

NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study

IDSEM-UG 2070: Critical Disaster Studies

Fall 2021

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Office hours: T 10-12, W 1-3

[room]
W 4:55-7:40

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 immediately.

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 Brightspace.) These books are on order at the NYU Bookstore and are available from other bookstores too. They are on reserve at Bobst and 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.
- Jacob A.C. Remes and Andy Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). ISBN 9780812224825
- 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

Class Participation – 25% – 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 write a short (approximately 250 words) reading response. Your reading response is due on paper in class. If for whatever reason you aren't in class, you should email me your reading response by 4:55 on Wednesday (i.e. by the beginning of 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.

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.

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. You are always welcome to talk to me about your research paper—at any stage, from conception to revising—in office hours or at a special appointment. *Your final paper is worth 29% of your grade and is due at 5:00pm Eastern Time on Thursday, December 16.*

Proposal – 7% – Write about two pages proposing your topic. Explain what you want to write about (that is, 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 October 20.

Annotated bibliography – 7% – Prepare a bibliography of at least six 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 November 30.

Primary source summary – 7% – 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 December 1.

Course schedule

Unit 1: Key Concepts in Disaster Studies

September 8 – 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, 2021), 1-8.
- 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> [Brightspace]
- 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/> [Brightspace]

September 15 – 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]. [Brightspace]

September 22 – 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]. [Brightspace]

September 29 – 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.

October 6 – Resilience

- 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. [Brightspace]
- 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. [Brightspace]

- Mark Vardy and Mick Smith, “Resilience,” *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2017): 175-179. [Brightspace]

October 13 – Anticipation

- Kerry Smith, “The Tōkai Earthquake and Changing Lexicons of Risk” in Remes and Horowitz, *Critical Disaster Studies*, 147-164.
- Kenneth Hewitt, “‘Acts of Men’: Disasters Neglected, Preventable, and Moral,” in Remes and Horowitz, *Critical Disaster Studies*, 184-192.
- Lee Zimmerman, *Trauma and the Discourse of Climate Change* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 27-39 [chapter 2]. [Brightspace]
- Liz Koslov, “Let Us Now See Climate Change,” *Public Books* 4 September 2018, <https://www.publicbooks.org/let-us-now-see-climate-change/>. [Brightspace]
- David Wallace-Wells, “Uninhabitable Earth,” *New York* July 2017. [Brightspace]

Unit 2: Ways of Knowing Disaster

October 20 – Thinking about scale in disaster: individuals, geographies, communities

- Paper proposals due.
- 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 strongly recommended: Scott Gabriel Knowles and Zachary Loeb, “The Voyage of the Paragon: Disaster as Method,” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies*, 11-31.

October 27 – 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].

November 3 – Disasters as tools

- Dara Z. Strolovitch, “When Does a Crisis Begin? Race, Gender, and the Subprime Noncrisis of the Late 1990s,” in Remes and Horowitz, *Critical Disaster Studies*, 51-67.
- Malini Bhattacharjee, “Sevā, Hindutva, and the Politics of Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction in Rural Kutch,” *Asian Ethnology* 75, no. 1 (2016): 75-104. [Brightspace]
- Pranathi Diwakar, “Spaces at Risk: Urban Politics and Slum Relocation in Chennai, India,” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies*, 97-115.

November 10 – Disaster in fiction

- Annotated bibliography due.
- Susan Scott Parrish, “Mediating Disaster, or, a History of the Novel” in Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies*, 133-148.
- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

November 17 – Disasters as field of contest

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

November 24 - Class cancelled for Thanksgiving

Unit 3: Politics of Disaster

December 1 – Disasters as liberation

- Primary source reports 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]. [Brightspace]

December 8 – 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.

Thursday, December 16 – Papers Due

- Please both drop off a paper copy of your paper in my mailbox on the fifth floor *and* email me your final papers by 5:00pm.

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 is required. 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 come than not to come, but if an absence is unavoidable, please email me ahead of time and I will excuse your absence. In ordinary circumstances, I don’t need to see a doctor’s note; an email that you are sick will suffice. 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.

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. I invite you to my office hours to talk about disasters, the class, or anything else. No appointment is necessary during office hours; they are first-come, first-served and drop-in. 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 (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. 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, xxx-xxx-xxxx(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 Acting Dean of Students Greg Erickson (gte1@nyu.edu) for support. If you feel comfortable

speaking to me, I will advocate on your behalf. If you are having academic, emotional, or financial difficulties, I urge you not to suffer in silence but to ask for help.

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; 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.