

NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study

**IDSEM-UG 2070: Critical Disaster Studies**

Fall 2020

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Office hours by appointment M 2:00-5:00, W 10:00-12:00

Book office hours at

By Zoom

W 3:30-6:10 Eastern Time

**Description**

It can seem like we are living in an era of constant disaster: climate change leads to more floods and droughts, heatwaves and storms; global urbanization to seismically active cities leads to massively destructive and fatal earthquakes; highly complex systems on which we increasingly rely fail; radiation, chemicals, and other effluvia of modernity go where they are not intended and harm us. This course takes up the idea of disaster to ask interpretive questions about how and why disasters operate in society. What constitutes a disaster? What makes disasters different from ordinary bad things? How does society shape the experience of disaster, and how does disaster shape society? What makes people vulnerable to disaster? What does it mean to be resilient? Disasters are moments of severe distress, deprivation—and also possibility. How people, organizations, and governments have responded and continue to respond to disasters says much about how we imagine society to be and how we hope it will be in the future. Readings may include texts by Kai Erikson, Eric Klinenberg, Rebecca Solnit, Dara Strolovitch, and others.

**Learning goals**

- Students will be introduced to, consider, and learn major themes in critical disaster studies.
- Students will practice their research, analytical, and academic writing skills.

**Embedded internship program**

This course has an embedded internship option. That means that if you'd like, you can apply for a two-credit internship with an organization working in disasters. Unlike with ordinary Gallatin internships, these will be graded, and I, rather than your advisor, will be your academic supervisor. If you are interested in this option and have not already made your interest known, please contact Faith Lucine at [fs1@nyu.edu](mailto:fs1@nyu.edu) immediately.

**A note about this semester**

This semester is going to be unusual, and it's going to be difficult. We'll all be figuring things out as we go along. We will all need to be patient and flexible. We should expect things to be tougher than usual for all of us and to make allowances for each other. We will need to experiment with ways to approximate at a distance the in-person modes of learning, thinking, and socializing to which we were once accustomed. To borrow ideas from Japan,

we will all need to *ganbaru* and *gaman*—to do our best and to persevere—and we'll need to help each other do that.

This semester may come with special challenges for you as a student, whether it is in your ability to study, write, and think, or to pay tuition, eat, remain housed, or stay sane. I can't solve every problem, but I can help with many of them, and I can direct you to people and offices who can help with others. But I can't help if you don't tell me that you're struggling. You can feel free to tell me as much or as little as you are comfortable sharing, but please do not hesitate to let me know if you need support so I can try to help you.

We all should try hard to replicate the ordinary seminar room on Zoom. For that reason, please join the Zoom meeting on time, please keep your camera on, and please engage as you would if we were meeting in person. If there are reasons you can't do any of these things, please talk to me and we'll come to an agreement about how to accommodate your circumstances.

### **Required texts**

In general, the books listed below are those in which we will read at least 100 pages. (Other texts will be available on NYU Classes.) These books are on order at the NYU Bookstore and are available from other bookstores too. Most of them are also available online via Bobst. I strongly encourage you to look for and purchase used copies so that you can read them on paper and mark them up while also saving money.

- Kai Erikson, *Everything In Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976). ISBN 9780671240677.
- Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). ISBN 9780674971714
- Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). ISBN 9780226276182.
- Richard Lloyd Parry, *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone* (New York: Picador, 2018). ISBN 9781250192813.
- Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). ISBN 9780226735481
- Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2010). ISBN 9780143118077
- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). ISBN 9781608196265

### **Assignments and grading**

The main things we're doing in this class are learning key concepts (reading and talking about the readings) and then applying those concepts (your final papers). These two parts of the class are worth equal amounts of your grade.

### Participation and discussion

This is a strange semester, and it's harder to have a good seminar conversation by Zoom than in a classroom—although please try! Depending on your situation, you might find it easier to participate on the NYU Classes discussion board rather than by talking. Therefore, the grade percentages listed below are only defaults. If you would like your reading responses and your responses to your classmates' reading responses to count for more, please talk to me about it in your first office hours visit and we'll come to an arrangement.

*Class Participation – 15%* – The purpose of class participation is not only to show that you have done the reading assigned, but also to help yourself and your classmates better understand the readings and the issues discussed in them. In addition, class participation provides practice for the skill of engaging in honest, respectful, and thoughtful intellectual discussion. The point of discussion is quality, not quantity; you don't get points each time you open your mouth, and the person who talks once but says something brilliant that moves the discussion forward is more appreciated than the person who talks every five minutes but never says anything useful. That said, you can't participate well if you never participate, so you can't be silent; if I don't know the sound of your voice by the end of the term, you're unlikely to get a good class participation grade. Likewise, you can't participate if you're not in class, so please prioritize attendance.

*Reading Responses – 10%* – Each week in which we have reading (other than the first week), you will post on the NYU Classes discussion forum a short (approximately 250 words) reading response. Your reading response is due by 6:10pm Eastern Time on Tuesdays (that is, 24 hours before the end of each week's class). Reading responses aren't papers, and they won't be graded as papers. It's a way to make you think about the reading before you come to class, to get your intellectual juices flowing, and to practice writing. In each reading response, you should think about the argument of what you have just read and assess its success. These papers will be graded check-plus (10/10), check (9/10), or check-minus (8/10). This means that the only way you can get less than an 8 out of the 10 possible points in this section is by failing to turn in your reading responses. Note that because the point of the reading response is to think about the readings before class, late reading responses will not be accepted.

*Responses to Your Classmates' Reading Responses – 7%* – Please read each other's reading responses and reply to them. The goal is to have a second conversation online in addition to our class discussions. You can do this at any time, and I encourage you to get into the habit of reading and replying to everyone's reading responses, and responses to responses. To help you get into that habit, in your choice of five weeks, you must respond to someone else's reading response in addition to writing your own. Alternatively, you can respond in writing to something someone said in class. You can write this response on the message board before class or after class—any time until the next week's class.

*Presenting/Leading Discussion – 15%* – One week, you (or in some cases, you and a colleague) will be in charge of presenting the reading to your classmates. For that week (we'll pick the first session of class) you will be responsible for presenting the reading and its key issues to the class. Don't just summarize the reading; put it into the context of the

course. Prepare some discussion questions that you think will spark a good conversation. Prepare to speak for 10 minutes (I'll cut you off after 15) and then start off the conversation. The best judge of your success as a presenter will be the quality of the discussion that follows.

*Class Assistant – 3%* – Each week someone will be assigned to monitor the Zoom chat for question and comments that should be surfaced into the conversation. You should also look out for people who are trying to talk but are muted, or otherwise people who are having difficulties participating because of technological problems.

### Application and Papers

The other half of this class will be a research paper on a relevant topic of your choice. Your paper can be on any relevant topic about disaster so long as it (a) engages at least some of the ideas we read and discuss in seminar, (b) involves primary source research, (c) advances an argument, and (d) contains your original analysis. It should be 15-20 pages long (plus a bibliography), include Chicago/Turabian style footnotes, and have a title. In keeping with the Gallatin ethos, you may propose a different sort of final project as long as it has major research and analysis components; if you are interested in doing this talk to me in office hours about what you'd like to do. If you need help thinking of a topic, I'm always happy to talk and give ideas. You'll work on the paper in several stages, and there are times built into the class schedule to talk about them. *Your final paper is worth 30% of your grade and is due at 5:00pm Eastern Time on Wednesday, December 16.*

*Proposal – 5%* – Write about two pages proposing your topic. Explain what you want to write about (what questions you will ask), how you plan to research it, and why it is a good topic. Important for this assignment is to say what primary sources you plan to use—that is, what sources or data will you analyze yourself as the basis of your paper? Due September 30.

*Annotated bibliography – 5%* – Prepare a bibliography of at least seven *scholarly, secondary* sources. Cite them in proper Chicago/Turabian bibliography format and then write four or five sentences about their argument, their evidence, and their relevance to your topic. Be sure not to include non-scholarly sources or primary sources. Due October 28.

*Primary source summary – 5%* – Write about two pages telling me what you've learned from looking at your primary sources. This can be informal, but it should be the start of the analysis you'll end up writing in your final paper. Due November 11.

*Draft outline – 5%* – Write a draft of your paper's outline. Due December 2.

## **Course schedule**

### Unit 1: Key Concepts in Disaster Studies

September 2 – Introduction: What is critical disaster studies, and how can it help us to think about Covid?

- Andy Horowitz and Jacob A.C. Remes, “Introducing Critical Disaster Studies,” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2021) [NYU Classes]
- Amy Kapczynski and Gregg Gonsalves, “Alone Against the Virus,” *Boston Review* 13 March 2020 <http://bostonreview.net/class-inequality-science-nature/amy-kapczynski-gregg-gonsalves-alone-against-virus> [NYU Classes]
- Manuel Tironi and Sarah Kelly, “Care and Sovereignty: Territorial Control and the Decolonization of Disaster Risk Reduction,” *SSRC Items* blog, 25 June 2020 <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/disaster-studies/care-and-sovereignty-territorial-control-and-the-decolonization-of-disaster-risk-reduction/> [NYU Classes]

#### September 9 – Constructing Unnatural Natural Disasters

- Ted Steinberg *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47-68, 97-115, 149-195 [chapters 3, 5, 7, and 8]. [NYU Classes]

#### September 16 – Vulnerability

- Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People’s Vulnerability, and Disasters*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 3-124 [chapters 1-3]. [NYU Classes]

#### September 23 – Time

- Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020). Read the whole book, but skim chapter 5 and the epilogue.

#### September 30 – Resilience

- Paper proposals due.
- Jonathan Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-26, 71-119 [introduction, chapters 1 and 3]. If you have a particular interest in security policy or international development, you might want to read the relevant chapter as well. [NYU Classes]
- Shalanda H. Baker, “Anti-Resilience: A Roadmap for Transformational Justice within the Energy System,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 54 (2019): 1-48. [NYU Classes]

#### October 7 – Individual conferences to talk about your paper proposals.

- Please make an appointment for an office hours slot; if none of my scheduled office hours are possible, let me know and we’ll work something out.

#### Unit 2: Ways of Knowing Disaster

#### October 14 – Thinking about scale in disaster: individuals, geographies, communities

- Kai Erikson, *Everything In Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 21-48, 135-259 [part 1, part 3, and conclusion].
- Optional but recommended: Scott Gabriel Knowles and Zachary Loeb, “The Voyage of the Paragon: Disaster as Method,” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* [NYU Classes]

#### October 21 – Disaster as autopsy

- Erik Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-164 [introduction and chapters 1-3].

#### October 28 – Disaster as tools

- Annotated bibliography due.
- Kenneth Hewitt, “The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age,” in *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, edited by Kenneth Hewitt (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1983): 3-32. [NYU Classes]
- Malini Bhattacharjee, “Sevā, Hindutva, and the Politics of Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction in Rural Kutch,” *Asian Ethnology* 75, no. 1 (2016): 75-104. [NYU Classes]
- Pranathi Diwakar, “A Recipe for Disaster: Framing Risk and Vulnerability in Slum Relocation Policies in Chennai, India” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* [NYU Classes]

#### November 4 – Disaster in fiction

- Susan Scott Parrish, “Reading Novels in a Time of Disaster” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* [NYU Classes]
- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

#### November 11 – Disasters as field of contest

- Primary source reports due.
- Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

#### November 18 - Individual conferences

- Please make an appointment for an office hours slot; if none of my scheduled office hours are possible, let me know and we’ll work something out.

### Unit 3: Politics of Disaster

#### November 25 – Disaster Capitalism

- Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007), introduction, chapters 19 and 20 [NYU Classes].
- Other readings TBA.

#### December 2 – Disasters as liberation

- Draft outlines due.
- Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 1-10, 73-97, 135-180.
- Takashi Miura, "Upholding a Catfish as a Yonaoshi God: The Earthquake Catfish of the 1855 Ansei Edo Earthquake" from *Agents of World Renewal: The Rise of Yonaoshi Gods in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 86-110 [chapter 4]. [NYU Classes]

December 9 – The politics of loss

- Richard Lloyd Parry, *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone* (New York: Picador, 2018). Read the entire book.

December 16 – Papers Due

- Please email me your final papers by 5:00pm Eastern Time.

### **Course policies**

*Attendance.* As described elsewhere in this syllabus, participation in class discussion is a key thing we do in this class. You can't participate if you're not in class. Therefore, attendance on our Zoom sessions is required. Please turn your camera on and be prepared to participate as you would in an in-person seminar room. Frequent absences will be factored into your participation grade. That said, some absences are legitimate and unavoidable, and it is up to you to decide what those are. It is always better to be on the Zoom call than not, but if an absence is unavoidable, please email me ahead of time and I will excuse your absence. Absences for religious observance are always permissible, but you should let me know what days you'll be out. No matter why you miss a class, it's your responsibility to find out what happened during it, so you should ask a classmate for notes. If your situation is such that attendance and participation via Zoom is or becomes impossible, please talk to me.

*Academic integrity.* As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the university. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (<http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html>).

Beyond the above boilerplate warning, the best rule is: When in doubt, cite. This admonition isn't just about following the rules. To be convincing, arguments must be based in fact, and in order to assess facts the reader must know from whence they came. Academic dishonesty also robs you of the education you're here for; if you don't do the work you're supposed to do, you don't get the educational experiences you're supposed to get. If you have questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty or plagiarism, ask.

*Deadlines and extensions.* Written work must be turned in on time. Reading responses will not be accepted late under any circumstances; all other work that is turned in late will be marked down a third of a grade per day; that is, a paper turned in a day late that would otherwise have gotten an A- will get a B+. If a legitimate delay is unavoidable, you can ask for an extension, but you must ask for one no less than 24 hours before the deadline. Practically, what this means is that you should try to

get your work done on time, and if you can't you should ask me for an extension and we'll work something out. But if you don't ask me for an extension first, you'll be in trouble.

*Office hours and help.* This semester, my office hours are by appointment at <https://tinyurl.com/remes-appointments> and on Zoom. As described above, in two weeks this semester, you will come to office hours instead of having class, but encourage you to make an Zoom with me other weeks instead—to talk about disasters, but to talk about whatever else you'd like, too. If you need to meet outside my office hours, feel free to email me for an appointment and we'll make something work. You're also welcome to email me about anything else at [jacob.remes@nyu.edu](mailto:jacob.remes@nyu.edu) (but please don't expect a fast response on weekends). Always, the rule is, if you don't understand something, or if you're having trouble, ask for help, whether in class, by email, or in office hours.

*Academic assistance.* What we're trying to do here is think about hard things in a supportive environment. This course is supposed to be difficult (if it's not, complain to me and we'll fix it!) but I also want to be supportive. Giving you help is my job. But I'm not the only one you can turn to for help. I strongly encourage you to make use of the Gallatin Writing Center at every stage of your writing, from conceiving of your paper to your final revisions. See <http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing/writingcenterappointments.html> for more details. The general rule, whether for reading or writing or researching, is: ***If you're having trouble, ask for help.*** That's what I'm here for. If for whatever reason you don't want to talk to me, reach out to your academic advisor or to your class advisor. The most important thing is not to suffer in silence and to make use of the many NYU and Gallatin resources that exist to help you.

*General support.* Beyond academic support, Gallatin has resources for you if you need help. I, your class advisor, and others at Gallatin are especially aware that this semester will be difficult for many students—academically, emotionally, and financially—and we want to help as best we are able. There are many entry points: you can turn to your academic advisor; to your class advisor; to Richard Jung, the assistant director of student affairs ([richard.jung@nyu.edu](mailto:richard.jung@nyu.edu), 347-453-9751(c)); to the NYU Wellness Exchange (212-443-9999, 24 hours a day); or to me. If you're having difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or if you lack a safe and stable place to live, and you think it's affecting your performance in the course, I urge you to contact Richard Jung or Dean of Students Pat McCreery ([patrick.mccreery@nyu.edu](mailto:patrick.mccreery@nyu.edu)) for support. If you feel comfortable speaking to me, I will advocate on your behalf.

*Disabilities.* New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for students with disabilities. It is the University's policy that no qualified student with a disability be excluded from participating in any University program or activity, denied the benefits of any University program or activity, or otherwise subjected to discrimination with regard to any University program or activity. If you have a disability and need accommodation, the first step is to talk to the Moses Center for Students for Disabilities. You can contact them at 212-998-4980 or email [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu); see <http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/students-with-disabilities.html> for more information. Before or after you speak with the Moses Center, I am happy to talk to you about accommodating you.