

# American Catastrophes, Radical Histories

## AMS 311S (31096)

**Instructor: Nicholas Bloom**  
**Fall 2018**

**Course Overview:** Catastrophes, “events producing...violent, wide-spread change in the order of things,” appear frequently throughout US history and the history of the Americas, especially those created by human beings: a centuries-long system of racial slavery, a civil war, genocide of indigenous peoples, two world wars, the degradation of natural lands, and the mass exploitation of workers are just a few.

Because catastrophes affect the lives and consciousnesses of so many people across so much space and time, they invite a plethora of interpretations, from a variety of different vantage points. Historical narrators—and these can be professional historians, but also activists, artists, novelists, poets, elementary school teachers, high school class clowns, parents at a dinner table, etc.—try to make sense of catastrophes by placing them within certain narratives, under certain kinds of critical lenses. In this course, we are going to study a selection of important catastrophes from a variety of historical vantage points that are often given short shrift by dominant and/or popular narrators of history in American culture. In doing so, this course aims to challenge easy notions of *progress* or *decline* that tend to dominate popular American political discourse, and instead consider the complex causes and effects of catastrophes without quickly integrating them into narratives which we already “understand” as true.

This course will require that we suspend our idea of the United States as a single, unified entity. Instead, we will study these catastrophes as events in which varieties of overlapping groups of people, regions, state and economic powers, and ideas were brought into tumultuous, violent contact with one another, often against their will, rarely on an equal playing field, and almost never with an easy resolution back to a clear, American “norm” or conclusion.

On the flip side of this focus, this course will also study the some of the social, intellectual, and imaginative creations of those groups most affected by the catastrophes we consider, creations that often offer alternative visions or even manifestations of social life. These “radical histories” of American catastrophe we study here will be as much about the present and the future as they are about the past.

**Essential Questions:** Two key sets of questions will run throughout this course:

**Firstly**, why are the events/phenomena we study “catastrophes?” What are the overlapping sets of visions, desires, material forces, and coincidences that created the catastrophe, and how did the catastrophe effect different people and places differently? We will pay particular attention to the ways that catastrophes interact with, shape, and destroy social power structures, such as racial and gender categories, state power, and distribution of wealth.

**Secondly**, how do various groups of people respond to catastrophes? What lessons do various actors learn from catastrophes, and how do these lessons generate responses in both the realm of ideas and material action? Why should we study or care about the catastrophe we are studying? How do catastrophes provoke our imaginations, and how do they inspire as well as paralyze us? Can catastrophe be ongoing, and are human-made catastrophes inevitable parts of civilization? Have people attempted to generate social visions of catastrophe-less civilization?

**A Note on the Readings:** While some of the readings for this course will be the work of academic historians, this course will pay special attention to the creative and political work of activists, intellectuals, and artists not necessarily in the academy, many of them contemporary to the catastrophes we are studying. These thinkers are generally engaged in attempts to explain the *roots* of the catastrophes they describe, often in attempts to imagine or create cultures and societies in which catastrophe is not programmed in to the order of things. In this sense, they represent radical responses to the catastrophes they describe, in the original sense of the word: to get at the “root” of something. Whether or not these writers *do* get to the root of the catastrophes we study will be our task to consider; yet their attempts will be models for us as we investigate and ruminate on the power of various catastrophe in US history.

**Course Format: Leading Discussion and Reading Responses:** This course will be run primarily as discussion-based seminar, with intermittent historical lectures by the instructor when appropriate. Since it is a discussion-based seminar, student preparation and participation are vital and mandatory.

***Leading discussion:*** Throughout the course, you will be required to help lead discussion one time. You should come prepared to give a brief, 5-10 minute presentation on the biography of the author we are studying that day, as well as at least five discussion questions to provoke class discussion. You must submit your discussion questions and a brief outline of their presentation **at least 48 hours in advance of your assigned class period.**

***Reading Responses:*** Students are required to write **six** one-paragraph-long reading responses throughout the semester. These responses should demonstrate a thorough engagement with the text you are writing about, and also engage with the question: what does this text have to do with catastrophe? In order to answer this question, use the “Essential Questions” section above to consider the many ways the text might be wrestling with catastrophe. These responses are explorations and

provocations, and do not have to come to a clear conclusion. They can even function as a series of thorough questions, or end with a question, if you so choose. The most important thing is that you demonstrate that you have thoroughly wrestled with the text, even if you feel you haven't understood it fully. Reading responses are **due on 11:59 PM the night before we discuss the text.**

**Course Expectations:** Attendance, preparation, and active participation in class are mandatory. Students are allowed three unexcused absences from class; with the exception of emergencies, sickness, or religious holy days, students will lose a half-grade in their participation grade for each subsequent absence (see *Accommodations* section below). In addition to leading discussion and reading responses, reading quizzes may be issued at instructor's discretion.

All written assignments must be turned in on time, and will lose a half-letter grade for each day late. If there are extenuating circumstances that you know will cause you to turn in a paper late, you must let the instructor know at least a week in advance of the due date.

### **Assignments/Grade Breakdown:**

15%: **First (Short) Essay** [*Choice of Two Prompts Instructor Provides: Putting Two Texts in Conversation*]

15%: **Second Essay** [*Developing Your Own Question; Putting two or more texts in conversation; develop question in consultation with instructor*]

25% **Final Essay** [*Expanding one of first two papers, refining question and applying to "catastrophe" of student's choice; outside research necessary*]

20% **Weekly Response Posts**

10% **Leading Class Discussion**

15% **Class Participation** [*Attendance/Discussion Section Participation*]

**Accommodations:** The University of Texas at Austin provides, upon request, appropriate accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. To determine if you qualify, please contact the Dean of Students at 471-6259 or 471-4641 TTY. If the office certifies your needs, I will work with you to make appropriate arrangements.

A student who misses an examination, work assignment, or other project due to the observance of a religious holy day will be given an opportunity to complete the work missed within a reasonable time after the absence, provided that he or she has properly notified the instructor. It is the policy of the University of Texas at Austin that the student must notify the instructor at least 14 days prior to the classes scheduled on dates he or she will be absent to observe a religious holy day. For religious holy days that fall within the first two weeks of the semester, the notice should be given on the first day of the semester. The student will not be penalized for these excused absences, but the instructor may appropriately respond if the student fails to complete satisfactorily the missed assignment or examination within a reasonable time after the excused absence.

### **Required Texts for Purchase:**

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. (1962 (1993) Vintage International).  
Cesaire, Aime. *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955).  
Morrison, Toni, *Beloved*. (1987, Alfred A. Knopf).  
Ward, Jesmyn, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017, Simon & Schuster).  
Zinn, Howard, *The Bomb*. (2010, City Lights Books).

*All texts listed above are available for purchase at the UT COOP.*

*All other assigned texts will be uploaded by instructor to the "Files" section of Canvas, OR the instructor will direct you to online location of the text.*

### **CLASS SCHEDULE**

#### **INTRODUCTION: History, Catastrophe, and Narrative**

***"We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be..." – Michel-Rolph Trouillot***

#### **Week 1:**

8/29: Course Introduction

8/31: Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, Ch. 1: Pages 1-4; Winthrop, "City Upon a Hill" Excerpt

#### **Week 2: Catastrophe and History**

9/3: NO CLASS, LABOR DAY

9/5: Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, Ch. 1: Pages 4 -31

9/7: James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook." *The Fire Next Time*, Pages 1 – 10; "The Declaration of Independence" <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

#### **UNIT 1: FOUNDATIONAL AMERICAN CATASTROPHE: SLAVERY IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD**

#### **Week 3: Atlantic Slavery: A Calculated Catastrophe**

9/10: Stephanie Smallwood, "The Living Dead aboard the Slave Ship." *Saltwater Slavery*, pp. 122 – 152; Peruse [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org): **Receive Essay 1 Prompt**

9/12: Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*: 3 – 17

9/14: Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 13-23; C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins*, "Prologue" and "The Property" (3 – 26)

**Week 4:** Radical Histories of Slavery and Resistance I: CLR James and WEB Dubois

9/17: CLR James, *Black Jacobins*, Part of "The Owners" and "Parliament and Property", 55 - 85

9/19: Dubois, *Black Reconstruction*, "The General Strike," 55 – 67; : James, *Black Jacobins*: "The Saint Domingue Masses Begin" 86 – 93; "Black Consul" 260 -65

9/21: James, *Black Jacobins*, "The War of Independence" 370 – 7; Dubois, *Black Reconstruction*, 711 – 717, 725 – 728.

**Week 5:** Radical Histories of Slavery and Resistance II: Toni Morrison

9/24: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

9/26: *Beloved*

9/28: *Beloved*

**Week 6:**

10/1: *Beloved*;

10/3: *Beloved*

10/5: *Beloved*

**UNIT 2: THE CENTER WILL NOT HOLD: MANY HISTORIES OF A WORLD AT WAR**

**Week 7:** A Sick Civilization?

10/8: NO CLASS: **Essay 1 Due**

10/10: Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*; Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, "Civilization" 15 – 17

10/12: Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* Continued.

**Week 8:** Violence and Morality in a Catastrophic Atmosphere

10/15: Howard Zinn, "Hiroshima." *The Bomb*; **Receive 2<sup>nd</sup> Essay/Final Essay Prompt**

10/17: Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth*.

10/19: Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 103 – 114.

**Week 9:** US Black Freedom Movement: Catastrophe's Possibilities

***Consult w/ Instructor Regarding Essay Topic This Week; Send Proposal 24 hours in advance of meeting***

10/22: Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman." (1949) <https://libcom.org/files/claudiajones.pdf> ; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963) [https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter\\_Birmingham\\_Jail.pdf](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf)

10/24: Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet" Selections; NPR Code Switch Redlining Documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5FBjyqfoLM>

10/26: King, "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," "What is to Be Done"

**Week 10:** Decolonization from the Inside: A Sick Civilization?

10/29: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, "Down at the Cross."

10/31: *The Fire Next Time* continued

11/2: *The Fire Next Time*, cont.; Selections, Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*,

**UNIT 3: HAUNTED LANDS: CASE STUDIES OF "NATURAL" CATASTROPHE: MISSISSIPPI/LOUISIANA GULF COAST AND PUERTO RICO**

**Week 11:** Mississippi and Louisiana

11/5: Clyde Woods, "Introduction," *Development Arrested*, 1 – 24;

11/7: Clyde Woods, "The Disaster Before the Disaster." *Development Drowned and Reborn* 222-254; Naomi Klein, Excerpt, "This Changes Everything." *The Guardian*, 3/6/15. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/06/dont-look-away-now-the-climate-crisis-needs-you>

11/9: NO CLASS (American Studies Association National Meeting): **2<sup>nd</sup> Essay Due**

Week 12: Louisiana and Mississippi

11/12: Sarah M. Broom, "The Yellow House." *The New Yorker*, August 2015.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/08/24/the-yellow-house>; **Review**  
**Final Essay Assignment**

11/14: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

11/16: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Week 13: Mississippi Cont.

11/19: Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

NO CLASS 11/21 or 11/23 (Thanksgiving Holiday)

Week 14: Puerto Rican Crisis, Before and After Maria (And finishing Ward)

11/26: Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

**11/28: Final Paper Conferences (10 – 2, in Office; Can meet by appointment at other times this week as well if this time doesn't work)**

11/30: Colonialism, Debt, and Austerity in Puerto Rico: Articles from *The Puerto Rico Syllabus*: <https://puertoricosyllabus.com/>

"Puerto Rico's Long Fall from 'Shining Star' to 'Greece of the Caribbean.'" *The Conversation*, 6/12/2015. <https://theconversation.com/puerto-ricos-long-fall-from-shining-star-to-the-greece-of-the-caribbean-43097>

"The Bonds that Broke Puerto Rico." *The New York Times*. 6/30/2015  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/business/dealbook/the-bonds-that-broke-puerto-rico.html?mcubz=0&r=0>

"Hedge Funds tell Puerto Rico: Lay Off Teachers and Close Teachers to Pay Us Back." *The Guardian*. 7/28/2015.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/hedge-funds-puerto-rico-close-schools-fire-teachers-pay-us-back>

"Puerto Rico Woos US Investors with Huge Tax Breaks as Locals Fund Debt Crisis." *The Guardian*. 2/14/16.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/14/puerto-rico-woos-us-investors-with-huge-tax-breaks-as-locals-fund-debt-crisis>

Week 15:

12/3: Selections from *Puerto Rico Syllabus*: Maria and Harvey

“Like Going Back in Time’: Puerto Ricans Put Survival Skills to Use.” *The New York Times*, 10/24/2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/us/hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-coping.html?nytmobile=0>

*The Battle for Paradise* (Documentary, Dir. Naomi Klein 2018).  
<https://theintercept.com/2018/03/20/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-recovery/>

People’s Tribunal on Hurricane Harvey Recovery Excerpts (Online Location TBA).

12/5: Final Paper Presentations

12/7: Final Paper Presentations

Week 16:

12/10: **Final Essays Due:** Presentations and Instructor Survey