

# QUEERING DISASTERS: LGBTQ+ INCLUSION IN DISASTER PRACTICE

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Applied Anthropology

By

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May 2025

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Queering Disaster: LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Disaster Practice

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This project report reflects the guidance, encouragement, and wisdom of many individuals. First and foremost, I extend my sincere appreciation to my advisor, Dr. A.J. Faas. Your guidance has not only shaped this project but has also helped me grow as a scholar and as a person.

A heartfelt thank you to my cohort, Kiley Stokes, Kayla Taturan, Jackson Benz, Brenna Wheelis, Cibella Gamma, Anna Edmondson, Cesar Villanueva, Andriana Bodrouk, and Caroline Ammon Yildiz. Your support has meant so much, whether through lengthy discussions, study sessions, or simply sharing moments of laughter.

To my family, thank you for always being such a strong support system. Your love, patience, and encouragement have kept me grounded; I am endlessly grateful for that.

Special thanks to the Silicon Valley Chapter of the American Red Cross and the Northern California Coastal Region. I am grateful to be part of such an incredible team and to contribute to its mission alongside dedicated volunteers. A heartfelt thank you to all the Disaster Cycle Services volunteers I am privileged to support each day. Working with you has been an honor, and I have learned so much from each of you.

Finally, thank you to my amazing partner and husband, Ulises Ponce Valencia. Your belief in me has been my greatest source of strength. I couldn't have done this without you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCING THE QUEERING DISASTERS PROJECT

#### Introducing the Project

The LGBTQ+ community in the San Francisco Bay Area is one of the country's most visible and historically influential, with a rich legacy of activism, art, and cultural presence. This project is based in San José, the southern part of the Bay Area, and home to nearly one million people. Known as the heart of Silicon Valley, San José is a hub for major tech companies and corporations. It is also home to the Queering Disasters research team, which examines experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and collectives in disaster prevention, preparedness, and response within the broader Bay Area.

This project report consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, I review the problem statement, followed by an introduction to the history of the Queering Disasters Project and the community partners involved. This chapter also discusses how the Queering Disasters team and I collaborate to address LGBTQ+ issues in mass care and sheltering scenarios and how this phase contributes to developing my deliverables. The second chapter of this report is an article intended for *Practicing Anthropology* that details how I work between LGBTQ+-focused community partners and disaster-focused community partners to create an active dialogue about a reciprocal knowledge exchange on making mass care and sheltering during a disaster response a safer place for LGBTQ+ existence. The final third chapter offers my final thoughts on the project, key takeaways, limitations, and recommendations for future studies.

## **Introducing the HayWired Scenario**

Within the Bay Area, several earthquake fault lines pose a potential for a large-scale, catastrophic event, including a 72 percent probability of an earthquake of magnitude 6.7 or higher in the Bay Area by the year 2043 (USGS). Bay Area residents are typically accustomed to public information and preparedness drills about this risk, with young children practicing earthquake drills since their early school years and adults asking the lingering question about “when will the big one hit?” - referring to the large earthquake that seems likely to happen in the distant future.

The Loma Prieta Earthquake, which struck on October 17th, 1989, was the last catastrophic quake to hit the Bay Area. This magnitude 6.9 earthquake killed 63 people and left 3,757 injured, with a total of \$6 billion in property damage (USGS 2024). While the Loma Prieta Earthquake is fading into memory, its impact remains a central focus for disaster researchers and risk reduction professionals. These experts, including those at the United States Geological Survey (USGS), continue to explore the best ways to prepare San Francisco Bay Area residents and communities for another major earthquake. The USGS has collaborated with state, local, academic, and industrial partners to map the potential impact of a 7.0 earthquake along the Hayward Fault, integrating geosciences and social sciences insights, including the populations represented on the U.S. Census. My graduate advisor, A.J. Faas, began collaborating with Dr. Anne Wein from the USGS to identify the potential impacts of a disaster on communities that are not well represented in the U.S. Census. Faas and Wein began exploring this topic with local LGBTQ+ community organizations, and the Queering Disasters Project was created to address LGBTQ+ representation on the HayWired Scenario.



## **Problem Statement**

Historically, disaster research and response have overlooked the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals in disaster risk reduction and recovery efforts. While LGBTQ+ individuals share the same basic and psychological needs as the general population during disasters, they face unique barriers to accessing appropriate care. These barriers are often rooted in heteronormativity, anti-gay bias, and anti-trans bias. The absence of comprehensive Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) data in disaster research and emergency planning has resulted in a lack of targeted response strategies that acknowledge uniquely LGBTQ+ experiences. Previous studies have shown that LGBTQ+ individuals may significantly face barriers to accessing resources during a disaster, including inadequate healthcare provision, discrimination in shelters, and lack of consideration in mainstream preparedness initiatives. Without intentional efforts to address these issues, LGBTQ+ individuals remain at heightened risk during disasters. Faas (*In press*) invites the idea of *radical hospitality* as a framework in disaster studies, particularly in how we understand and experience disasters. Keeping this in mind, we are left with two key questions: How do we invite LGBTQ+ voices into disaster planning? And how do we ensure they can actively shape what inclusion looks like for them within these contexts? This is where the Queering Disasters Project enters the story.

## **Introducing the History of the Project and our Community Partners**

Queering Disasters began in 2021 as a collaboration between United States Geological Survey's Dr. Anne Wein and San José State University's Dr. A.J. Faas. At the time, the USGS recognized that several demographics were not represented on the United States Census, including LGBTQ+ people. Data on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) has been historically underrepresented in research for several reasons. Many studies have

overlooked SOGIE as a relevant factor in research, and LGBTQ+ individuals have often withheld this information due to past experiences of harm and discrimination, using privacy as a means of protection. Dr. Anne Wein began working with Faas to explore LGBTQ+ experiences in disaster and how these experiences can aid in informing more inclusive disaster research and practice.

The overall objective of this project is to complement the USGS's HayWired Scenario. The HayWired Scenario is an earthquake scenario that models the effects of a magnitude 7.0 earthquake along the Hayward fault and its impact on the San Francisco Bay Area. It includes the "interactions between critical infrastructure systems and compounded effects in communities and economies." The first community organization to participate in this project was the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center in San José, California. The Billy DeFrank Center was named after - popular local drag queen who raised money for the local LGBTQ+ community in the 1970s and a local activist, also known as William Price. Price's legacy lives on in the Billy DeFrank Center, which now aims to provide a health and well-being space for LGBTQ+ community members through group activities, social events, and discussions.

In the initial phase of Queering Disasters, A.J. Faas, Ann Wein, and SJSU MA in Applied Anthropology student Jhaid Parreno invited local members from Billy DeFrank Center to participate in focus groups that focused on how LGBTQ+ participants identified and navigated vulnerability and hazards. Participants in these sessions identified specific groups within the LGBTQ+ community that face heightened vulnerabilities, leading to disproportionate impacts during disasters. They also explored the root causes of these vulnerabilities. While the discussion initially focused on earthquakes, as outlined in the HayWired Scenario, participants highlighted additional hazards affecting their community. These include Anti-LGBTQ+ Aggression &

Violence, the COVID-19 Pandemic, Domestic Violence & Abuse within the LGBTQ+ Community, Police Lack of Education on LGBTQ+ Issues, and Wildfires (Faas, Parreno, and Wein, n.d., 5). Beyond these hazards, participants recognized a need for LGBTQ+-led disaster practices that strengthened the LGBTQ+ community's ability to be a source of support during a disaster rather than receiving training and information on how to prepare oneself for a disaster best. Within this focus group, a lingering question remained of "how do we queer" disasters? Essentially, how do we make disasters a space that not only invites and facilitates LGBTQ+ inclusion, but also, how do we best prepare local LGBTQ+ community members for disasters themselves?

### **Project Implementation**

Faas, Wein, and Parreno identified two key avenues for gaining a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences in disasters. They emphasized using this understanding to create a reciprocal knowledge exchange between the LGBTQ+ community and disaster response organizations. This led to two approaches: *queering disaster knowledge* and *queering disaster practice*. Queering disaster knowledge aims to address the data gap in the US Census regarding the LGBTQ+ population. Specifically, it explores how we generate knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community in disaster contexts. By queering disaster practice, we question how we can develop disaster response strategies that are inclusive and mindful of the LGBTQ+ community. Jackson Benz, a fellow Applied Anthropology master's student at San José State, took on queering disaster knowledge, focusing on mapping essential queer structures and infrastructure within the LGBTQ+ community. In collaboration with Dr. A.J. Faas, queering disaster practice became my project, exploring how LGBTQ+ community members can contribute to developing inclusive disaster response practices.

To initiate the work of queering disaster practice, Faas and his team developed tabletop exercises as a tool for facilitating conversations- a form of participatory modeling that centers stakeholder knowledge as central to creating community informed solutions to co-produce solutions to the issues presented (Quimby and Beresford 2023). These discussion-based serious games present participants with vignettes that simulate potential emergencies, encouraging them to work through responses figuratively or literally to improve disaster response plans and identify gaps in preparedness. Faas, Parreno, and Wein piloted an initial set of these exercises in collaboration with the Billy DeFrank Center and the Japantown Prepared! Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). These tabletop exercises incorporated narratives from the focus groups and existing literature on LGBTQ+ experiences in disasters. The scenarios piloted between the Billy DeFrank Center and Japantown Prepared CERT were set after a 7.0 earthquake along the Hayward Fault. Each scenario explored situations in which trained CERT responders conducted block-by-block search and rescue operations, addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in disaster response. In this case, Faas and Parreno presented multiple scenarios, one case at a time, and allowed CERT team members to respond as they would under the circumstances. Following the CERT comment, Billy DeFrank Center participants were asked to provide any feedback, comments, or questions on the CERT team's answers.

Tabletop scenarios between the Billy DeFrank Center and Japantown Prepared focused on expanding our understanding of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the first response phase of a disaster; however, participants recognized the need for extending this discussion into the longer term of the disaster, primarily when people begin recovering from it. This realization led to the development of new tabletop scenarios focused on LGBTQ+ inclusion in mass care and

sheltering, emphasizing identifying areas where harm to LGBTQ+ individuals could occur and addressing those risks.

### *Research Question and Project Deliverable*

My role within the Queering Disasters Project is to help gather an understanding of how the mass care and sheltering phase of a disaster can be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ identifying people. After the initial stages of the Queering Disaster Project, the main question presented is “How do we queer disaster?”. More specifically, how do we create disaster risk reduction and response practices knowledgeable of LGBTQ+ experiences and, therefore, that acknowledge and challenge the barriers that prevent them from accessing appropriate support? The deliverables for this project include tabletop exercises featuring a set of LGBTQ+-specific scenarios for disaster response agencies to address in a simulated emergency context. Each scenario is based on interview data from prior research by Faas and his team and existing literature on the topic. These scenarios are short vignettes involving an LGBTQ+ individual, pair, or group in a hypothetical emergency. Through this exercise, participating agencies had the opportunity to assess their LGBTQ+ inclusivity and learn how to improve, with input from LGBTQ+ participants from the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center. At the same time, the Billy DeFrank Center gains insights into how various agencies respond. The final deliverable will include a set of tabletop scenarios, the rules and procedures for “playing” the exercise, and a podcast episode that speaks in depth about the experience created with my fellow student, Jackson Benz.

## **Crafting Deliverables**

### *Mass Care and Sheltering Tabletop Exercises*

Faas and I began drafting LGBTQ+-centric tabletop exercises that focused on mass care and sheltering scenarios that are probable and representative of what narratives exist for LGBTQ+ care in disaster response. I created vignettes depicting LGBTQ+ interactions with shelter staff, shelter facilities, and other residents by referencing and combining encounters from Faas, Parreno, and Wein's initial vulnerability assessment with input from the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center, disaster research on LGBTQ+ inclusion, and broader research on LGBTQ+ issues in health and care. Using an expansive view of what trends were most prevalent to likely LGBTQ+ barriers to inclusivity in shelters, I found common themes such as misunderstanding in healthcare, lack of identity representation in spaces, interpersonal harassment, and institutional exclusion.

Once drafted, I shared the deliverables with my community partners at the Billy DeFrank Center and my faculty advisors for feedback and guidance on relevance. Before sharing the tabletop exercises with community partners from the American Red Cross, I also created a set of tabletop procedures modeled after common tabletop rules and standards. The procedures explained basic guidelines around exercise objectives, participant guidelines, roles and responsibilities, and overall rules of the exercises. When the tabletop scenarios and procedures were complete, I provided them to representatives from the American Red Cross and CADRE for feedback before our meeting to pilot them.

Once ready, Faas and I hosted an evening of piloting the tabletop exercises between several Red Cross disaster response volunteers and the president of CADRE. Representatives from both organizations were massively perceptive and insightful with their feedback on the

scenarios presented. They offered many stories and comments on where LGBTQ+ consideration may be due in mass care and sheltering.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RAINBOW READINESS: TABLETOP EXERCISES FOR LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE DISASTER RESPONSE**

#### **Abstract**

LGBTQ+ people often experience disproportionate effects in disaster aftermath and recovery. Emerging research on the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and disaster response is shedding light on areas where harm may occur. My project addresses the gap in disaster practice by developing LGBTQ+ inclusive strategies for sheltering and mass care through tabletop exercises that enable participants to work through specific problems in potential emergencies. By working as a mediator between local LGBTQ+ community members and disaster response volunteers, I fostered pathways for reciprocal learning that build capacity for both parties to support the LGBTQ+ community throughout a disaster response.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+ Inclusion, Disaster Response, Tabletop Exercises



## Introduction

My research aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in disaster research using an inclusive approach that focuses on LGBTQ+ voices as central to the development of my project, thereby advancing the conversation towards a more inclusive paradigm for disaster research. The focus of this project is to examine the current state of LGBTQ+ inclusive practices in disaster response and risk reduction, as informed by both LGBTQ+ individuals and disaster response representatives, to foster a dialogue on how these practices can be improved and made more inclusive. By 2024, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) tracked over 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in the United States that targeted all aspects of LGBTQ+ existence, including gender-affirming healthcare, public accommodation, and school education (ACLU 2024). This legislation poses the ability to contribute to harsh anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in the United States and sources of harm for LGBTQ+ identifying people nationwide, particularly during a disaster. LGBTQ+ people are twice as likely to be displaced after a disaster than cisgender and heterosexual people, with LGBTQ+ individuals of color facing the highest rates of displacement (Geiger, Mendez, and Goldsmith 2024). To fully understand LGBTQ+ experiences in disaster contexts, we must first understand the often-complex relationships that LGBTQ+ individuals have with systems of care, aid, and protection in the United States. By examining these relations, we can explore how available resources may inadvertently become sources of harm and inaccessibility.

## **How Queering Disaster Began**

The Queering Disasters Project began as a partnership between San José State University's (SJSU) Dr. A.J. Faas and the United States Geological Survey's (USGS) Dr. Anne Wein. The project aims to understand and implement LGBTQ+ inclusion before, during, and after disasters. The objective of Queering Disasters is to complement the USGS HayWired Scenario. This scientific model maps areas of highest risk along the Hayward Fault in the event of a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. The HayWired Scenario maps hazards, structures, and impacts while accounting for social variables using data drawn from the U.S. Census. This information identifies where impacts coincide with populations historically overrepresented in disaster impacts and those overrepresented in disaster data overlap.

Notably, the LGBTQ+ community, which has been overrepresented in disaster impacts, was not included in the HayWired scenario due to the limited availability of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) data before the 2020 US Census. Faas partnered with Dr. Wein to work with community-based organizations to explore the experiences of diverse communities with various hazards and systemic vulnerabilities. Queering Disasters occur in Silicon Valley, the southernmost part of the San Francisco Bay Area. LGBTQ+ history in the Bay Area spans decades, from Compton's Cafeteria Riot in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco to the United States' first Office of LGBTQ Affairs in Santa Clara County. The LGBTQ+ community throughout the Bay has contributed to the breadth of history and research on LGBTQ+ inclusion.

To gain a deeper understanding of how the LGBTQ+ community experiences disaster, Faas and the team began working with the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center to begin that conversation. The Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center, located in downtown San

Jose, is a local community center that serves as a social space and resource hub for local LGBTQ+ Community members. A.J. Faas and Jhaid Parreno, then a student in the MA Program in Applied Anthropology at SJSU, partnered with Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center to examine how LGBTQ+ community members living near the Hayward Fault perceive hazards in their local communities. Through a series of focus groups with LGBTQ+ community members, Faas and Parreno identified hazards beyond earthquakes that LGBTQ+ people felt most affect their community, including *Anti LGBTQ+ Aggression & Violence*, *the COVID-19 Pandemic*, *Domestic Violence & Abuse Within the LGBTQ+ Community*, *Police Lack of Education on LGBTQ+ Issues*, and *Wildfires* (Faas, Parreno, and Wein, n.d.).

Faas began working with tabletop scenarios as a methodology to translate these findings into responsive action (Quimby and Beresford 2023). Tabletop exercises are discussion-based, serious games that provide vignettes for participants to “walk through” emergency events and create plans to improve their response to such events. These exercises are frequently employed by governmental and nongovernmental organizations for emergency planning or after-action reviews of previous emergencies. Initially, Faas piloted a series of tabletop exercises between Billy DeFrank and the Japantown Prepared Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) to explore LGBTQ+ inclusion in the first response phase of a disaster; however, insights from this session highlight a greater need for effective response operations, especially when LGBTQ+ individuals are in mass care and sheltering environments. In the Fall of 2021, I joined Faas and the Queering Disasters team to explore how we can continue to develop disaster research that guides LGBTQ+ inclusion in mass care and sheltering environments.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Vulnerability is a concept employed in disaster studies to explain the social production of disasters and inequalities in the distribution of disaster impacts. Elizabeth Marino and A.J. Faas (2020) argue that vulnerability is best understood in the context of the systems and relationships that create inequality rather than simply labeling individuals as ‘vulnerable’ because they suffer from the consequences of an exclusionary system. LGBTQ+ people experience vulnerability stemming from social stigma, violence, and discrimination while broadly facing exclusion from social structures such as legal acknowledgment and access to affirming services (Faas, Parreno, and Wein, n.d.). Dale Dominey-Howes and colleagues (2014) call for a greater understanding of the diverse needs within the LGBTQ+ community to deliver informed, practical actions that disrupt vulnerability. For example, queer people often have a shared experience of facing rejection from their own families because of their identity, immediately excluding them from the familial support that provides security during times of hardship (Faas et al. n.d.). Dominey-Howes and colleagues (2014) highlight the importance of analyzing how public policies reinforce heteronormativity and marginalize LGBTQ+ experiences and identities within the broader sociopolitical context, extending beyond the household.

LGBTQ+ inclusive disaster practice begins long before the disaster itself and is rooted in our everyday experiences with systems of care and aid. William Roberston (2017) finds an “invisibility narrative” prevalent in the medical field that stems from medical practitioners avoiding topics of gender and sexual identity in their treatments because of a lack of training and overall comfort with the topic. During post-hurricane Katrina recovery, aid distribution prioritized families with heterosexual parents over LGBTQ+ or chosen families, then causing people to recast their partners and family members or seek aid elsewhere entirely (Leap et al.

2007). LGBTQ+ experiences with methods of care are deeply nuanced, requiring us to zoom out to a larger picture of interconnected issues to understand the finite challenges in everyday existence. Faas and Parreno's (2024) intention in the earliest stages of the Queering Disaster was to keep LGBTQ+ voices as a central role in producing knowledge about their community. By inviting LGBTQ+ folks to participate actively in shaping inclusive disaster response, Queering Disasters lessens the disconnect between them and the resources necessary to respond and recover from disasters (Faas and Parreno 2024).

### **Crafting Tabletop Scenarios**

To create a dialogue that captured how response agencies would realistically respond to LGBTQ+ experiences during mass care and sheltering events, I made a tabletop exercise that featured seven LGBTQ+-specific scenarios, and each tabletop had an accompanying set of discussion questions and learning objectives. These tabletop exercises facilitate a conversation between LGBTQ+ community members and disaster workers. This discussion will focus on how disaster workers can act as initial disruptors of LGBTQ+ harm during a disaster response. At the same time, the exercises aim to empower LGBTQ+ individuals to learn how to build their capacity to be better prepared for disasters.

To construct the tabletop exercises, I pulled data from previous emergency response conversations between Japantown Prepared and Billy DeFrank, a Preliminary Findings report conducted in phase one by Faas and his team, models from the Los Altos Evacuation Tabletop Exercises employed by The Red Cross Silicon Valley Chapter, and extant literature that focuses on LGBTQ+ experiences in disasters. Drawing insight from these sources, we developed several scenarios focusing on topics presently affecting the LGBTQ+ community. These scenarios included narratives involving harassment of a transgender person in a shelter and a following

scenario of the same person wanting to leave the shelter due to feeling unsafe; an encounter where a person's Government ID does not accurately reflect their gender identity; a transgender person who is experiencing medical needs, including their hormone prescription, signs of domestic violence between a same-sex couple; two gay parents with a teenage son and different last names; and a woman with limited English who has sensitivity to touch and is separated from her partner. Below is an example of the first scenario that was piloted with representatives from the Red Cross and CADRE.

Shelter staff has received reports from several people that a shelter resident is receiving harassing remarks from a nearby woman who is sleeping in the same dormitory. When asked to identify who is receiving these remarks, shelter volunteers point out a young individual, in their twenties, with shoulder-length hair, and dark stubble growing across their chin and jawline, wearing a baggy T-shirt, blue jeans, and Nike sneakers. This resident does not appear to be accompanied by any friends or family. When approached by the shelter supervisor about the issue, the shelter resident confirmed that they have been experiencing harassing remarks and that they have been repeatedly told they do not belong with the women and to "stop using the wrong restroom."

Once drafted, I sent these scenarios to my community partners at Billy DeFrank, and faculty committee members for feedback. Following confirmation that the scenarios accurately reflected a potential LGBTQ+ experience in disaster, I created a tabletop procedure that works in tandem with the tabletop scenarios by outlining roles, responsibilities, and guidelines for participants at the tabletop exercise run-through. I then shared these documents with my community partners at the American Red Cross, Silicon Valley Chapter, to confirm they were clear and usable as a tool.

### **Connecting with Community Partners and Piloting the Tabletop Scenarios**

Faas and I recognized the need for community partners who actively play a role in sheltering and mass care during a disaster response. The American Red Cross is one of the largest non-governmental disaster relief providers in the world, providing mass care and

sheltering services for both large and small-scale emergencies. The American Red Cross Silicon Valley Chapter and Santa Clara Collaborating Agencies Disaster Relief Network (CADRE) became our community partners. They recruited volunteers for the tabletop, some of whom have more than 35 years of disaster response experience. CADRE is the local Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) for the County of Santa Clara. CADRE's local mission is to coordinate between local nonprofits and faith-based organizations to provide services during a disaster. The intention behind working with the Red Cross and CADRE was to create an active dialogue between LGBTQ+ community members and disaster responders on how they could employ each other's knowledge to build capacity on creating and receiving LGBTQ+ inclusive services in mass care and sheltering environments.

Red Cross volunteers arrived at the tabletop session equipped with their organizations' current documents regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion. The documents that volunteers brought to the tabletop session are not presently available to the public but are available to all Red Cross volunteers and employees for reference and guidance. Red Cross volunteers affirm their commitment to providing disaster relief services without discrimination, as stated in their documents. However, it is important to consider how evolving social landscapes have created challenges in delivering these services. While these tabletop scenarios do not attempt to encompass all the ways that LGBTQ+ people can experience harm during a disaster, they begin a conversation about how we can facilitate a spirit of care for LGBTQ+ folks during disaster response.

### **Barriers to Inclusion**

Faas and I facilitated the tabletop exercises with Red Cross and CADRE representatives, collecting their responses and subsequent conversations around each of the scenarios we

presented. Both conversations highlighted two significant obstacles to ensuring LGBTQ+ safety: discrimination against individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and heteronormative administrative practices.

Individual discrimination is a form of harm that arises from overall anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in society that transcend into personal encounters of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity. Whereas administrative heteronormativity pertains to the presumption and reinforcement of gender binaries in our government and institutions, essentially creating bottlenecks to the delivery of LGBTQ+-affirming actions.

### *Individual Discrimination*

After listening to the first scenario mentioned earlier, Red Cross volunteers said that they felt prepared to confront any harassment from shelter clients. One volunteer, Aaron, stated;

If a client, staff member, or volunteer has objections to sharing facilities with a person who is transgender, you should explain that the Red Cross's mission and official policy [of] the organization is to provide humanitarian services to anyone for everyone, we don't discriminate.

Aaron continued to explain that the offending party would be asked to relocate within the shelter or even be evicted from the shelter should the harassment continue. Red Cross shelter volunteers felt prepared to handle situations of client discrimination; however, they identified discrimination from within the Red Cross as a potential problem.

Being one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations, the Red Cross has hundreds of thousands of volunteers who work across all their lines of service. This means that volunteers participating in a sheltering response can vary widely in identity and experience. This poses a potential issue during a disaster response when volunteers are brought in from across the United States to run a shelter. Aaron shared that, "Our [Red Cross] ability to vet incoming volunteers



from across the country is minimal. Disasters are often no-notice events. And so you need hundreds of volunteers, you need them there as quickly as possible.”

Other volunteers agreed with this sentiment, sharing that there could be potential for a volunteer who has non-LGBTQ+ affirming beliefs to be brought into a disaster response despite receiving training that covers how to provide inclusive services to all identities and experiences. Also, volunteers shared that they receive extensive training early in their volunteer journeys. While the training does cover topics of facilitating a spirit of “everyone is welcome”, it is coupled with massive amounts of other information. It may not cement itself in their memory until it is implemented in actual disaster responses.

### *Administrative Heteronormativity*

Conversations with the Red Cross show that LGBTQ+ inclusion can be available at the organizational level, but its efficacy is undermined without inclusive state policy. Despite volunteers being well-equipped to provide inclusive sheltering services to LGBTQ+ identifying folks, they commonly expressed that participating in disaster responses in non-LGBTQ+ affirming states creates a gray space of what shelter volunteers can legally do as allies. Aaron responded to the topic of providing gender-neutral restrooms as,

In the state of Florida, Florida is a great one to use, because it is the most restrictive. And so I would say that the reasonable thing to do is, just to put up a sign that says ‘gender neutral’. Which is not going to get me cuffed as a shelter supervisor and taken down to jail for violating state law. But I’m not sure.

To clarify, Aaron is referencing a bill Florida passed in 2023, HB 1521. HB 1521 (Fla. Senate 2023), which “Provides requirements for the exclusive use of restrooms & changing facilities by gender; prohibits willfully entering restrooms or changing facility designated for opposite sex & refusing to depart when asked to do so.” This law prohibits anyone from using a facility that is designated for a gender other than that they were assigned at birth, regardless of

their gender identity. HB1521 is one of the several hundred laws that reaffirm heteronormativity within legislation, ultimately diminishing room for gender and sexual minorities to exist safely in the United States. While this captures one of many interactions with anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, Red Cross volunteers expressed concern about providing facilities that are accessible for non-binary, transgender, or gender-nonconforming individuals; however, current laws in Florida pose potential legal consequences for doing so.

## **Lessons Learned**

Following the conclusion of the exercise, I released an after-action assessment to collect volunteer reflections on the primary lessons they had learned during the tabletop exercises and how they can develop LGBTQ+ inclusive disaster response strategies moving forward. In their responses, one volunteer elaborated on their understanding of Red Cross policies,

The primary lesson I learned was a deeper understanding of ARC (American Red Cross) written and implied doctrine regarding LGBTQ support in shelters. Our written doctrine is thin, but implied doctrine is more encompassing of the approach and open attitudes that shelter workers need to take toward supporting LGBTQ members. Regardless of these written and implied doctrines, ARC volunteers from across the country bring in their own biases towards LGBTQ issues and more aware volunteers need to ensure openness from all volunteers, regardless of individual baggage.

This volunteer referenced the duality between an organization's mission and values versus how they are carried out by the people who are a part of the organization. The absence of organizational policies that prohibit homophobia and transphobia can perpetuate individual biases, even within organizations that otherwise share a humanitarian mission.

Vastly polarized views of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, stemming from the politicization of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, pose a challenge in implementing more LGBTQ+ inclusive practices. While volunteers may prove dedicated to providing inclusive spaces, variation in LGBTQ+ acceptance can skew the effectiveness of those

efforts. One volunteer illustrates this by explaining, “My fear is that cultural differences and beliefs across the country can cause uneven application of our policy.”

Red Cross volunteers also emphasized the importance of education on LGBTQ+ inclusion in disasters being taught to the LGBTQ+ community. One volunteer shared, “I would love for the community to know their rights and the Red Cross policy. I would tell them to ask to speak to the Shelter Manager if the worker they encounter does not follow policy.” Other volunteers resonated with this statement, explaining that it is essential for the LGBTQ+ community to understand what risks they face during a disaster and what actions can be taken to mitigate those risks. Several responses in the survey advised that LGBTQ+ folks who experience any type of issue within a shelter raise their concerns to the shelter manager or continue the conversation up the chain of command. Furthermore, Red Cross volunteers expressed the importance of continuing volunteer training around these topics and expressed how it would be beneficial to engage in active dialogues with their fellow volunteers moving forward.

## **Conclusion**

Disaster research has long served as a lens to uncover deep-rooted inequity and exclusion within our communities, societies, and institutions. This necessitates a critical examination of how research can challenge these exclusionary structures and drive meaningful social change. LGBTQ+ risk in a disaster begins far before the beginning of the event itself. The disparities that LGBTQ+ people experience during a disaster are mere reflections of social inequity that exists within our systems of care, aid, and protection. My project with The Queering Disasters Project explores the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals during disaster situations, which often arise from the intersection of systemic discrimination, exclusionary policies, and gaps in emergency preparedness and response. Through collaboration with disaster mass care and

sheltering representatives, *Queering Disasters* sheds light on how these challenges can manifest in real-world disaster responses, helping to identify potential areas of harm for the LGBTQ+ community.

By prioritizing LGBTQ+ inclusion in disaster planning, from incorporating community feedback into planning to ensuring that emergency personnel receive training on cultural competence, the potential for equitable response becomes increasingly promising. *Queering Disasters* urges us to push past the heteronormative paradigm that is entrenched within society so that we can make space for more fluid, liberated ways of envisioning gender and sexual identity within disaster research.

## Author Biography



Becca Carmick is a graduate of the Master of Arts program in Applied Anthropology at San José State University. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies from San José State, which sparked her interest in the intersection of identity and the environment. As a graduate student, Becca served as a government fellow with the Santa

Clara County Office of LGBTQ Affairs, where she conducted a research project on LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the county's outdoor spaces, including public parks, trails, campgrounds, and community gardens. She currently works as the Community Disaster Program Manager for the American Red Cross, Silicon Valley Chapter, where she manages a large team of disaster response volunteers and oversees disaster cycle services for the territory.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REFLECTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

#### **Project Takeaways**

Reflecting on my work on the Queering Disasters Project, I learned many valuable lessons that have contributed to my growth as an anthropologist, a leader, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Queering Disasters sought to create conversations that utilized local knowledge of LGBTQ+ identities and bridge this understanding into disaster risk reduction and response procedures. In this final chapter, I reflect on the key takeaways from my research, the limitations I encountered, and recommendations for further study.

#### *Identity and Research*

A critical component of this project was engaging with LGBTQ+ individuals to understand their experiences and concerns regarding disasters better. While I have always been around and present with my local LGBTQ+ community, my prior experiences were not academic nor based in an emergency management context. In preparation for my research, I tried to attend more local pride events, whether hosted at Billy DeFrank or hosted by the larger LGBTQ+ community in Santa Clara County. At these events, I had the opportunity to engage in candid conversations about identity, community, and resilience. These times were not simply networking opportunities but spaces that deepened my understanding of what it means to be queer in a world that still poses risks for gender and sexual minorities.

A recurring question that circulated in many of my conversations was, “What does it mean to be queer?” When we deeply examine this question, we understand that being LGBTQ+ or identifying as queer has no single look or definition but is influenced by one’s sense of self and identity. This is guided by a further understanding of how people experience their gender

and sexuality as rooted in their lives. I am sincerely grateful for this period because it gave me the confidence to fully understand myself and begin showing up for others as a researcher, a friend, and a pansexual woman. At the start of my work on Queering Disasters, I was hesitant to share my experiences as a pansexual woman, fearing it might be unprofessional or inappropriate. However, over time, I found that being open about my identity and life encouraged others to do the same. Reflecting on these interactions, many discussions that began with my life as a student or my research naturally evolved into personal exchanges of stories and life lessons. One instance was during a meeting with an informant to work through edits on my tabletop exercises. I arrived at their office ready to talk about my draft but after a short read of the scenarios, we spent the next two hours talking about the metaphysics and LGBTQ+ themes in mythology. Granted, our time management skills could have used some work, but I left that conversation understanding a sense of care and affirmation shared within safe spaces to explore identity. While the scenarios eventually did get their proper edits, the lesson of our interaction revealed the need for human connection. I found the power of storytelling and human connection to be a healing entity, especially after COVID-19, when people sought to regain the connections they felt they had once lost.

#### *Collaborating with the LGBTQ+ Community*

My project with Queering Disasters aimed to understand how LGBTQ+ experiences could contribute to inclusive disaster response practices, but the most essential part of my project was gathering an understanding of how both unique and shared perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals could respectively contribute to the formulation of my tabletop scenarios. At the time, there was a growing amount of literature to lean on, but limited research directly approached the topic of LGBTQ+ experiences in disaster contexts. I am massively thankful for

the work of Dale Dominey-Howes and their team, William L. Leap and their team, and Jessica Geiger and their team. Their research was a strong guiding point for my research and greatly aided in creating the tabletop scenarios. While these authors provided a better understanding of the broader topic of LGBTQ+ experience in disasters, *Queering Disasters* also focused on gathering hyperlocal experiences to guide scenarios.

### *Creating and Translating New Conversations*

*Queering Disasters* emphasized the importance of using local conversations created with members of the LGBTQ+ community to guide subsequent conversations with disaster responders who actively support disaster responses with boots on the ground. LGBTQ+ individuals often face barriers that can complicate their ability to recover from disasters. Issues such as discrimination and fears around disclosing gender or sexual identity can significantly impact disaster experiences. Understanding these challenges requires more than asking questions: listening to personal stories with a compassionate ear, building trust, and learning to welcome open conversations.

In this context, we used anthropology as a tool to serve as a bridge between local communities and broader organizations that facilitate conversations about how to respond to a local disaster. The benefit of using anthropology in this project was that it circulated insights from these two groups into a collaborative narrative, advising one another when such dialogues may not have happened organically. *Queering Disasters* helped create spaces and was a broker for essential discussions of inclusivity and transformation in spaces that reflect identity and care.



## **Limitations**

### *Participant Hesitancy*

Initial attempts to connect with local LGBTQ+ community members about disaster research were understandably met with hesitation despite efforts to appear transparent and sincere. Histories of violence and discrimination understandably caused trepidation for some at the thought of having one's name entered into a database alongside one's gender identity and sexuality. Fortunately, I was able to partner with an LGBTQ+ community organization that helped facilitate initial conversations and create warm introductions between myself and others.

### *Limited Direct Conversations*

Due to the availability constraints of LGBTQ+ informants, we could not pilot the tabletop exercises directly between LGBTQ+ community members and disaster responders. Facilitating direct dialogues between the two groups that could provide depth of direct conversation would have been even more impactful; however, we relied on guided intermediary discussions.

### *Creating Dialogues*

Both the LGBTQ+ community and the disaster response field have their distinct terminology, and at times, it felt like I was speaking two entirely different languages. This distinction highlighted a potential gap; many disaster responders had scant experience directly handling LGBTQ+-specific concerns, while many LGBTQ+ individuals had limited firsthand experience with disasters.

### *Informants*

After piloting the tabletop scenarios with the initial group of informants from the American Red Cross, I was later asked to return and facilitate the tabletop scenarios with the

Regional Mass Care team for the American Red Cross Northern California Coastal Region. After demonstrating the tabletop scenarios again with another volunteer pool, I received several more subtle insights into potential avenues for LGBTQ+ inclusion in mass care and shelter settings. My informant sample all lived in Santa Clara County and were already open and knowledgeable about some topics regarding LGBTQ+ inclusivity and even went so far as to provide the internal Red Cross guidance on supporting transgender clients. During our session, they were honest that responders from other areas might not react to these scenarios as they would because of vastly different and exclusionary political atmospheres. Having a group of disaster responders from Santa Clara County may have contributed to a more inclusive ideology surrounding LGBTQ+-focused responses than I would have received in other states with stricter laws excluding the rights and existence of LGBTQ+ people.

## **Future Considerations**

### *LGBTQ+ Disaster Preparedness*

The tabletop exercises intended to create a reciprocal knowledge exchange between LGBTQ+ and disaster response organizations. An intention that could be expanded upon further is what the LGBTQ+ community can learn from disaster response agencies to fortify themselves for a disaster. Throughout my project, I have noted that LGBTQ+ experiences in disaster are deeply tied into the systems of care and aid they exist in. Therefore, I would recommend that further research explore how LGBTQ+ community members navigate these systems of care, particularly in preparation for a large-scale disaster.

### **LGBTQ+ Experiences in Recovery**

The first phase of Queering Disasters held tabletop exercises that focused on LGBTQ+ experiences in the first response phase of a disaster, where local CERT teams would actively

enter homes and may encounter potential harm. The second phase, where I came in, focused on the subsequent phase of the same disaster, where LGBTQ+ people have the potential to reside in mass care shelters. This research should be expanded past a disaster response's mass care and sheltering phase and into the long-term recovery stages. Recovery after a disaster can be lengthy and complex, requiring individuals and families to allocate and navigate what resources are available to them. LGBTQ+ folks often have complex and challenging relationships with systems of care and aid; therefore, there may be disproportionate barriers to accessing recovery resources such as housing, LGBTQ+-sensitive healthcare, financial support, and overall tools to rebuild. Further research would be warranted to examine what recovery efforts are currently available and whether they are prepared to activate in a local disaster.

## **Final Thoughts**

### *Looking at the Project a Year Later*

Since completing this research, I have been the Community Disaster Program Manager for the American Red Cross, Silicon Valley Chapter, for over a year. Shortly after concluding the tabletop exercises between the American Red Cross and CADRE, I was extended the opportunity to work with the team full-time. In this position, I oversee the Silicon Valley Chapter's Disaster Cycle Services programs and support a team of over 200 disaster response volunteers. Each Red Cross representative who participated in the LGBTQ+ mass care and sheltering tabletop scenarios eventually became a volunteer that I enjoyed supporting. Their extensive expertise and knowledge give me a deeper understanding of the power of volunteerism and the genuine desire to be a positive force in the world.

Being a part of the Silicon Valley Chapter has given me a front-seat look into the sense of care and commitment necessary in emergency management and disaster response. Whether

responding to local home fires, installing free smoke alarms, or deploying nationwide for large-scale disasters, they consistently show up for their communities locally and far away. This has reinforced an understanding that disaster response goes beyond preparedness and logistics; it is a more profound sense of care, compassion, and hospitality.

### *Moving Forward in Disaster Response*

Large-scale disasters are occurring with higher frequency and severity. Events that seemed far away and improbable now may happen closer to home, with a nationwide impact. As disaster response agencies move from chronic to continuous response and large-scale disasters across the United States increase, there is a more profound need to examine how support systems will persist under more consistent demand. The Queering Disasters Project explores LGBTQ+ inclusivity in disaster response and risk reduction, recognizing that creating truly safe and inclusive spaces during disaster responses requires ongoing conversations. These discussions must be rooted in hyperlocal understandings of experiences and identities within both our communities and those we serve. By integrating anthropological perspectives, Queering Disasters offers valuable insights into how these conversations can be facilitated, fostering new dialogues that prioritize more effective and thoughtful disaster services.

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