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# Governing Affect

Roberto E. Barrios

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# **Governing Affect**

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# **Governing Affect**

Neoliberalism and Disaster Reconstruction

*Roberto E. Barrios*

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For Teresa and Everardo



## Contents

List of Illustrations	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Author's Note	xiii
Introduction: Affect and Emotions in Disaster Reconstruction	I
1. Powerful Feelings: Emotions and Governmentality in Disaster Research	27
2. <i>Hallarse</i> : Defining Recovery in Affective Terms	49
3. Feelings of Inequity: Gender and the Postcolonial Modernity of Disaster Reconstruction	79
4. The <i>Marero</i> : Terror and Disgust in the Aftermath of Mitch	99
5. Ecologies of Affect and Affective Regimes: The Neoliberal Reconstruction of New Orleans	121
6. How to Care? The Contested Affects of Disaster Recovery in the Lower Ninth Ward	157
7. Criollos, Creoles, and the Mobile Taquerias: Latinophobia in Post-Katrina New Orleans	177
8. To Love a Small Town: The Political Ecology of Affect in the Middle Mississippi	205
9. Rebuilding It Better: The Ethical Challenges of Disaster Recovery	229
10. The Anthropology of Affect and Disasters: From Critique to Practice	253
References	261
Index	279

## Illustrations

1. Research sites	4
2. A detail of Limón de la Cerca's master plan	17
3. Image of New Orleans's possible future	22
4. "Flood Plain Management"	31
5. Map of greater Choluteca urban area	50
6. A micro-shelter, a wind-damaged house, and electricity poles	52
7. Mara Salvatrucha graffiti	53
8. Spatial distribution of a Choluteca neighborhood before Hurricane Mitch	63
9. Choluteca annual government report, 1998–99	75
10. New Orleans Planning District 4	130
11. Location of Tremé in relation to other New Orleans neighborhoods and suburbs	130
12. Mardi Gras Indian Parade	135
13. Nine Times Social Aid and Pleasure Club second-line parade	137
14. Candle Light Lounge in Tremé	141
15. UNOP recovery plan for Planning District 4	151
16. Lower Ninth Ward area	158
17. Greater Olive Branch area	209
18. Greater Ostuacán area	239
19. New San Juan de Grijalva	247
20. Modified house in New San Juan de Grijalva	250

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## Author's Note

*Governing Affect* is the result of four ethnographic research projects I conducted from 1999 to 2015. The research sites where I collected evidence include the greater Choloteca urban area in southern Honduras, various neighborhoods in the city of New Orleans, the town of Olive Branch in southern Illinois, and the resettlement community of New San Juan de Grijalva in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Research in these four sites involved a range of methods including ethnographic interviews (casual and formal conversations with people about topics of ethnographic interest), participant observation (doing things alongside people) in community and institutional activities, household surveys, and the collection of anthropometric measurements (measurements of body size). With this evidence I make a number of claims about the challenges and unresolved contradictions of disaster mitigation policy and practice. To substantiate these claims, I use excerpts from ethnographic interviews and vignettes from participant observation activities throughout this manuscript. Anthropologists, I always tell my students, are very much like lawyers. We argue cases, and we must present evidence to the jury of our readers and fellow colleagues. The evidence must bear a logical connection to the claims we are trying to make, and it must be believable to the jury.

Anthropologists often differentiate between what they call unstructured, semi-structured, and structured ethnographic interviews. *Unstructured ethnographic interviews* are conversations anthropologists have with interlocutors that occur serendipitously as a result of the researcher becoming immersed in a particular community or institution and simply being in the right place at the right time. Unstructured ethnographic interviews are one of the most powerful and yet delicate forms of data gathering. The anthropologist must carefully and ethically balance the requirements of informed consent (reminding interlocutors that even though they may come to share bonds of friendship and even “fictive”

kinship with the anthropologist, the anthropologist is still a researcher) and the trust and intimacy that their interlocutors demonstrate when, without solicitation, they pull the ethnographer aside and share intimate information about their lives and communities. While we learn the most in these moments, we are also given information that is sensitive and potentially harmful to the communities we study. The American Anthropological Association's ethical code stipulates that anthropologists must do no harm to the people and communities they study, and how we handle the information we are given during these seemingly casual exchanges can make the difference between doing something that is helpful and constructive and doing something that is incredibly harmful.

Because of the sensitive nature of information gathered through unstructured ethnographic interviews, ethnographers often wait until a conversation is over to write their journal entries, which anthropologists call *fieldnotes*. The anthropologist must attempt to re-create any exchange as faithfully as memory allows, and this task is not easy. Although unstructured ethnographic interviews may not seem a rigorous method to the uninitiated, their execution requires finesse and ethical awareness, and their documentation requires rigor and discipline. "You're just hanging out and talking to people, right?" someone might ask. Well, it involves more than that. Writing fieldnote entries after the fact is a time-consuming and intellectually draining task. Memory fades quickly, and details, phrases, and stories lose their resolution by the minute. The ethnographer must have the rigorous habit of writing things down as thoroughly as possible and as soon as circumstances allow.

*Semi-structured ethnographic interviews* differ from unstructured ethnographic interviews in that they are not unsolicited. In these instances, the ethnographer sets out to purposely have a conversation with an interlocutor about a topic of the former's interest. In some instances, the anthropologist may take brief notes during the conversation and later flesh them out as more detailed fieldnotes, with the end result being a journal entry that resembles those created for unstructured interviews as well.

By contrast, *structured ethnographic interviews* are more formal affairs. The anthropologist often brings lists of topics of conversation to ensure she or he covers them with their interlocutors. The researchers may also

take more detailed notes than they would during a semi-structured interview and, only with the explicit and documented authorization of the interlocutor, may even create an audio recording of the exchange if circumstances and cultural norms allow. While these latter ethnographic interviews may seem superior due to their structure and documenting techniques, they may not be as rich in information because the interlocutor is made overly aware of the research process. These interviews may therefore elicit “official” versions of events and opinions, whereas unstructured ethnographic interviews are critical moments that occur in practice during which the interlocutor demonstrates a cultural phenomenon or shares information whose relevance the anthropologist may not have known about and was therefore incapable of asking questions about it. As a rule of thumb, what does not look rigorous in ethnographic research is quite the opposite, and what seems most rigorous may be that which reveals the least.

In *Governing Affect*, I differentiate evidence I gathered through unstructured, semi-structured, and structured ethnographic interviews with formatting that separates it from the rest of the text and by adding a citation that indicates the year I conducted the interview and the manner in which I handled the information. For example, information collected from a semi-structured ethnographic interview in 2011 features a parenthetical citation at the end of the given section that reads “(semi-structured interview 2011).” A structured ethnographic interview that I conducted in 2008 and that I audio recorded and later transcribed, in contrast, reads “(structured interview transcription 2008).” If I did not audio record and transcribe this latter interview, I then cite it as “(structured interview 2008).”

Complementing interviews, *participant observation* is the other mainstay of ethnographic research. One of the potential pitfalls of ethnographic interviews is that they can often elicit “official” representations of events and people that may not match what people actually do in practice. Anthropologists therefore supplement their interview materials by developing profound rapport with their cultural interlocutors and doing things alongside them. In doing things with people, anthropologists can capture what their interlocutors may not be able to speak about but can demonstrate in action. As with their unstructured and

structured ethnographic interviews, anthropologists rely on short-term memory and the writing of fieldnote entries to process the information they gain from participant observation activities. In this book, I include multiple excerpts of comments my interlocutors made during participant observation activities that I documented in the form of fieldnotes. When I use fieldnote excerpts as evidence, I also separate this evidence from the remainder of the text and close the section with a citation that notes the year in which the activity and documentation took place. For example, evidence detailing the ways expert planners spoke about the recovery process in New Orleans during a 2006 planning meeting where I conducted participant observation is cited as “(fieldnotes 2006).”

## Introduction

### AFFECT AND EMOTIONS IN DISASTER RECONSTRUCTION

On a hot and humid summer day in 2009, Ward “Mack” McClendon agreed to sit with me outside of a large green warehouse located in the Lower Ninth Ward—a part of New Orleans devastated by Hurricane Katrina’s floods—to talk about his assessment of the area’s recovery. Before the storm, Mack dedicated himself to restoring old cars and driving a tow truck, bringing in a comfortable income. The disaster and the way local and federal government agencies handled the area’s reconstruction, however, resulted in the partial disappearance of what he had come to take for granted in the preceding years: his friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and relatives, as well as their particular ways of speaking, behaving, socializing, sharing food, and everyday ways of being that generated a sense of comfort and wellness for Mack.

In 2009 only 15 percent of the area’s pre-Katrina households actively received mail, a proxy measure demographers used to estimate the rate of population return after the hurricane. By 2015 this number had increased to 37 percent, while the citywide figure had risen to 90 percent (Allen 2015; Plyer and Mack 2015). The absence of familiar faces and embodied ways of being struck Mack in what social scientists would label *an affective way*. Mack felt this absence; the feeling he experienced was an uneasy sense of loss that drove him to do things he never considered doing before the catastrophe. Mack reflected:

Believe it or not, before Katrina, I was a very private person, okay, but my community is hurting so bad, I can never be the same person I was before. After embracing the problems that we have, you got to change, and it’s a good way. It’s not a bad way; it makes you start caring about people. (structured interview transcription 2009)

Over the years I knew Mack, I also came to recognize his concern for how those people who were not born and raised in the Lower Ninth Ward but had come to help rebuild after the catastrophe cared about the neighborhood. In some instances, academics, environmental activists, and non-profit program managers seemed more worried about such things as the salinity levels of nearby wetlands and the energy efficiency of homes with low carbon footprints than about the New Orleanians who lived in the area before the flood. Mack felt these residents were irreplaceable, even as new arrivals from other parts of the city and the United States created the impression that the neighborhood was slowly “coming back.”

Mack’s concern about the Ninth Ward’s reconstruction moved him to do something he would have considered illogical before Katrina: he gave up his towing business and dived head deep into community organizing. With his own finances, he purchased a warehouse located in the flooded neighborhood and remodeled it as a community center where out-of-town reconstruction volunteers and residents who needed assistance with home repair could connect. This decision was financially difficult for Mack, and he faced great challenges over the next five years, including the death of his daughter during childbirth and the bank’s foreclosure on his house. But he never questioned his decision in my presence. Mack’s emotion-laden response to the absence of people and practices he found culturally familiar had affected him in such a way that community organizing was something he *had* to do.

One thing that struck me about our conversation was that it was not the first time in my decade of ethnographic research that a person who had lived through a disaster used a language of affect and emotions when assessing his or her community’s recovery process. Nine years before my conversation with Mack, the people of Choluteca, Honduras, who were displaced by Hurricane Mitch’s floods also alluded to their bodily sensed notion of comfort (which was triggered by the spatial proximity of trusted friends, relatives, and familiar architectural structures) as the criterion by which they reflected on the merits of governmental and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reconstruction programs. New Orleans would also not be the last place where I would hear my ethnographic interlocutors make such statements. In the years and research projects to follow

in the midwestern United States and Chiapas, Mexico, people I spoke with would similarly reference their sensed and emotion-laden experience of neighbors, relatives, and spaces as the mechanism by which they evaluated disaster risk and recovery.

On the day of my conversation with Mack, however, I could not foresee that I would one day be sitting down to write this particular book. Disasters, after all, are often represented in popular media as states of emergency in which pragmatic decisions concerning life and death must be made on the fly, while emotions are viewed as sensory experiences whose consideration requires a slowing down of practice and as a luxury that can only be afforded by those not facing an imminent geophysical threat or the widespread disruption of a catastrophe. I would also have had difficulty understanding the relevance of research on emotions and affect for disaster survivors and the myriad professions involved in disaster reconstruction. Yes, the impact of catastrophes on built and “natural” environments is one that usually makes a significant emotion-evoking impression on television audiences, and news media outlets are all too eager to exploit its sensationalist potential. Emotions, one could say, are “all over disasters.” Nevertheless, as we shall see throughout *Governing Affect*, disaster mitigation experts often dismiss the more mundane feelings (e.g., people’s attachments to small rural towns that have seen better days, to socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, and to social relations with friends and relatives) of those who directly experience devastation as obstacles to the application of rational best practices in disaster prevention and recovery.

It is noteworthy that a number of anthropologists have documented the ways emotions manifest in disaster contexts as public reactions to sensationalist news or propagandistic state coverage (Makley 2014), as grounds for identity formation on the basis of shared suffering (Oliver-Smith 1986), and as movers of collective action in the form of volunteerism and personal donations (Adams 2013). I also recognize that, recently, Katherine E. Browne (2015) has begun to take a closer look at the relationships between comfort and kin relations in post-disaster contexts and at the importance of this web of practice, sociality, and feeling in the recovery of communities. This book, however, is about the ways people who live through disasters invoke emotions as a means



FIG. 1. Research sites. Courtesy of author.

of assessing the relevance of governmentally sanctioned recovery plans, judging the effectiveness of disaster recovery programs, and reflecting on the risk of living in areas that have been deemed prone to disaster hazards. Affect and emotions, I claim, are by no means irrelevant to the study of disasters and the distribution of reconstruction aid. The cases I present from southern Honduras following Hurricane Mitch, New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Olive Branch in southern Illinois after the Mississippi River flood of 2011, and San Juan de Grijalva in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, after the 2007 Grijalva River landslide (fig. 1) demonstrate that feelings are central to people's experience of catastrophes and recovery. They must therefore be carefully apprehended, considered, and addressed by those interested in enhancing post-disaster assistance and risk reduction.

While taking affect and emotions into account in disaster prevention

and recovery may seem initially like a simple task, the topic is more complex. First of all, a critical reader may ask why I have chosen to focus simultaneously on both affect and emotions. What do I mean by the two terms, and why do I mention both as if they were separate and distinct phenomena? As I explore in greater detail in chapter 1, these questions reflect a long-standing dialogue in the humanities and social sciences. Immanuel Kant (1996 [1797]), for example, saw affects (in the plural) as differing from passions, both of which he considered subcategories of emotion. In Kant's categorization, affects (e.g., anger, lust), on the one hand, precede reflection; they are quasi-involuntary reactions to social situations and experience. Passions (e.g., hatred), on the other hand, are "a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination" (1996, 208) and are therefore subject to reflection.

In other instances, anthropologists such as Frances Hsu (1977) have used affect and emotion interchangeably, suggesting that the two terms are synonymous. More recently Brian Massumi (2000) has once again distinguished affect from emotion. He uses the former term to indicate bodily reactions to external stimuli that do not enter a person's consciousness and the latter to refer to a sensory experience that a person becomes aware of and interprets in a culturally particular way, or what he calls a "socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (Massumi 2000, 88).

Suffice it to say for now (see chapter 1 for a more thorough discussion), in this book, I use the term *affect* to refer to a sensory experience that is felt by a body in relation to another, human or otherwise (Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Spinoza 1994), and I understand the body that feels as a product of human practice and human-environment interactions, or as an embodied way of being. I use *emotion* to refer to affective experience as it is narrativized by people, structured in a culturally particular way, and put to a political or social use—for example, what or whom to love, hate, or fear and how (Lutz 1986, 1988; Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990). As I show through various ethnographic examples, affect is a sensory experience that disaster survivors often attempt to apprehend linguistically, therefore crossing the threshold that separates it from emotion in Massumi's definition. I argue that the dramatic impact of disasters on the built, natural, and social environments, on whose

presence or remembrance affective experience is contingent, presents a unique circumstance that drives disaster survivors to reflect on what is often sensed but is not necessarily brought into discourse. This linkage, as Mack McClendon tells us, can become a driving force of social change, leading people to do things and become persons they otherwise would not have done or been.

Another complication of writing about affect and emotion is that people often naturalize the bodily experiences of disgust, fear, comfort, or desire as if they were the manifestation of biologically determined (isn't it natural to be frightened by *x*?), rational (isn't it logical to be disgusted by *y*?), or universal (doesn't everyone desire *z*?) ways of reacting to others and things. The anthropological literature, however, is replete with examples that tell us something quite different. Emotions and sensory perception can vary tremendously from one cultural context to the next, and what a person experiences as grotesque or comforting in one setting may not be considered so by someone in another. In fact, sensory and emotional experiences were one of the primary ways through which people experienced cultural difference and enacted ethnocentrism in colonial situations (Povinelli 2002, 2006), and they continue to be a primary way of making and maintaining race and class distinctions (Stewart 2007).

The anthropological literature, then, requires us to ask the question, if emotions and affect are differently experienced, then what evokes an emotion or bodily reaction for whom and why? The cases I present demonstrate that people come to experience sensory and emotional states in unique ways as a result of their life experiences in specific contexts, ones that are material, cultural, political, and environmental at once. Affect has both historicity and ecology, meaning that bodies are not given in nature with a predetermined or hardwired way of sensing the world and relationships around them; instead, they emerge in relation to socially structured and meaning-laden relationships with people and things in what I call an ecology of affect. A concern with affect, then, bridges the gap between meaning and materiality and collapses a number of binary representational conventions that limit anthropological analyses of people and cultural practice: nature versus culture, subject(ivity) versus object(ivity), and static "traditional" past versus changing

present. This brings about yet another complication that preoccupies this book: if bodies and their sensing and emoting capacities are not given in “nature” but emerge in affective ecologies, then they may always be in a process of emergence, and how can an ethnographer document (much less make policy recommendations about) something that is forever in a process of becoming?

Through the case studies featured in this book, I hope to show that affect is simultaneously emergent and mnemonic—a term I use to denote how the body’s sensing capacities can conjure memories through the detection of familiar people, objects, smells, and tastes (Jackson 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Proust 2006; Sutton 2000). By the same logic, affect is neither static nor unchanging: what is first unfamiliar and unpalatable may become recognizable and pleasant (or vice versa) depending on the social relations within which it is experienced. Nevertheless, bodies are not computer hard drives whose memories can be easily erased or whose “programs” can be simply and predictably rewritten.

The simultaneously emergent and mnemonic qualities of affect can be particularly challenging in the case of disaster recovery. Disasters and reconstruction programs often radically transform the social relations and built environments that evoke familiar and comforting affective reactions (Oliver-Smith 1986, 2002; Ullberg 2013). If disaster survivors mobilize a language of affect when assessing the relevance of disaster reconstruction projects or gauging progress toward recovery, how can aid program managers and disaster recovery planners re-create a world that may no longer be feasible? At the same time, what are policymakers and program managers to do when disaster survivors cannot experience ease or security in the socio-spatial arrangements of reconstructed or resettled communities? If affect is emergent, why can’t some disaster survivors simply get used to a new state affairs?

It is worth noting that there is a growing and important body of literature on memory, identity, and disasters (Doss 2010; Gray and Oliver 2004; Simpson 2013; Ullberg 2013). This book distinguishes itself from these other works by focusing on the mobilization and invocation of affect among disaster survivors. This practice has mnemonic dimensions, but as I further explore in chapter 1, it also merits analysis from the vantage point of the anthropology of the body and

practice theory (Bordo 1993; Bourdieu 1977; Farquhar 2002; Lock and Farquhar 2007; Stoler 1995).

*Governing Affect* is also about the ways urban planners, NGO program managers, and governmental officials involved in disaster mitigation implicitly figure sensed experience and emotions in policy and institutional practice, which are often inflected with neoliberal and modernist assumptions about the natures of people and well-being. In the presented case studies, I show how disaster recovery experts and political elites often render the emotions and attachments of subaltern (a term I use to describe people who find themselves in a condition of sociopolitical subordination) disaster-affected populations as obstacles to fiscal cost-benefit analysis or techno-scientific disaster management, while at the same time the experts and elites promote the desire for built environments and human-material relations, which they credit with the capacity to reproduce capital or shape normative human behavior.

Like affect and emotions, the terms *neoliberalism* and *modernity* have long histories of examination, discussion, and debate in the social sciences. For the sake brevity, allow me to briefly clarify what I mean by each, understanding that such cursory treatment leaves out the overwhelming majority of volumes on these topics. At the same time, rest assured that each of the succeeding chapters further engages the existing scholarship on these two concepts.

My use of “neoliberalism” is informed by Michel Foucault’s (2004) and Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2010) recognition of a cultural trend where policymakers, political leaders, and the public at large propose the subjection of all facets of human life to capitalist cost-benefit analysis as a mechanism for creating social well-being. Related to this particular kind of political imagination is the idea that market liberalization (e.g., the deregulation of labor, environmental policy, and financial markets) will lead to optimal social ends (di Leonardo 2008). Social scientists who trace the history of neoliberalism often see its emergence as a response to the global capitalist crisis of the 1970s, although neoliberalism, just as all types of global flows, is a changing entity that people interpret and reconfigure in varying ways from one locality to the next. At the same time, research on disaster recovery has demonstrated that rather than operating as a complete retraction of government, disaster neoliberalism works more toward the rearrange-

ment of relationships between government and the private sector in a particular type of corporatism where the former channels public funds and resources to the latter in exchange for the provision of services (e.g., disaster aid and case management) (Adams 2013). Neoliberalism, then, is not singular and homogenous but plural and mutated, and disaster contexts, with their global distribution, are particularly interesting sites to explore its proliferation and diversification.

By “modernity,” I mean to call attention to ethnocentric ways of thinking and governing where cultural difference is implicitly rendered in hierarchal temporal terms. Specifically I mean those cases where policymakers and sociopolitical elites figure the cultural practices of people that are deemed “other” in their national imaginaries (e.g., indigenous, racialized or ethnicized, and subaltern populations) as vestiges of prior developmental stages of a linear evolutionary history (Fabian 1983; Povinelli 1995). Of particular relevance here is the way anthropologists interested in modernism have documented how some technocrats envision specific modifications of the built environment (e.g., spatial homogenization and regimentation, postmodern aesthetic design) as mechanisms for transforming “poor” or “traditional” peoples into the kinds of subjects who populate neoliberal and modernist imaginaries (Caldeira and Holston 2005; De Cunzio 2001; Holston 1989; Rabinow 1995).

What specifically concerns *Governing Affect* is how politically and hegemonically influential actors often seize post-disaster contexts as opportune moments for bringing about the dramatic transformation of urban and community spaces under the auspices of “rebuilding better” and how accompanying definitions of “the better” seem to repeatedly entangle neoliberal and modernist assumptions about the natures of people and the common good. It is noteworthy that a significant body of literature recognizes how disasters have increasingly become an advantageous moment to carry out or expedite dramatic transformations of economies, cities, and nations along neoliberal principles (Adams 2013; Button 2010; Button and Oliver-Smith 2008; Gunewardena and Schuller 2008; Klein 2007; Rozario 2007). What distinguishes this book is its focus on the ways neoliberal and modernist tenets are entangled with existing social orders that are a long time in the making (i.e., post-coloniality), on the unique and contingent ways they are interpreted

and reconfigured across disaster-affected localities, and on the affective frictions they elicit.

By looking at two intersecting points of interest—the impacted populations’ affective experience of reconstruction following catastrophes and the figuration of affect in modernist and neoliberal recovery policy and practice—this book explores a number of complications, tensions, and mediations that characterize the ways sensory perception and emotions manifest in disaster contexts. As Mack’s case demonstrates, affect is both a primary mover of social action (feelings of loss, desire, love, or fear move people toward particular ends) and a fundamental dimension of human experience; inequity, vulnerability, and recovery are conditions that are, first and foremost, *felt* (Fassin 2013; Seigworth and Gregg 2010). *Governing Affect* shows how disaster recovery practices on the part of assisting governmental and nongovernmental agencies that ignore the felt experience of disaster survivors run the risk both of failure in practical terms and of being perceived by affected populations as culturally insensitive and disruptive, if not ethnocidal. An affect-centered approach to disaster recovery, I argue, is key to adapting governmental and NGO reconstruction policies to the embodied cultural particularities of the people who live in catastrophe-affected sites.

#### *An Ethnographer’s Journey, a Book’s Roadmap*

The process through which I came to recognize the importance of affect and emotions in disasters was not a straightforward one. This trajectory was one part biographical, one part corpus of anthropological literature, and one part collection of ethnographic experiences as a disaster researcher. My path illustrates how the production of anthropological knowledge is influenced by the ethnographer’s life history, which shapes the researcher as a particular kind of person with unique interests, passions, politics, interpretations of the anthropological canon, and ways of seeing and processing the world. At the same time, this kind of knowledge making is also influenced by the ways the ethnographic method has a feedback effect on anthropologists, transforming how they engage and understand their field experiences. Ethnography involves a co-constitutive relationship between the producer of anthropological knowledge and the people and places that the researcher studies.