

Guest editorial: Using critical perspectives to explore disasters through shifting climates: an introduction to the special issue

This special issue is inspired by the life and work of sociologist William A. (Bill) Anderson, a highly respected scholar and visionary leader who helped shape the trajectory of the disaster research field, both within the United States and internationally. Bill was a member of the first cohort of graduate students trained at the Disaster Research Center, which was founded in 1963 at The Ohio State University, and the only Black member of that cohort. His doctoral dissertation was based on his research following the 1964 Great Alaska earthquake. While at DRC, in addition to leading field teams in domestic and international disasters, Bill also played a key role in research on urban uprisings such as the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles and the 1969 anti-colonial May Movement rebellion in Curaçao. His first academic appointment was at Arizona State University, where he rapidly achieved the rank of full professor. Bill left ASU to become the founding director of the American Sociological Association's Minority Fellowship Program, which sought to increase the diversity of the field of sociology long before the concept of DEI became prominent in US institutions. Following his time at ASA, Bill enjoyed a long tenure as a program officer and division director at the National Science Foundation, where he oversaw numerous projects that focused on the societal dimensions of hazards and disasters as well as on the development of an infrastructure for the conduct of multi- and inter-disciplinary disaster research. In 1999, Bill moved to the World Bank's Disaster Management Facility, where he played a key role in establishing the Bank's ProVenton Consortium. He then moved in 2001 to the National Academy of Sciences, where he served as associate executive director in the Division of Earth and Life Sciences and director of the Disasters Roundtable, which sought to increase communication and the exchange of ideas among disaster scientists, practitioners and policymakers.

Throughout his distinguished career, Bill was a thought leader whose observations regarding the disaster research field spurred significant change. For example, his concerns in the 1990s about the "graying" of the field led to NSF's sponsorship of successive projects on "enabling the next generation of disaster research," in which senior researchers mentored early career hazards and disaster researchers, for example, by providing them with guidance on how to develop successful grant proposals. Those mentees were incredibly successful; many current leaders in the field participated in those "enabling" projects. Similarly, Bill urged the research community to focus on understudied issues regarding children in disasters, which led to a growth in research, articles and books on the topic. Likewise, he pushed disaster scholars to address blind spots in the field regarding socially marginalized populations by bringing more of these individuals into the research community.

This special issue recognizes Bill Anderson's legacy by documenting how current policies and practices continue to disadvantage communities of color and the poor, both in the US and in other societies. Importantly, it highlights insights from those underserved and minoritized communities about how they resist environmental injustices. Several articles find evidence for what the sociologist Merton (1968) called the "Matthew Effect": the tendency for benefits to accrue to those who already have significant resources, while those with few resources are left worse off. We see this pattern, for example, in the distribution of Emergency Management Performance Grants, which tend to go to communities whose residents are wealthier, more educated, less socially vulnerable and more economically resilient, as opposed to less-well-off communities that actually need that assistance more. In that same vein, the ultra-wealthy



community of Montecito, California, an enclave built on racial exclusion and an idyllic exurban imaginary, was able to tap into public resources for disaster mitigation and recovery to sustain its “privileged vulnerability.” The historically disadvantaged environmental justice community of North Port St. Joe, Florida, was the site of a promising project aimed at restorative post-disaster and environmental cleanup planning. Yet powerful oil and gas interests seek to locate a liquified natural gas facility in that community – a move that most residents oppose but that benefits the capitalist class. Similarly, on Colombia’s San Andres Island, a desalination plant funnels water in ways that benefit tourism-oriented and commercial sectors while providing limited access for island residents.

Inequitable practices are also meeting with resistance. Recognizing that governmental institutions do not exist to serve poor and marginalized communities and forged in the aftermath of a series of hurricanes and environmental disasters that struck the Louisiana Gulf Coast, the Disaster Justice Network is a mutual aid network consisting of researchers, practitioners and nonprofit organizations centered on community empowerment and sustainable disaster recovery. As seen in research on the co-creation of a public health assessment tool for residents of the Corcovada barrio in Anasco, Puerto Rico, participatory research methods can challenge top-down programs that fail to address community priorities by providing a mechanism for multi-stakeholder collaboration and evidence-based decision-making.

Other entries in this issue contribute to the growing field of critical disaster studies. UndocuCrit valorizes the experiences of undocumented US immigrants while framing disaster vulnerability as a political and legal condition produced through state violence. Likewise, this perspective echoes back to Bill’s efforts to sharpen the analytic lens of disaster studies by calling in those most deeply affected by the environmental harms driven by systems of social and economic stratification. A focus on researchers’ positionalities reminds us that we must elucidate the ways in which our often-privileged identities influence the conduct of research and how to overcome those biases.

Cultural criticism also has an important role in disaster studies, as seen in how Black feminist thought provides a lens through which to analyze Bessie Smith’s song “*Blackwater Blues*,” a reflection on the catastrophic 1927 Great Mississippi flood and how it affected women of color. Likewise, the arts present an additional domain through which those experiencing and documenting the intersections between environmental degradation, forced migration, and the resilience of the oppressed, as explored here through poetry and visual commentary. Collectively, the articles included in this special issue stand in conversation with Bill Anderson’s scholarship while expanding upon the themes raised throughout his life’s work.

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