Course Description:
This course explores the role cultural responses play in synthesizing disaster. We will focus on two central twenty-first century disasters, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, as case studies for what we might expect in subsequent twenty-first century disasters as well as lenses through which we can examine recurring motifs within literature and popular culture, patterns of media coverage, and injustices of government missteps. The texts we will use are both written and pictorial, and sometimes both; the two together are commanding, as visual offerings have become as central as verbal presentations in our contemporary culture.

Five Questions:
1. What can we learn about disaster in the twenty-first century by comparing two massive catastrophes that are quite unlike each other?
2. If disaster's greatest impact comes after the enormous event that is so disruptive, how can we anticipate the social response to natural calamities?
3. How has media representation come to determine our memory of disaster?
4. How do film, literature, and photography contribute differently to our understanding of cultural responses to disaster?
5. What ethical responsibilities do cultural representations of disaster have, if any?

Objectives:
Students who take this course will develop a deeper understanding of how to critically read both literature and popular culture texts. They will understand how the presentation of disaster itself raises numerous questions of interpretation and analysis. They will gain practice in constructing arguments by drawing on precise examples from a variety of source material (film, literature, photography, journalism, political speeches and policies, and various academic discourses) as well as practice successful collaboration within a group project. Most of all, however, students will hone critical thinking skills that integrate multiple disciples to engage real world problems.

Required Texts:
Patricia Smith - *Blood Dazzler* (2008)
Method and Grading:

• **Blogging (20%)**
  You will receive an invitation to our class blog after our first class; this blog is not a public forum and will be accessible only to those enrolled in our class. For weeks three through thirteen, I will post a question pertaining to our assigned readings. Over the course of the semester, you must respond to a minimum of 6 questions as well as respond to a minimum of 4 of your classmates' posts. Your responses should be between 250-350 words each.

• **Synthesis Papers (20%)**
  After the final class of our study of each major disaster, you will have one week to submit a 4-5 page paper that synthesizes material of your choice from our readings and class activities. This paper must move beyond restating class discussion and instead pursue new connections within our materials.

• **Group Project (20%)**
  In self-selected groups of 3-5 students, you will research a cultural response to a disaster. Modeling the methods of critical analysis utilized in class readings and discussions, your group will prepare a 20-30 minute presentation that (1) provides the class with necessary background information, (2) teaches at least three texts (a poem, short story, short excerpt from a novel or memoir, photograph, film clip, newspaper article, political speech, etc.), (3) synthesize said texts to illustrate the claim your group has developed as its thesis.

• **Final Paper (40%)**
  Due on the day of our final exam, your final paper in the class must be 7-10 research-based pages. This paper can be (a) an extension of an earlier synthesis paper or your work within your group project, or (b) focus on cultural responses to a disaster not discussed in our coursework or presentations.

Weekly Learning Experience:

*In the first two weeks of the course we will become familiar with the idea of disaster as well as explore critical approaches to the study of disaster from several academic disciplines, such as the humanities and social sciences.*

• **Week One - What is disaster? How are we to respond?**
  I will introduce the course as well as the essential questions which will guide our study of disaster. You will spend some time writing in reaction to disaster rendered in different mediums (text, image, and sound).

• **Week Two - What informs our discussions of disaster?**
  Each student will be responsible for reading three critical articles or book chapters as well as writing a rhetorical précis for one assigned article/chapter on disaster. During class we will work to assemble a critical toolkit from our readings that will be useful throughout the course. We will consider, for example, the introduction to E. Ann Kaplan's *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, chapters from Philip Buckle's *What is Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions*, and chapters from Charles Perrow's 2011 *The Next Catastrophe: Reducing our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters.*
In the next four weeks we will study the disaster of 9/11 through various cultural responses. The first two weeks are devoted to works that literally respond to the disaster. The final two weeks explore the wars that resulted from 9/11 in two distinctly different (yet uneasily linked) ways, torture at Abu Ghraib and children whose fathers are away at war. All of the selected pieces focus on the central role the image plays in twenty-first century culture. At the culmination of these four weeks, you will write your first synthesis paper.

• Week Three - *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
  This week we will study Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), an experimental mix of text, color, and image. The novel chronicles the explorations of Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old child, in his attempt to solve a mystery involving a key belonging to his father who died in the attacks of September 11. We will also read Toni Morrison's "The Dead of September 11" and Dori Laub's "September 11, 2001: An Event without a Voice" to frame our discussion of the mixed critical reception of Foer's novel.

• Week Four - *September 11*
  This week we will watch and analyze several of the short films that make up the collection *September 11* (2004). *September 11* collects the commissioned work of eleven different global filmmakers charged with the task of responding to the disaster of 9/11.

• Week Five - *Abu Ghraib Torture Photographs*
  In preparation for this week we will examine several chapters from W.J.T. Mitchell's *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Our focus will be not only the Abu Ghraib torture photographs (2003) but also their complicated similarities to lynching photographs from the first half of the twentieth century.

• Week Six - *Refresh, Refresh*
  Danica Novgorodoff’s 2009 graphic novel *Refresh, Refresh* is our focus this week. An adaptation of Benjamin Percy's short story of the same name, *Refresh, Refresh* is the story of three high school boys who, on the verge of adulthood, must figure out how to navigate a world in which their fathers are away at war.

The next two weeks provide a brief reprieve from assigned readings to allow your group to begin your project and its necessary readings and research.

• Week Seven - "Fear Itself"
  To introduce your group project we will look at a representation of a disaster in miniature. First, however, we will read Robert Pinsky's poem "9/11," a meditation on American popular culture. Then we will turn to "Fear Itself," a portrait of George Zimmerman in Skittles that artist Andy Bell made in response to the shooting of Treyvon Martin in 2012. We will also Skype with Bell for a brief lecture and Q&A. This will springboard our brainstorming of potential topics for group projects.

• Week Eight - Spring Break

In the next five weeks we will study the disaster of Hurricane Katrina through various cultural responses. Beginning the first two weeks with background information and photojournalism, we will then turn to poetry, documentary film, and a graphic novel. Through all texts, issues of class
and race will be central to our discussion. At the culmination of these five weeks, you will write
your second synthesis paper.

- **Week Nine - Can disaster be natural?**
  This week we will turn to chapters from *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (2006), selected essays from *American Quarterly*'s September 2009 issue entitled "In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina," and chapter two from Charles Perrow's 2011 *The Next Catastrophe: Reducing our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters* to open up discussions of class and race that the next four weeks will continue.

- **Week Ten - Katrina Photographs**
  Before coming to class this week, please post to our class blog a photograph from Katrina that depicts either an issue of race or class (such as those by Joseph Rodriguez). During class we will compare and contrast these photographs with iconic photographs from the Great Depression by photographers such as Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and Margaret Bourke-White to talk about the role of media in framing disaster and shaping national narratives.

- **Week Eleven - Blood Dazzler**
  Patricia Smith's *Blood Dazzler* (2008) includes poems written from multiple points of view including the hurricane. Though we'll discuss many, "The President Flies Over," "Buried," and "Up on the Roof," and "Ethel's Sestina" will be emphasized.

- **Week Twelve - When the Levee Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts**
  This week we will be viewing segments from Spike Lee's 2006 documentary about Katrina.

- **Week Thirteen - A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge**
  Josh Neufeld's 2009 graphic novel is our focus this week. He renders in comics the stories of seven real survivors. We'll also listen to portions of episode #296, "After the Flood," of the radio show *This American Life* to hear other survivor testimony.

The final three weeks of the course will be focused on your group project and individual final paper.

- **Week Fourteen - Roundtable**
  For class this week we will engage in a group brainstorming session for each individual research paper. The purpose of this exercise is to benefit from the collective knowledge of the class. Each student will give a brief overview of his or her final paper and the class will offer feedback, suggest other texts or critical sources, and help troubleshoot problems.

- **Week Fifteen - Group Presentations**

- **Week Sixteen - Final Exam**
  Final paper is due via email during your scheduled final exam time for this course.