

**Fall 2018**  
**AMS 370**  
**Unique #: 31240**  
**Class Schedule:**  
Tue/Thursdays  
2-3:30 p.m.  
**Prof. Cary Cordova**

**AMS 370**  
**AMERICAN**  
**DISASTERS**

As the popularity of Hollywood disaster films can attest, Americans relish and romanticize the spectacle of disaster. This course will examine “natural” and human-made disasters as key turning points in American history. Whether fire, hurricane, toxin, or epidemic, moments of crisis frequently heighten the visibility of race, gender, and class inequalities, as well as propel, or limit social change. This class requires students to question what is “natural,” to analyze the relationship between class, race, gender, and government policies, and to develop a historical understanding of disasters and American identities and transformations.

A disaster, by virtue of its magnitude, can defy examination. By definition, “disaster” suggests something insurmountable, unfathomable, and implicitly unavoidable. Disasters can invoke a sense of powerlessness, or apathy, but to be clear, this is not the orientation of this class. In looking at disasters over time, this class requires students to think critically about the interaction between human culture and disaster and to use this understanding to think thoughtfully, and even hopefully, about responses to contemporary “disasters.”

This class is loosely divided into two parts: spectacular and everyday disasters. Among our spectacular disasters, we will consider the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, Hurricane Katrina, and disaster film culture. Spectacular disasters tend to graphically illustrate our own mortality, as well as spur changes in government intervention and policy, such as the Disaster Relief Act of 1950 and the Patriot Act of 2001, while disaster films tend to reflect and shape our social hopes and anxieties. Everyday disasters tend to enter our lives more silently, but no less deadly. In terms of everyday disasters, we will look at heat waves, fires, and everyday chemicals. In setting forth this division between the spectacular and the everyday, students are expected to consider the enormous intricacies between “disastrous” events and human behavior.

Not surprisingly, our survey of disasters is quite selective, and cannot encompass all the issues at stake. Rather, our objective in this class is to develop a set of questions that can launch our understanding of how disasters have been defined over time, as well as investigate a disaster’s historical and cultural impact through an American Studies framework. What happens when we place disasters in the center of our understanding of American culture? What is a disaster, and what is not? How have social inequalities framed representations of disasters? Students will gain “disaster vision,” or the ability to recognize parallels and intersections across seemingly disparate events. At the end of the class, students are expected to become independent scholars of disaster and will be expected to apply the tools provided in this class to present and submit their own American Studies analysis of a disaster.

## **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

**COURSE READER:** This class requires a course reader, which will be available for purchase at Jenn's Copy and Binding (512-482-0779).

Jenn's is located at 2518 Guadalupe (where Guadalupe intersects with Dean Keeton, approximately two blocks from our classroom).

**Please note: The first few articles will be posted on Canvas to ensure everyone has access to the initial readings: <<https://utexas.instructure.com>>.**

If you have trouble accessing the Canvas system, please contact the UT helpdesk (512-475-9400).

In addition, one copy of the course reader will be placed ***ON RESERVE*** to ensure everyone's access.

## **ASSIGNMENTS:**

- Students are expected to do the required readings for each class *in advance* of attending class. Students also are encouraged to **bring the course reader with them to class**, in order to refer to the material when needed (or perhaps prepare for a pop quiz!).
- You are responsible for the material missed in any class. I will not respond to any email requests to summarize an entire class, but I will respond to in-person requests during office hours or by appointment. Alternatively, consult with a fellow student.

## **GRADING:**

- **Primary Source Analysis (15%) (4-5 pgs):** Students will analyze a disaster through available archival material (documents, photographs, film, etc.).
- **Disaster Film Analysis (20%) (5-6 pgs):** Students will choose and analyze a "disaster film" using theoretical concepts developed in class.
- **Today's Disasters (10%) (2 pgs):** This assignment asks students to analyze contemporary reportage of a disaster in relation to a class topic. In addition to writing a 2-page analysis of the source and content, students will present their analysis at the start of our class, on the day they are assigned.
- **Group Discussion Leading (5%):** As part of a larger group (about 3 students), each student will have one opportunity over the course of the semester to lead class discussion.
- **Final Research Project (30%):**
  - **Research Proposal (5%)**
  - **Final Presentation (5%)**
  - **Final Paper (20%)**
  - This final project challenges you to focus on a disaster, or set of disasters and analyze through the lens of American Studies.
    - **1. Presentation on your chosen disaster(s).**
    - **2. Each student will write a paper (~10 pages).** The paper must draw on the issues, themes, and texts raised in this class, but also must reflect thoughtful, original, engaged analysis. Topics must be approved by the Professor.
- **Attendance & Participation: (20%):** Because class participation is considered an important part of this class, attendance will be noted each day.
  - Missing more than 3 classes is likely to negatively impact your grade.
  - Missing more than 6 classes is a guaranteed zero for attendance and participation.
  - I reserve the right to fail any student who misses 7 or more classes.

- *I ask for more than just attendance.* You should make an effort to participate and show me that you have done the reading, or are actively listening to lecture. A variety of classroom exercises will ensure you are up-to-date with readings and contributing to class discussion. I look for quality of insights shared versus sheer quantity of comments made.
- *Tips for participation:* As you read, think about what you might add to our discussion. What ideas are driving the reading? How is the argument supported? Consider not just your personal reaction, but the big picture questions and contradictions. *Come to class with questions for discussion or with related ideas to make connections.*
- **QUIZZES:** I do pop reading quizzes. They are not hard if you have done the reading. Come to class prepared. *I do not give make-up quizzes.* For quizzes, I grade using the following symbols: + (excellent); ✓+ (good); ✓ (acceptable); ✓- (poor); — (failed). In establishing your final grade on the quizzes, I will take into account your overall performance in the class and your best quiz grades.
- **Office hours:** Your professor is happy to help you do well in this class. You are encouraged to visit during office hours, or by appointment. Please take a few minutes to introduce yourself and express any questions you might have, or just say “hi.”

## ■ EXTRA CREDIT

- As the semester rolls along, there may be a few opportunities for extra credit. Extra credit opportunities often entail attending an event or talk related to our class and submitting a short paper (1-2 pages) on how the content of the event relates to the content of our class. If you have an idea for an extra credit assignment, you are welcome to discuss it with the professor.
- **So what is extra credit worth?** Extra credit is given weight in the assessment of your participation grade. It is meant to help students that would like a little more recognition in this aspect of the grading process. It is in no way required, but it can help push students up a couple of points in their overall participation grade.

## GRADING SCALE:

100-93 = A	92-90 = A-	87-89 = B+	84-86 = B
80-83 = B-	77-79 = C+	74-76 = C	70-73 = C-
67-69 = D+	64-66 = D	60-63 = D-	0-59 = F

## FLAGS:

### Independent Inquiry Flag

This course carries the Independent Inquiry flag. Independent Inquiry courses are designed to engage you in the process of inquiry over the course of a semester, providing you with the opportunity for independent investigation of a question, problem, or project related to your major. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from the independent investigation and presentation of your own work.

### Writing Flag

This course carries the Writing Flag. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. In this class, you can expect to write regularly during the semester, complete substantial writing projects, and receive feedback from your instructor to help you improve your writing. You will also have the opportunity to revise one or more assignments, and you may be asked to read and discuss your peers' work. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from your written work. Writing Flag classes meet the Core Communications objectives of Critical Thinking, Communication, Teamwork, and Personal Responsibility, established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

## **POLICIES:**

### **CLASSROOM CONDUCT:**

- In order to build the best possible learning environment, please be respectful of the professor and other students. **Texting, browsing the Internet, talking to your friends, or other examples of disregarding the learning environment, are not acceptable conduct.** Should you feel compelled to engage in these activities, you may be asked to leave the classroom.
- **Please turn off and put away all the electronics – cell phones, ipads, and laptops. Failure to do so will impact your grade.**

### **PAPERS AND LATE POLICY:**

- All papers must be typed and proofread; careless editing will incur deductions. **All assignments are due at the beginning of the scheduled class.**
- Extensions on graded assignments will be granted only in the case of a medical or family emergency, or if you have official documented college business off campus. You must notify me before the due date. **Assignments turned in late without an allowable excuse will lose one letter grade for each day past the due date.**

### **ACADEMIC DISHONESTY:**

- Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and any incidents of dishonesty will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students and Student Judicial Services. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism (the unauthorized appropriation of another's work – including from Websites – in one's own written work offered for credit) and collusion (the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing college work offered for credit). These acts will be subject to serious academic penalty. If you are unclear about what plagiarism is, I would encourage you to visit the following website: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism>  
**STUDENTS WHO COMMIT PLAGIARISM ARE SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE FAILURE OF THE CLASS, IN ADDITION TO FACING THE POLICIES OF THE UNIVERSITY.**

### **ACCOMMODATION:**

- **Students with Disabilities:** Any student with a documented disability who requires academic accommodations should contact Services for Students with Disabilities at [ssd@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:ssd@austin.utexas.edu), or 512-471-6259 (voice), or 512-410-6644 (Video Phone), as soon as possible to request an official letter outlining authorized accommodations. The professor and student will use this letter as a guide for implementing any accommodations. *Students who need assistance, but do not yet have an official letter of support, are welcome to bring any of their concerns to the attention of the professor.* Immediate concerns will be handled on a case by case basis, and official documentation will be required to ensure proper accommodations are made. See here for more info: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/using-accommodations/>
- **Religious observances:** Texas Education Code 51.911 states that a student shall be excused from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. University

policy requires students to notify each of their instructors as far in advance of the absence as possible so that arrangements can be made.

### **CAMPUS CARRY:**

- According to Texas SB11, persons with a current legally valid Concealed Carry License may carry a legal handgun on public college campuses, as long as it remains concealed and on their person (private colleges can opt out of SB11). If anyone, including the professor, sees a handgun, however briefly, leave the vicinity and call 911 immediately.
- According to SB11, faculty members cannot ban the concealed carry of handguns in their classrooms, no matter how unsafe they or students may feel discussing complex issues with firearms present.
- Some exceptions to campus carry exist: For instance, faculty and staff can ban guns from their sole-occupant offices, *but only* if they give oral notice of this policy. Thus, in order to comply with this new policy, I will read the following aloud on the first day of class: **“I prohibit the concealed carry of handguns in my office.”**

### **Course Schedule:**

**Please Note:** *This schedule is subject to change as needed.*

#### **WEEK 1**

**Thursday, August 30**

- **Introduction**

#### **WEEK 2**

**Tuesday, September 4**

### **ACTS OF GOD, AND OTHER SPECTACULAR DISASTERS**

- **THE CULTURE OF CALAMITY**

- ◆ **READ:** Kevin Rozario, “Introduction: The Golden Age as Catastrophe,” *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster & the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-29.

**Thursday, September 6**

- **DENATURALIZING DISASTER**

- ◆ **READ:** Ted Steinberg, “Introduction: Hometown Blues,” *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xi-xxv.
- ◆ **READ:** Junot Díaz, “Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal,” *Boston Review*, May/June 2011.

#### **WEEK 3**

**Tuesday, September 11**

- **PORTRAYING 9/11**

- ◆ **READ:** Véronique Bragard, Christophe Dony, and Warren Rosenberg, “Introduction,” *Portraying 9/11: Essays on Representations in Comics, Literature, Film and Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).
- ◆ **READ:** Matthew J. Costello, “Spandez Agonistes: Superhero Comics Confront the War on Terror,” in *Portraying 9/11: Essays on Representations in Comics, Literature, Film and Theatre*, eds., Véronique Bragard, Christophe Dony and Warren Rosenberg (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).
- ◆ **IN-CLASS ASSIGN:** Presentations

Thursday, September 13

#### ■ PORTRAYING THE ATOMIC BOMB

- ◆ **READ:** Paul Boyer, excerpts, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 (1988)).
- ◆ **IN-CLASS ASSIGN:** Primary Source Analysis

### WEEK 4

Tuesday, September 18

#### ■ AFTER “THE BIG ONE”: THE DENIAL OF DISASTER

- ◆ **READ:** Ted Steinberg, Chapter 2, “Disaster as Archetype,” *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25-46.
- ◆ **BRING:** A compelling / provocative primary source (such as a historical document, or photograph) related to the San Francisco earthquake to class.
- ◆ Choose your source wisely, since you will have to analyze it in class. Use one of the following online archives:
  - University of California Archives: <https://calisphere.org/>
  - National Archives: <http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/>

Thursday, September 20

### *THE ARCHITECTURE OF DISASTER*

#### ■ FINDING SHELTER

- ◆ **READ:** Mark Svenvold, “How Firm Is Your Foundation?” *Big Weather: Chasing Tornadoes in the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2005), 228-253.
- ◆ **READ:** Jim Watts, “After Oklahoma Disaster, No Urgency to Bond for Tornado Shelters,” *The Bond Buyer*, May 24, 2013.
- ◆ **READ:** Kevin M. Simmons and Daniel Sutter, “Tornado Shelters and the Housing Market,” *Construction Management and Economics* (November 2007) 25, 1119-1126.
- ◆ **DUE: #1 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

### WEEK 5

Tuesday, September 25

#### ■ HURRICANES

- ◆ **READ:** Ted Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape,” and “Building for Apocalypse,” *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47-75; 79-96.

Thursday, September 27

■ **LIFE IN THE FLOODPLAINS**

- ◆ **IN-CLASS FILM: FATAL FLOOD**
- ◆ **DUE: Primary Source Analysis Paper**

**WEEK 6**

Tuesday, October 2

■ **WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE AGAIN**

- ◆ **READ:** Manning Marable, “Seeking Higher Ground: Race, Public Policy and the Hurricane Katrina Crisis,” in *Seeking Higher Ground: The Hurricane Katrina Crisis, Race, and Public Policy Reader*, eds., Manning Marable and Kristen Clarke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), ix-xvi.
- ◆ **READ:** Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, “The Social Construction of Disaster: New Orleans as the Paradigmatic American City,” in *Seeking Higher Ground: The Hurricane Katrina Crisis, Race, and Public Policy Reader*, eds., Manning Marable and Kristen Clarke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 271-294.

Thursday, October 4

■ **SCIENCE, POLITICS, AND HURRICANES**

- ◆ **READ:** Richard Levins, “Cuba’s Example,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Volume 16, No. 4 (December 2005), 5-6.
- ◆ **READ:** Ivor van Heerden and Mike Bryan, “Introduction,” “Is Anyone in Charge Here?” and “The Investigation,” *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina – the Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (New York: Penguin Books), 1-11; 137-152; 211-249.
- ◆ **DUE: #2 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

**WEEK 7**

Tuesday, October 9

■ **DISASTER APARTHEID**

- ◆ **READ:** Ted Steinberg, “Disasters and Deregulation,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 21, 2006.
- ◆ **READ:** Robert D. Bullard, “Katrina and the Second Disaster: A Twenty-Point Plan to Destroy Black New Orleans,” *Poverty and Race*, Nov/Dec 2006: 16, 6, 20-22.
- READ:** Naomi Klein, “Chapter 20: Disaster Apartheid: A World of Green Zones and Red Zones,” *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (NY: Picador, 2007), 513-534.

Thursday, October 11

■ **FROM KATRINA TO HARVEY AND MARIA**

- ◆ **To Be Announced**

**WEEK 8**

Tuesday, October 16

## ***DISASTERS ON SCREEN***

### ■ **IMAGINING DISASTER**

- ◆ **READ:** Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, 1966), 209-225.
- ◆ **READ:** Glenn Kay and Michael Rose, “A Brief History of Disaster Movies,” in *Disaster Movies: A Loud, Long, Explosive, Star-Studded Guide to Avalanches, Earthquakes, Floods, Meteors, Sinking Ships, Twisters, Viruses, Killer Bees, Nuclear Fallout, and Alien Attacks in the Cinema*, (Chicago, IL: Mosaic Press, 2006), 1-6.
- ◆ **ASSIGN:** Film Analysis

Thursday, October 18

### ■ **THE RISE AND FALL OF 1970s DISASTER MOVIES**

- ◆ **READ:** Ken Feil, “Recipes for Disaster: The Rise and Fall of the 1970s Disaster Movie,” *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 1-30.

WEEK 9

Tuesday, October 23

### ■ **READING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN 1990s DISASTER FILMS**

- ◆ **READ:** Steven J. Zani, “Traumatic Disaster and Titanic Recuperation: Popular/Historical Representations of the Titanic,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Fall 2003, vol. 31, no. 3, 125-31.
- ◆ **READ:** Ken Feil, “Queering the Wreckage and Straightening Up: Camp, Stereotyping and the Later 1990s Disaster Cycle,” *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 59-93.
- ◆ **DUE: #3 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

Thursday, October 25

### ■ **DISASTER MOVIES POST-9/11**

- ◆ **READ:** Stephen Prince, “Shadows Once Removed,” *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 1-16, 71-123.
- ◆ **DUE: #4 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

WEEK 10

Tuesday, October 30

## ***EVERYDAY DISASTERS***

### ■ **(IN)VISIBLE DISASTERS**

- ◆ **READ:** Jerry Herron, “Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*; Fall2007, Vol. 106 Issue 4, 663-682.
- ◆ **ASSIGN:** Research Paper

Thursday, November 1

### ■ **TO BE ANNOUNCED**



- ◆ **DUE:** Film Analysis

## **WEEK 11**

**Tuesday, November 6**

### ■ **WHAT THE EYES DON'T SEE: POISONED WATERS**

- ◆ **READ:** Mona Hanna-Attisha, excerpts, *What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City* (New York: One World, 2018).
- ◆ **DUE: #5 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

**Thursday, November 8**

### ■ **HEAT WAVE**

- ◆ **READ:** Eric Klinenberg, "Prologue: The Urban Inferno," and "Introduction: The City of Extremes," *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-13; 14-36.
- ◆ **DUE: RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

## **WEEK 12**

**Tuesday, November 13**

### ■ **WHERE IS THE FIRE?**

- ◆ **READ:** Mike Davis, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 96-147.
- ◆ **DUE: #6 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

**Thursday, November 15**

### ■ **IN-CLASS FILM:** *Merchants of Doubt*

## **WEEK 13**

**Tuesday, November 20**

### ■ **A TOXIC TOUR OF AUSTIN**

- ◆ **READ:** Andrew Busch, "Of Toxic Tours and What Makes Austin, Austin: Battles for the Garden, Battles for the City," *City in a Garden: Environmental Transformation and Racial Justice in Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 206-236.
- ◆ **DUE: #7 STUDENT PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION LEADING**

**Thursday, November 22**

### ■ **THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY**

## **WEEK 14**

**Tuesday, November 27**

### ■ **STUDENT PRESENTATIONS AND PEER FEEDBACK**

**Thursday, November 29**

- **STUDENT PRESENTATIONS AND PEER FEEDBACK**

**WEEK 15**

**Tuesday, December 4**

- **STUDENT PRESENTATIONS & PEER FEEDBACK**

**Thursday, December 6**

- **STUDENT PRESENTATIONS & PEER FEEDBACK**
- **LAST CLASS / FINAL PAPER DUE**