary between the safety of the Montrose against the violence of (cis)heteronormative society outside no longer exists. In the Montrose, home has been not just physical, but social. Gentrification of the Montrose results in domicide for queer residents because it results in the rewriting of the social imaginary of the space.

By denaturalizing the impacts of Hurricane Harvey and reframing the conversation of disaster recovery around post-disaster gentrification, I identify the root of the crisis here as neoliberal urban development rather than the disaster itself. The socio-economic marginalization of queer residents of the Montrose existed well before Harvey. The storm merely exacerbated the vulnerabilities that come as a by-product of urban development. The urbanization and development taking place in the Montrose serves to perpetuate the experiences of disaster for marginalized people. Disaster recovery remains a long, contentious, and sometimes unattainable goal for those impacted by Hurricane Harvey because recovery itself is tied to systems and processes that continue to marginalize queer people.

Harvey's Impacts on Health

While I started this project mainly interested in people's access to healthcare during a disaster, I later became more interested in the ways that Hurricane Harvey impacted queer people's health more broadly but also how it affected those living with HIV/AIDS specifically. Though once seen as a death sentence, with the introduction of antiretroviral therapy and other treatments, managing one's HIV/AIDS is simply a balancing act. Maintaining proper health despite a diagnosis is doable with adequate access to care and medication. As Ramirez-Valles (2011) points out, barriers to care such as stigma can prove to be life-threatening. While people within the community such as Robbie say that the stigma of HIV/AIDS has faded considerably, there remains other barriers to care. Hurricane Harvey's impact caused massive disruptions in people's care in the immediate aftermath of the storm as well as long after, and in doing so, it led to declining health for many living in the community. Though I was unable to interview individuals living with HIV/AIDS during my fieldwork, the narratives that were shared with me about people who passed away during the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey confirms this pattern.

I propose the use of the concept of syndemics here to better conceptualize the embodied health effects of when disasters, diseases, and marginalization operate synergistically creating a feedback loop of conditions where people are more vulnerable to premature death. Taking inspiration from how scholars like Clarence Gravlee (2009) argue that race is not simply a social construct because racism carries biological consequences, I use syndemics here to highlight how queerness is an embodied process. Marginalization related to being queer carries biological effects, specifically to one's health. To be queer is to take on sociopolitical oppressions and conditions that leads one to be more vulnerable to illness and premature death. As such, queer bodies are impacted differently by disaster.

Diseases like HIV/AIDS exist as facets of the environment. Subsequently, queer bodies themselves are also facets of the environment that interact with each other and with nature. During my research, a staff member at Legacy Community Health expressed concerns about the proliferation of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases during the storm due to lack of access to condoms or interruptions in preventative health programs like pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). Loss of access to resources like condoms or PrEP create conditions where people are more vulnerable to contracting or spreading HIV/AIDS.

Gentrification and displacement also contribute to declines in people's health. As people are forced away from the Montrose and its resources, those living with HIV/AIDS experience further disruptions in their care. The social conditions created by the interactions between neoliberal urban development and disaster recovery thus lead to downstream effects on the health of queer people.

While interview data point to a connection between the impacts of Hurricane Harvey and HIV/AIDS, I do not have sufficient data to make an analysis on how these dynamics are playing out amongst queer Houstonians. There was difficulty in the field with finding participants who were living with HIV/AIDS as many of the leads that I had did not pan out especially during the pandemic. As such, further research on this question can prove to be fruitful.

Access to Aid

Survival during a disaster like Hurricane Harvey is dependent on one's access to aid during and after the disaster. According to staff at the Montrose Center, queer people are less likely to seek aid due to how many forms of aid are tied to faith-based organizations. This avoidance stems from either a doubt that they would receive any help or from prior negative

experiences with those systems. While the Montrose Center works to connect those in need with programs that would help them, many queer people, especially trans people choose to instead rely on informal networks of care and systems of mutual aid. Queer residents went to the bars during Harvey to get help and to be around community that would provide emotional support during a strenuous time. Activists opened up their homes as shelters for members of the community who otherwise would have been homeless during the storm.

These informal systems of aid are intertwined with Weston's (1991) idea of "chosen family". Through shared struggles and trauma, queer residents in the Montrose form bonds that they use to define themselves not just as a community, but as a family. These new kin ties go beyond being close friends with members within one's community. They imply communal struggle and communal solidarity towards those that may even be strangers within the community. The way that Diamond for example refers to fellow Black trans women as "sisters" implies an understanding of solidarity. Trans women, especially trans women of color, are reliant on systems of mutual aid for survival. Though Diamond today has the resources to provide help for those within her network, in previous disasters, she relied on the solidarity of sisters to survive.

However, inclusion into these networks of care is not equal. As pointed out in Diamond's interview and stories of other activists of color, Black and brown trans women do not have the same social capital that grants them access to these spaces. This is made worse when compounded with other marginalizing conditions such homelessness, drug-abuse, HIV/AIDS, and systemic racism. For Black and brown queer people in Houston, access to aid is mitigated by the interactions between white supremacy and respectability politics. Under such politics, to

receive aid means to appear worthy of receiving such aid, and such considerations are often not afforded to people of color.

The Spatial Politics of Houston

Gentrification since Hurricane Harvey has also led to disruptions in queer networks. As gentrification displaces people from the Montrose, the social networks within the community thin out. Meanwhile, those that are priced out from the neighborhood are much less likely to be able to access the same support systems that they had while living in the neighborhood. NGOs like the Montrose Center and Legacy Community Health struggle to keep track of those that are forced out from the neighborhood. As Kayla mentioned, living outside of the “Loop” is isolating. It is especially so if one does not own a car or have the money to afford other means of transportation. The geographic layout of Houston and its overinvestment in its inefficient highway systems creates islands throughout the city where poor people are unable to move around. From experience, getting from one side of the city to the other can take up to an hour or more even by car. Those that cannot afford to live close to the neighborhood lose day-to-day access to their community, and the social relations between individuals within the community become strained.

In considering these spatial politics, it is important to keep in mind how racial capitalism has informed the built landscape in Houston. The Montrose for example has through time been regarded as such a livable environment because within Houston’s mainstream imaginary, the neighborhood is associated with suburbia and whiteness. It is because of these associations that now the decision-makers in the city are seeking to reclaim the Montrose from the queer community that moved there and transform the neighborhood into a profitable, new market. Meanwhile, people that cannot afford to live in the Montrose, or any of the neighborhood that

make up Houston's commercial core, are displaced towards the outsides of the Loop. These neighborhoods are underserved precisely because they are predominantly communities of color that do not serve a purpose within Houston's drive for expansion, that is until their land is needed. Thus, the experience of queerness within Houston is one that is also shaped by the racialized way by which neoliberal expansion manifests within the built environment.

Conclusion

As of this writing, it has been four years since Hurricane Harvey and three years since the start of this project. A lot has changed in Houston, and Houstonians have faced numerous disasters since Harvey. The temporality of it all has been constantly on my mind. In fact, it felt strange for me to ask people about a disaster that happened years ago because so much has happened since then that has threatened the livelihoods of those most vulnerable in the city. At the time that I started writing this thesis, Houston was faced with another crisis as ice storms across Texas paralyzed the state's crumbling infrastructure leaving millions without power. I am reminded of a quote from one of the staffers at the Montrose Center saying, "Disasters like this knock people off, and they don't get back on." At the time, in 2018, he was talking about Hurricane Harvey. People who suffered the worst from Harvey were people yet to have recovered from previous disasters, now less capable of preparing for future disasters.

In concluding this thesis, I want to highlight the most salient point that I have come across during this research. I came into this project focusing on Hurricane Harvey as a crisis when in reality Houston and the residents of the Montrose are in constant crisis. What does it mean to recover from a disaster if where you were before the disasters is still bad? Is there merit in disaster studies focusing on specific instances of disaster when people on the ground no longer even view disasters in such temporal terms? Across the board, activists and community members are constantly thinking about the next major event and whether they will be able to outlast it. For these people, recovery does not exist. While the storm has passed, there is no reprieve from the constant pressures of neoliberal expansion. Organizers like Diamond point to global climate change and the increasing frequency of climatic events as an indicator of the times to come. The imaginary boundaries around Hurricane Harvey as a disaster only serve to distract from the

gradual dissolution of livable environments across the globe. Policymakers in cities like Houston are less concerned with the maintenance of life. Rather, they are mainly concerned with constant production and extraction of resources in the name of profit. There will be a lack of long-term plans to deal with global climate change so long as those in power continue to make quick profits off exploiting the environment. Thus, so long as neoliberalism continues to thrive in areas like Houston, many of its residents, particularly those most marginalized within a (cis)heteronormative, racialized, capitalist society, remain in constant crisis.

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Vita

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