

American Catastrophes, Radical Histories

AMS 311S (Spring 2019)

Instructor: Nicholas Bloom (nfbloom@gmail.com)

Office Hours: Monday 11:30 - 1, Tuesday 10 - 12, and by Appointment, BUR 408

Class Meeting: M-W-F 10 – 11 AM, BUR 436A

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.

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 working from universities, 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. They are also often trying 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. Their writings will be models for us as we investigate 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 **three discussion questions** to provoke class discussion for the specific text we are reading that day. You must submit your discussion questions and a brief outline of your 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*, and how does it frame the *narrative* of this 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 do not

have to come to a clear conclusion. They can even function as a series of thorough questions, or end with a question. The most important thing is that you demonstrate that you have seriously read and 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 will be issued at instructor's discretion, and will factor significantly into students' participation grade.***

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 Essay** [*Choice of Two Prompts Instructor Provides: Putting Two Texts in Conversation*]

20%: **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**

5% **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:

1/23: Course Introduction

1/25: Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, Ch. 1: Pages 1-4; Winthrop, "City Upon a Hill" Excerpt

Week 2: Catastrophe and History

1/28: Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, Ch. 1: Pages 4 -31

1/30: Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"; "The Declaration of Independence" (<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>);

2/1: James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook." *The Fire Next Time*, Pages 1 – 10

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

Week 3: Atlantic Slavery: A Calculated Catastrophe

2/4: Stephanie Smallwood, "The Living Dead aboard the Slave Ship." *Saltwater Slavery*, pp. 122 – 152; Peruse www.slavevoyages.org (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.; **Receive Essay 1 Prompt**

2/6: Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*. 3 – 17

2/8: Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 13-23

Week 4: Radical Histories of Slavery and Resistance I: Military Revolts

2/11: "Slave Revolt in Jamaica" Assignment (<http://revolt.axismaps.com/>)

2/13: Dubois, *Black Reconstruction*, "The General Strike," 55 – 67

2/15: Dubois, *Black Reconstruction*, 711 – 717, 725 – 728.

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

2/18: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Foreword & 1 - 75

2/20: *Beloved*, 76 - 125

2/22: *Beloved*, 125 - 173

Week 6:

2/25: *Beloved*, 174 - 235

2/27: *Beloved*, 236 - 270

3/1: *Beloved*, 271 - 324

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

Week 7: A Sick Civilization?

3/4: **Essay 1 Due;** Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, "Civilization" 15 – 17

3/6: Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (31 - 53)

3/8: Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (54 - 78) **Receive 2nd Essay Prompt**

Week 8: Violence and Morality in a Catastrophic Atmosphere

3/11: Howard Zinn, "Hiroshima." *The Bomb*;

3/13: Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth* (1 - 21; 52 - 62)

3/15: Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 103 – 114.

Spring Break: NO CLASS 3/18 – 3/22

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

3/25: Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman."
(1949) <https://libcom.org/files/claudiajones.pdf>

3/27: Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet" Selections; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
(1963) https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

3/29: King, "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam"; NPR Code Switch Redlining Documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5FBjyqfoLM>

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

4/1: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, "Down at the Cross." (15 - 47)

4/3: *The Fire Next Time* (47 - 82)

4/5: *The Fire Next Time* (82 - 106)

UNIT 3: HAUNTED LANDS: CASE STUDIES OF CONTEMPORARY CATASTROPHE: MISSISSIPPI AND PUERTO RICO

Week 11: Mississippi

4/8: Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested*, pages TBA

4/10: Woods Cont., pages TBA

4/12: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*; **Second Essay Due**

Week 12: Mississippi

4/15: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*; **Receive Final Essay Assignment**

4/17: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

4/19: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Week 13: Puerto Rican Crisis, Before and After Maria (And finishing Ward)

4/22: Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

4/24: Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

4/26: Colonialism, Debt, and Austerity in Puerto Rico: Articles from *The Puerto Rico Syllabus*: <https://puertoricosyllabus.com/>

Week 14: Puerto Rican Crisis (Cont.)

4/29: Colonialism, Debt, and Austerity in Puerto Rico: Articles from *The Puerto Rico Syllabus*. <https://puertoricosyllabus.com/>

5/1: Final Paper Presentations

5/2-3: **Final Paper Conferences (10 – 2, in Office; Can meet by appointment at other times this week as well if this time doesn't work)**

Week 15:

5/6: Final Paper Presentations

5/8: Final Paper Presentations

5/10: **Final Essays Due:** Presentations and Instructor Survey