

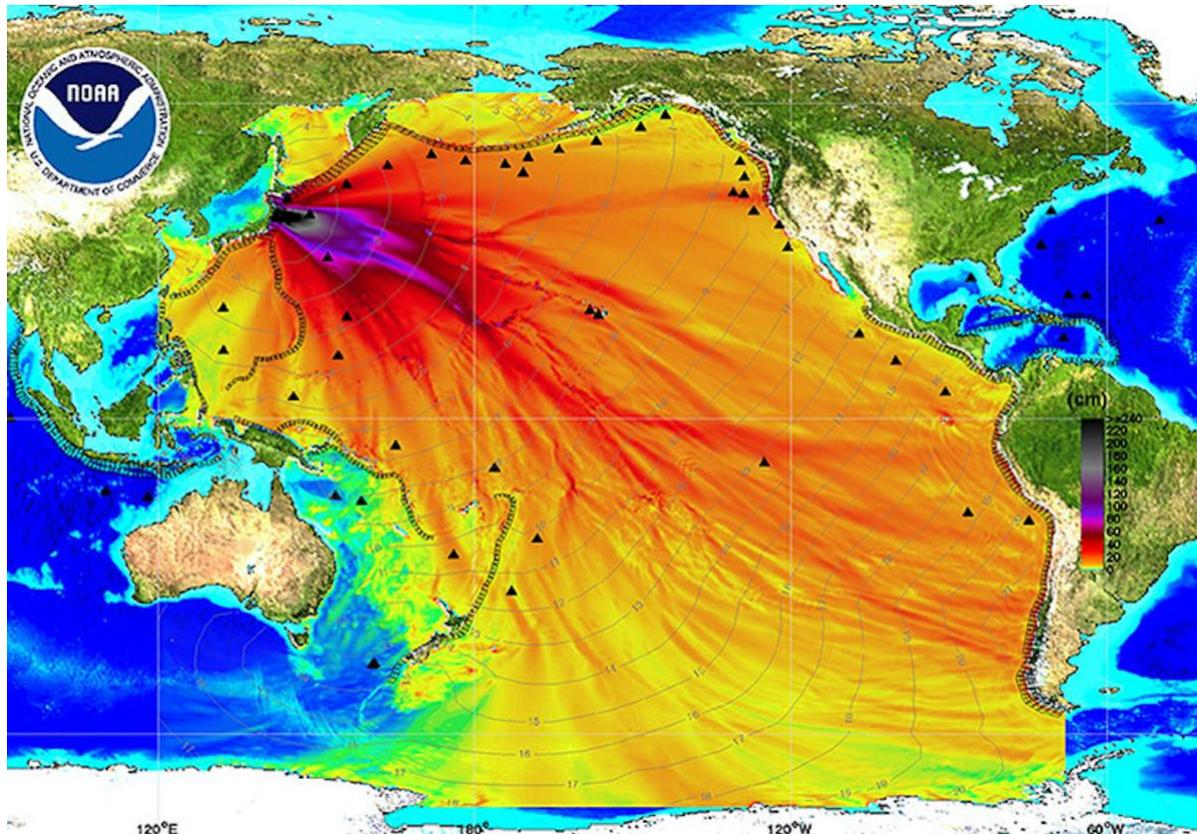
The Historian's Craft: The History of Disaster

Wednesday, 3:30-5:25, EDUCATION 345

Daniel Williford, PhD

Email: daniel.williford@wisc.edu

Office Hours: Wednesday, 1-3 pm, <https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/97607658612>



Course Description

In recent years, popular and academic writing about the causes and consequences of “natural” disasters has undergone a paradigm shift. Wildfires in California and Australia, hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, drought in the Syrian countryside—once presumed to be isolated, catastrophic events—are now inevitably linked to questions of anthropogenic climate change and global environmental crisis. Similarly, world-altering pandemics—previously imagined as a relic of the past—have revealed the tightly wound connections between contemporary economic, political, and technological systems and the microscopic

world of viruses and microorganisms. In this contemporary moment, it remains essential to investigate the historical contexts in which disasters occur and the social, political, and cultural dynamics that they reshape. This course takes a case-study approach to the history of disaster, drawing on examples from multiple regions across the 19th and 20th centuries.

This class is designed to help students develop the capacity to think, speak, and write critically about disasters while developing the essential tools of a historian. The course is organized around a number of core questions: What does it mean to describe a disaster as natural, social, or political? How have disasters intersected with racial inequalities, colonial ventures, the history of capitalism, and modernization projects? How have experiences of disasters and the meanings assigned to them remade institutions, state-society relations, and cultural imaginaries? As we answer each of these questions, we will work on developing the skills of historical analysis and writing, including the ability to ask historical questions, to critically analyze secondary and primary sources, to develop a persuasive argument, to plan and carry out a research project, and to present your findings orally.

Official Description: Students conduct original historical research and convey the results to others. Through engagement with archival materials, undergraduates become historical detectives; they practice defining important historical questions, collecting and analyzing evidence, presenting original conclusions, and contributing to ongoing discussions. Students confer individually with and receive feedback from instructors to improve their skills of historical analysis and communication in both written and spoken formats. Requirements include at least 30 pages of writing - including drafts - and two or more formal oral presentations, each totaling at least five minutes. Upon successful completion of this course, students will be prepared to undertake historical research and writing in a variety of courses, including the HIST 600 capstone seminar.

Requisites: Com A or equivalent

Credit Policy: 3-credits. This class meets for one, 120-minute class period each week over the spring semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, problem sets, studying, etc) for about 3 hours out of the classroom for every class period. The syllabus includes more information about meeting times and expectations for student work.

Comm-B: This class fulfills Part B of the General Education Communication requirement. This course emphasizes speaking, listening, writing, and research throughout the semester. All assignments are structured in accordance with fulfilling the goals of Comm-B.

Learning Objectives

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Interrogate core issues related to the historical relationship between disasters and colonialism, state building, nationalism, racialized inequity, the history of capitalism, and other broad processes.
- Plan and complete short and medium-length writing projects that showcase historical analysis in multiple genres
- Analyze secondary literature and identify conversations within bodies of scholarship
- Present original research orally
- Give and receive written feedback to improve written communication

Assignments

Individual Writing Conferences: Early in the semester, students will be required to schedule a one-on-one meeting with the instructor to discuss their writing goals and plans for improvement.

Participation: 15%

Participation grades will be earned based on active contributions to discussions and activities. Thoughtful, regular, and relevant participation during class discussions will help you earn full points. Contributions to asynchronous parts of the course (responding to other students' reading responses) will also help you earn points.

In-class Writing Activities 10%: (5 activities for around 6 pages total): Each in-class writing activity is designed to introduce students to skills used by historians. Each activity will present students with a set of primary sources and a series of prompts that require them to situate each source in its social, cultural, and institutional context. Using these prompts students will produce an analysis of the sources that moves beyond description or summary to critical assessment. These activities will help students develop skills for producing their final research paper. We will complete these activities in class.

3 Short Writing Assignments 15%: (approx. 6 pages total):

Summary/ Argumentation/Analysis: These short assignments are your opportunity to develop specific skills that are essential for historical writing. They will involve posting 500-700 word responses to specific questions posed over the course of the semester in response to course readings and discussions. They should also be posted to the discussion tab of the Canvas page in response by 5:00pm the day before class, and students will be expected to read all of the responses prior to discussion.

Narrative Summary: **Due Feb. 1**

Argumentation: **Due Feb. 15**

Analysis: **Due Feb. 22**

Disaster and Visual Culture Presentation 10%: (5-minute presentation) Early in the semester you will give a short (4-5 minute) presentation on a visual source of your choosing. The source could be a map, a painting, a photograph, a short clip of a film or video, data visualization or any other type of visual media that *represents* a disaster in one way or another. In your presentation you should introduce the visual source, briefly contextualize it, describe how it represents the disaster in question, discuss the formal elements or stylistic choices made in the representation, and reflect on the wider social or political stakes of these choices.

5-Minute in-Class Presentation: **Due March 2 (Week 6)**

Research Proposal 5%: (1-2 page): This first stage of the research paper should include a one to two page description of the disaster you have selected, the historical context in which it takes place, and a research question that you plan to investigate. **Due 3/23.**

Annotated Bibliography 10%: (2-3 pages) You will gather a number of secondary and primary sources that will be the basis for your research proposal, and, for each source, provide an approximately 30-50 word synopsis, emphasizing the value of the source for your purposes. This will then be used in the 'literature review' portion of your final research paper. **Due 4/6.**

Research Paper 25%: (10 pages) Building on earlier assignments, you will produce an original research paper and a final presentation in conversation with the themes of the course (the relationships between disasters and politics, culture, and social life, etc.). The paper should be a historical case study of a particular disaster of

your choosing that uses the analytic and argumentative skills developed over the course of the semester.

Draft 1: (at least 7 pages) For In-class Peer Review: **4/20**

Revised Version: (10 Pages plus a full bibliography) **5/4**

Final Presentation 10%: (5 minutes with Slides or other Visual Component): Present your research findings in a 5-minute presentation. The presentation should include a description of the disaster you have chosen—its causes, consequences, and long-term significance—as well as an argument about how it intersects with politics, social life, or cultural values. **Due May 4.**

Grade Distribution

A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
93.0– 100%	88.0– 92.99%	83.0– 87.99%	78.0– 82.99%	77.9– 70%	60.0– 69.99%	0–59.99%

This is a writing-intensive course. Throughout the semester, you will produce roughly 30 pages in various formats, as well as revisions and peer editing exercises.

- Attendance and Participation — 15%
- In-class Writing activities— 10%
- 3 Short Writing Assignments — 15% (5% each)
- Visual Culture Presentations—10%
- Research Proposal—5%
- Annotated Bibliography—10%
- Research Paper—25%
- Final Presentation — 10%

Course Requirements & Policies

Course Canvas Site: Please consult the HIST 201 Canvas website frequently. All announcements will be posted there, as will important handouts and links to other sites.

Communication: You are encouraged to communicate your questions and concerns to the instructor, and it is strongly preferred **that you use email or the Canvas course site to communicate**. Given the extraordinarily difficult and unpredictable circumstances this semester responses might not always be timely, but we will be doing our best to make sure all questions and concerns are attended to. Instructor office hours should be scheduled online beforehand in the “Appointments” section of the Canvas Calendar.

Writing Resources: The focus of this class is on the development of writing skills related to academic contexts; how to turn your ideas into text. We won’t stress mechanical issues in this course, but there are resources to help you develop and improve those aspects of your writing. The History Lab and the University Writing Center can assist you at all levels of writing practice, from idea formation to proofreading.

The History Department History Lab: <https://history.wisc.edu/undergraduate-program/the-history-lab/>

University Writing Center: <https://writing.wisc.edu/individual/>

Attendance: **Attendance at all course meetings is mandatory**. Active participation in discussions will be an important component of the overall course grade. **Attendance is not the same as participation**. Participation grades will be earned based on active contributions to discussions and activities, not passive attendance. Tardiness, leaving early, etc. will negatively affect your participation grade. A pattern of absences will result in a significant lowering of your grade. If a chronic illness or other emergency prevents attendance, **it is your responsibility to talk to the instructor as soon as possible to arrange an accommodation. That said, we understand the complexities of life, health, and well-being in our contemporary world. Our inclination will always be to be flexible, but it is up to you to communicate with us about attendance.**

Accommodations: The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations by the

end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

Religious observances: The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports accommodation of religious observances that might conflict with the course schedule. Students must notify the instructor within the first two weeks of class of the specific days or dates on which they request relief. Make-ups may be scheduled before or after the regularly scheduled requirements. It is understood that instructors may set reasonable limits on the total number of days claimed.

Election observances are NEW starting this semester: Along with flexibility for religious observances, instructors are asked to make accommodations for students working as spring election officials as outlined in [Faculty document 2947](#), which passed the Faculty Senate in May 2021.

Students must inform instructors at least two weeks prior to Election Day about their commitment. Students will not receive a grade deduction for not attending class, and instructors will attempt to keep election days free of major assignments. Guidelines 2 and 3 listed below for religious observances are also applicable to election observances.

Please provide flexibility to students reporting they may be tardy or absent the day of an election due to waiting to vote at the polls.

Privacy and Use of Audio/Video Recordings: Lecture materials and recordings are protected intellectual property at UW-Madison. Students in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in this class. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, you are not authorized to record my lectures without my permission unless you are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability requiring accommodation. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities. Students are also prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor's

express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university's policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct.

Diversity and Inclusion: [Diversity](#) is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

Academic Integrity: All students are expected to adhere to the University of Wisconsin—Madison's core values regarding academic integrity. Students should utilize the [Chicago Manual of Style Online](#) for all issues of source citation, along with any specific guidelines provided in the course assignments. Clarifying the disciplinary standards of research ethics and source citation is part of the educational mission of this course, and students should consult the faculty instructor regarding any questions. Plagiarism or other academic misconduct may result in a zero on the assignment or exam, a lower grade in the course, or failure in the course. See the Dean of Students Office for more information about the academic misconduct process (<http://students.wisc.edu/doso/acadintegrity.html>). *When in doubt, be sure to cite carefully and completely all sources from which you obtain information.* This includes books, articles, documents, internet sites, encyclopedias, and periodicals. You must provide a citation if you exactly quote a source, paraphrase it, or extract information from it.

Student Health and Well-being: As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning. These might include strained relationships, anxiety, high levels of stress, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, or loss of motivation. University Health Services can help with these or other issues you may experience. Help is always available. You can learn about free, confidential mental health services available to you; call 608-265-6600 (option 2) or visit uhs.wisc.edu.

Grading Policies: Late assignments will be **docked half a letter** and another half for each 24 hour period after that. If you know you will have trouble meeting a deadline for any reason, please speak to the instructor in advance (or as soon as

possible) to arrange an extension. **Given the unusual circumstance of this semester, you are strongly encouraged to request an extension when and if you need it!** To appeal a grade, you must submit a written explanation to the instructor explaining why you deserve a better grade. The instructor's decision, however, will be final, and may be to raise, lower, or keep the grade

Devices: Students must bring a laptop or another device that can access Canvas to class. To avoid contact certain in-class assignments (such as Peer-Reviews) will have to be conducted electronically. These devices should be used HIST 201 purposes only. This includes note-taking and consulting electronic versions of the readings. Checking email, surfing the web, and completing work for other courses is disrespectful to your classmates and will result in a lowering of your participation grade for the section. Please silence and put away all cell phones before class begins.

Readings: Keeping up with daily reading assignments is an *essential* part of this course. All readings are subject to change, and students will be notified of any changes via email or the course website.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (1/26): Course Overview

Before Class: Look over the Syllabus/Course Site and Fill out the Entrance Survey

After Class: Schedule an Individual Writing Conference w/Instructor using the Canvas Calendar (Appointments Tab)

Week 2 (2/2): Race, Class, and Katrina: What is a Natural Disaster?

Before Class

Read: Theodore Steinberg, “What Is a Natural Disaster?,” *Literature and Medicine* 15, no. 1 (May 1, 1996): 33–47.

“Pre-Katrina, Post-Katrina” and “Abandoned Before the Storm” *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, Chester W. Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds., (Taylor & Francis, 2006), 1-12; 85-102.

Due Feb. 1: Short Writing Assignment: Narrative Summary

Before starting this assignment listen to at least two of the recorded oral histories with survivors of Hurricane Katrina on <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5704652>

Using **one** of these oral histories as well as the text by Hartman and Squires compose a short (500-700 word) narrative summary of the events described by the survivor. Pay attention in your writing to which details you choose to highlight and the relationship between these events and the wider context sketched out in the secondary source.

In Class

In-class Writing Activity: Write a short description of each of the following three images of disaster (Katrina, Kanto Earthquake, Machchhu Dam Failure). Which aspects and actors in the photograph did you focus on and why? What assumptions did you make about the event that took place prior to the photograph? How might you interpret these photographs or use them to make an argument?

In-class Discussion: What are the implications of describing a disaster as “natural”, “social”, or “political”?

Week 3 (2/9): Witnessing Disaster / Visualizing Disaster

Before Class

Read: Three different Eye Witness Accounts of the New Madrid Earthquake on <http://www.memphis.edu/cei/compendium/eyewitness.php>

Examine: Study and be prepared to discuss at least three of the data visualizations from each of the following websites (see discussion prompt below)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/data-visualization.htm>.

<https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/covid-19-coronavirus-infographic-datapack/>

<https://pandemic.internationalosos.com/2019-ncov/covid-19-data-visualisation>

In Class

In-class Writing Activity: Compare three eyewitness accounts of the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812. How is “disaster” represented in these accounts? What do the commonalities and differences in these accounts suggest about notions of “nature” at that time?

In-class Discussion: Coronavirus Data Visualizations: In analyzing the visualizations ask 1) what questions would you have about the data that produced these visuals, 2) what is the creator of the visualization trying to communicate through the graphic’s visual form? 3) What stylistic choices do you notice and what possible reasons for them can you infer?

Week 4 (2/16): Wildfires and Geographies of Class

We will meet this week in Special Collections Memorial Library room 984

Before Class

Read:

Mike Davis, “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn,” *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 2 (1995): 1–36.

Gustavo Arellano, “Revisiting Mike Davis’ Case for Letting Malibu Burn,” *latimes.com*, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-arellano-malibu-burn-20181114-story.html>.

Renee Lewis, “Native Traditional Methods Revived to Combat California Drought, Wildfires,” *Al Jazeera America*, June 12, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/12/native-knowledge-used-to-combat-calif-drought.html>.

Due Feb. 15 : Short Writing Assignment: Argumentation

After reading Mike Davis’s class “Case for Letting Malibu Burn” and the accompanying texts write a short (500-700 word) text in which you make a clear argument for or against Davis’s position. Your argument should be supported using specific evidence from any of the three readings.

In Class

Special Collections Library Workshop

Week 5 (2/23): Disasters in Film

Before Class

Read: Despina Kakoudaki, “Representing Politics in Disaster Films,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 7, no. 3 (December 2011): 349–56.

Watch: *2012* (2009)

Due Feb. 22 : Short Writing Assignment: Analysis

Using Despina Kakoudaki’s article as a model, write a short (500-700 word) analysis of some aspect of the film (a close-reading of a single scene, a critical interpretation of the visual or narrative techniques used, etc.). This text should go beyond a summary of the film or assessments of performative or directorial decisions to consider how each film represents “disaster” as a political, social, and cultural event.

In Class

In-class Discussion: Film Analysis and Citational Practice

Week 6 (3/2): Presentations and Pandemics

Before Class

Read: Nayan Shah, “Regulating Bodies and Space,” in *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*, 45-76 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

“[How to Frame a Researchable Question](#)” from William Cronon’s *Learning to Do Historical Research: A Primer*

Prepare: Disaster and Visual Culture Presentation (see syllabus description)

In Class

Due Disaster and Visual Culture Presentation

In-class Discussion: How to Frame a Researchable Question?

Week 7 (3/9): Disaster Colonialism and Disaster Capitalism

Before Class

Read: Adam Guerin, “Disaster Ecologies: Land, Peoples and the Colonial Modern in the Gharb, Morocco, 1911-1936,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59 (2016): 333-365.

Dwaipayan Banerjee, “Society for Sick Societies”

https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/society-for-sick-societies-media-itineraries/society-for-sick-societies-between-pandemia-and-pandemonium/

Naomi Klein, “There’s Nothing Natural About Puerto Rico’s Disaster,” *The Intercept*, September 21, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/09/21/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-disaster-capitalism/>.

In Class

In-class Writing Activity: How to make an argument? Use 4 “facts” from the Agadir Earthquake fact sheet to make an argument about the disaster?

In-class Discussion: Using examples from this week’s readings, reflect on the relationship between disasters, capitalism, and colonialism? What broader implications or conclusions can you draw about this relationship?

Spring Break March 12-20

Week 8 (3/23): Disasters and National Identity

Before Class

Read: Greg Clancey, “Japan as Earthquake Nation” in *Earthquake Nation: The Cultural Politics of Japanese Seismicity, 1868-1930*, 114-151 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Due Research Proposal (Before Class on 3/23)

In Class

In-class Writing Activity: Analyzing Nuclear Art - Choose either the “Prelude” to Toge Sankichi’s *Poem’s of the Atomic Bomb* or the video piece by Isao Hashimoto. How would does each artist *represent* nuclear disaster? How could you incorporate this type of source into historical analysis.

Research Proposal Peer-Review Activity

Week 9 (3/30): Humanitarianism and the Aftermath of Disaster

Before Class

Read: Didier Fassin, “The Predicament of Humanitarianism,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 22, no. 1 (October 6, 2013): 33–48.

Mark Schuller, “PA MANYEN FANM NAN KONSA: The Gender of Aid” in *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti*, 101-122 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

Paul Farmer, “Health, Healing, Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology,” in *The Preferential Option for the Poor Beyond Theology*, 199-221.

In Class

In-class Discussion: What do you make of the critique of humanitarianism in this week’s readings? What exactly is the predicament of humanitarianism and can it be avoided?

Locating Primary Sources Activity

Week 10 (4/6): Cultures of Disaster Response in Latin America

Before Class

Read: Mark D. Anderson, "Disaster and the "New Patria": Cyclone San Zenón and Trujillo's Rewriting of the Dominican Republic," in *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*, 29-55 (University of Virginia Press, 2011).

Julian Randall, "San Zenon Repents"

Due Annotated Bibliography (Before Class on 4/6)

In Class

Week 11 (4/13): Enviro-Technical Disasters and Causal Complexity

Before Class

Read: excerpted documents in Kim Fortun, *Advocacy after Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*, 1-6 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Sara B. Pritchard, "An Envirotechnical Disaster: Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima" *Environmental History* 17 (April 2012): 219-243.

In Class

In-class Writing Activity: Choose one of the three sources on Bhopal included with the Fortun reading and analyze: how the event is portrayed? What kind of institution produced the document and how does that shape the stakes of the portrayal? And what kinds of knowledge are valorized?

Week 12 (4/20): Extinction Events

Before Class

Read: Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Sixth Extinction?,” *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/25/the-sixth-extinction>.

Research Paper Draft Due to Peers

In Class

In-class Peer Review Activity

Week 13 (4/27): Disaster, Climate Change, and the Problem of Scale

Before Class

Read: Mike Hulme, “Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism,” *Osiris* 26: 1, *Klima* (2011): 245-266.

Robert Fletcher, “Capitalizing on Chaos: Climate Change and Disaster Capitalism,” *Ephemera; Leicester* 12, no. 1/2 (May 2012): 97–112.

In Class

In-class Discussion: How does contemporary knowledge about anthropogenic climate change and its complex effects on weather patterns shape the meaning of present-day disasters? What is lost and gained by framing disasters as *results* of climate change?

Week 14 (5/4): Disaster Futures

Final Oral Presentations in Class

Final Research Paper Due by Midnight