

History of Science 280

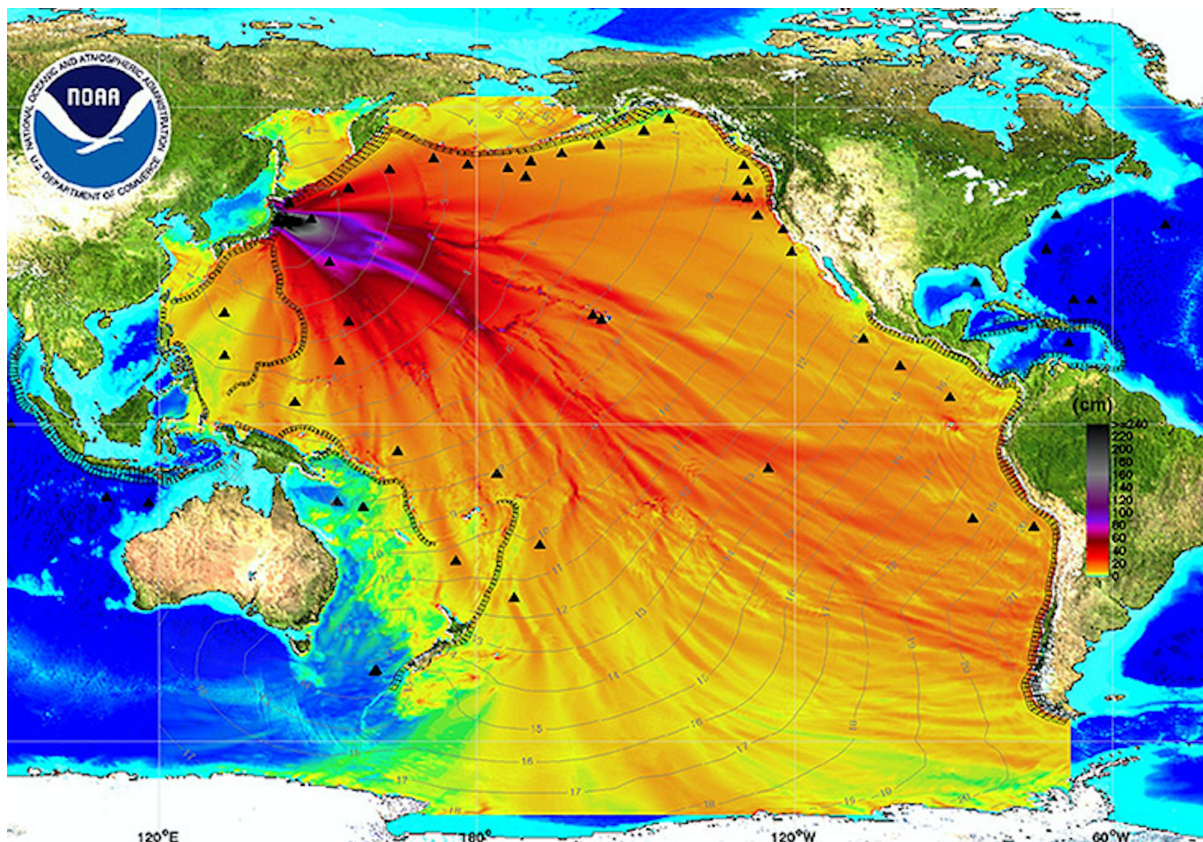
Histories of Disaster: Environmental and Technological Catastrophes

Tuesday and Thursday, 2:30-3:45, PYLE CENTER 232

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Office Hours: W 12-2PM on Canvas



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 disaster. Students will interrogate the role of “disaster writing” as a distinct genre and its relevance in the contemporary moment of global environmental crisis. 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 reading, speaking, and writing strategies that students need to be successful in a variety of academic and professional contexts.

Official Description: Intensive exploration of issues in the history of science. Emphasis on developing critical thinking about science through formal and informal writing.

Requisites: Declared in honors program

Credit Policy: 3-credits. This class meets for two, 75-minute class periods each week over the fall 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.

Learning Objectives

Argumentation and Analysis: Much of the course will be devoted to developing students’ capacity to read and write critically by assessing and evaluating arguments based on their logical coherence and evidentiary support. Students will be encouraged to build from basic interpretations of evidence, to comparative analyses, and finally to complex, synthetic argumentation.

Communication and Presentation: Students will develop speaking skills and practice presenting arguments from evidence in a clear and concise fashion.

Research Skills: Students will learn how to collect, analyze, and present evidence through practice primary source analysis activities and as part of their final research paper. This will involve making use of library resources to locate and obtain relevant materials.

Genre and Audience: Students will learn to distinguish between and practice writing and presenting in multiple genres with distinct audiences: film reviews, research papers, blog posts, etc.

Revision: Through instructor feedback and peer-editing activities, students will learn approaches for effectively editing their own writing and speaking, identifying problem areas, and setting strategies for improvement.

Collaboration: Students will have multiple opportunities to edit and engage with each other's written and oral work in a productive fashion. In class we will practice strategies for critical collaboration through peer-editing activities, focusing on how to give and receive constructive feedback while setting goals for improving writing.

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.

Primary Source Analysis Assignments: **(2 pages each x 3 assignments for 6 pages total)**: Primary source analysis activities are designed to introduce students to skills used by historians and historians of science. Each activity will present students with a set of primary sources and a series of prompts that require them to situate the 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. If in-person instruction continues they will be in-class activities. When there is a shift to online instruction they should 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.

Blog Posts: (2 pages each x 5 assignments for 10 pages total) Blog posts are your opportunity to experiment with a mixture of creative and critical 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.

Presenting a Pandemic: (5-minute presentation) False and misleading narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic run rampant today. Learning how to critically evaluate and clearly present complex data about the virus, its origins, and its impacts is crucial. For this assignment you will be required to read, analyze, critique, and present one article (from an academic journal in any discipline) that deals directly with the pandemic. Your presentation should offer a detailed account not only of the article's findings and argument, but also its sources, methods, data, etc. Beyond simply summarizing the article, you should take a critical perspective on its claims, assumptions, and blind spots, and you should elaborate on its wider stakes and importance for understanding and approaching the pandemic. Your presentation should include a slide show with visuals, including at least one chart, photograph, or data visualization (preferably from the article) which you will be expected to contextualize in the presentation.

Students must record their presentations using video capture software (Kaltura) with screen sharing enabled. The presentation videos must be uploaded to canvas by **10/6**.

Film Review: (5 pages) You will prepare a critical review of a film of your choosing that deals with questions of environmental disaster. These reviews should go beyond summaries of the films or assessments of performative or directorial decisions to consider how each film represents "disaster" as a political, social, and cultural event.

Draft 1: For In-class Peer **10/22**

Final Draft: For Instructor **10/27**

Research Paper and Presentation: (10 pages + 7-minute presentation) 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

case study of a particular disaster of your choosing that uses the analytic and argumentative skills developed over the course of the semester.

Research Proposal and Bibliography (2-3 pages total): 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 the sources, including primary sources, that you plan to refer to. Due: **11/5**

Draft 1: (at least 7 pages) For In-class Peer Review: **11/19**

Revised Version: (10 Pages and Bibliography) **12/10**

Practice Presentation: **11/24**

Final Presentation: (7 minutes with Slides or other Visual Component): Present your research findings in a 7-10-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: **12/8-12/10**

Grade Distribution

A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
93.0– 100%	88.0– 92.99%	83.0– 87.99%	78.0– 82.99%	78.0– 82.99%	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%
- Presenting a Pandemic— 10%
- Film Review — 15%
- Final Presentation — 15%
- Research Paper—25%
- Blog Posts and Primary Source Analysis — 20%

Course Requirements & Policies

Course Canvas Site: Please consult the HISCI 280 Canvas website frequently. All announcements will be posted there, as will important handouts and links to other sites. **Blog posts should be posted in the “Discussion” tab of the course website. If and when we shift to remote instruction, our synchronous sessions will all take place in BBCollaborate Ultra and can be accessed via the BBCollaborate Ultra Tab in Canvas.**

Communication: You are encouraged to communicate your questions and concerns to the instructor, and it is strongly preferred **that you use 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 will take place from 12-2pm on Wednesday and should be scheduled online beforehand in the Appointments section of the Canvas Calendar.

Attendance: **Attendance this semester is complicate matter.** While you are expected to attend all class meetings, there is an understanding that students are experiencing unprecedented constraints and difficulties. At the same time, your regular participation is essential for making instruction meaningful. If you are not able to attend class, please be in touch as soon as possible. If you become ill, please contact the instructor to arrange some form of accommodation.

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.

Privacy and Use of Audio/Video Recordings: Lecture materials and recordings for HISCI 222 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 HISC 280 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.

If you are having connectivity issues for online sessions please see:
<https://it.wisc.edu/news/home-internet-connection-doctor-service/>

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.

COVID Specific Policies

Students' Rules [Rights, & Responsibilities](#)

During the global COVID-10 pandemic, we must prioritize our collective health and safety to keep ourselves, our campus, and our community safe. As a university community, we must work together to prevent the spread of the virus and to promote the collective health and welfare of our campus and surrounding community.

UW-Madison [Badger Pledge](#)

UW-Madison [Face Covering Guidelines](#)

While on campus all employees and students are required to wear [appropriate and properly fitting face coverings](#) while present in any campus building unless working alone in a laboratory or office space.

Face Coverings During In-person Instruction Statement (COVID-19)

Individuals are expected to wear a face covering while inside any university building. Face coverings must be [worn correctly](#) (i.e., covering both your mouth and nose) in the building if you are attending class in person. If any student is unable to wear a face-covering, an accommodation may be provided due to disability, medical condition, or other legitimate reason.

Students with disabilities or medical conditions who are unable to wear a face covering should contact the [McBurney Disability Resource Center](#) or their Access Consultant if they are already affiliated. Students requesting an accommodation unrelated to disability or medical condition, should contact the Dean of Students Office.

Students who choose not to wear a face covering may not attend in-person classes, unless they are approved for an accommodation or exemption. All other students not wearing a face covering will be asked to put one on or leave the classroom. Students who refuse to wear face coverings appropriately or adhere to other stated requirements will be reported to the [Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards](#) and will not be allowed to return to the classroom until they agree to comply with the face covering policy. An instructor may cancel or suspend a

course in-person meeting if a person is in the classroom without an approved face covering in position over their nose and mouth and refuses to immediately comply.

The History Department has directed instructors to halt the class and, if necessary, leave the classroom if anyone in the room is not wearing a properly fitted mask.

Quarantine or Isolation Due to COVID-19

Students should continually monitor themselves for COVID-19 [symptoms](#) and [get tested for the virus](#) if they have symptoms or have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19. Students should reach out to instructors as soon as possible if they become ill or need to isolate or quarantine, in order to make alternate plans for how to proceed with the course. Students are strongly encouraged to communicate with their instructor concerning their illness and the anticipated extent of their absence from the course (either in-person or remote). The instructor will work with the student to provide alternative ways to complete the course work.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Course Overview

9/3: Course Introduction

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

9/8: **Primary Source Analysis:** 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?

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

9/10: **Blog Post Due:** What are the implications of describing a disaster as “natural”, “social”, or “political”?

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

Reading: Avis A. Jones-Deweever and Heidi Hartman, “Abandoned Before the Storm” in *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, Chester W. Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds. 85-102 (Taylor & Francis, 2006).

Listen to two of the recorded survivor accounts on <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5704652>

Week 3: Witnessing Disaster / Visualizing Disaster

9/15: Primary source analysis 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?

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

9/17: Reading: Study and be prepared to discuss at least three of the data visualizations from each of the following Websites. 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? What stylistic choices do you notice and what possible reasons for them can you infer?:

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

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

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

Week 4: Wildfires and Geographies of Class

9/22: Blog Post Due: Respond to “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn.” Does Davis make his case? Why or why not?

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

Reading: 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>.

Reading: 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>.

9/24: Library Primary Sources Analysis Workshop

Week 5: Presenting Pandemics

9/29: Reading: “Part 2” (pg. 90-117), Rob Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Influenza, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

10/1: Reading: 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).

Week 6: Representations of Disaster in Film

10/6: Reading: Despina Kakoudaki, “Representing Politics in Disaster Films,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 7, no. 3 (December 2011): 349–56.

Pandemic Presentations Videos Due

10/8: Film: *2012* (2009 film)

Week 7: Disaster Colonialism and Disaster Capitalism

10/13: Reading: 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.

10/15: Blog Post Due: 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?

Reading: 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/

Reading: Naomi Klein, “Coronavirus Capitalism — and How to Beat It,” *The Intercept*, March 16, 2020,
<https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-capitalism/>.

Week 8: Disasters and National Identity

10/20: Reading: 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).

10/22: **Draft 1 of Film Review Due for In-class Peer Review**

Week 9: Humanitarianism and the Aftermath of Disaster

10/27: **Final Draft of Film Review Due**

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

10/29: Blog Post Due: 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?

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

Week 10: Cultures of Disaster Response in Latin America

11/3: Reading: Mark A. Healey, “‘The Measure of Our National Solidarity’ The Aid Campaign and the Rise of Perón,” in *The Ruins of the New Argentina: Peronism and the Remaking of San Juan after the 1944 Earthquake*, 66-86 (Duke UP, 2011).

11/5: **Research Paper Proposal and Bibliography Due; In-class Workshop**

Reading: 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).

Week 11: Enviro-Technical Disasters and Causal Complexity

11/10: Primary Source Analysis 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?

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

11/12: Reading: Sara B. Pritchard, “An Envirotechnical Disaster: Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima” *Environmental History* 17 (April 2012): 219-243.

Week 12: Extinction Events

11/17: Reading: Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Sixth Extinction?,” *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2009,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/25/the-sixth-extinction>.

11/19: Research Paper Draft 1 Due to Peers; *In-class Peer Review Activity*

Week 13: Practice Oral Presentations

11/24: Practice Final Oral Presentation Workshop (outline)

Week 14: Disaster, Climate Change, and the Problem of Scale

12/1: Reading: Mike Hulme, “Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism,” *Osiris* 26: 1, *Klima* (2011): 245-266.

Reading: Anne McClintock, “Too Big to See with the Naked Eye,” *Guernica*, December 20, 2012, <https://www.guernicamag.com/anne-mcclintock-too-big-to-see-with-the-naked-eye/>.

12/3: Reading: Robert Fletcher, “Capitalizing on Chaos: Climate Change and Disaster Capitalism,” *Ephemera; Leicester* 12, no. 1/2 (May 2012): 97–112.

Blog Post: 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 15: Disaster Futures

12/8: Final Oral Presentations Part I

12/10: Final Oral Presentations Part II / Final Paper Due