

**Oil and Water: Literature, Science, and Disaster**  
AMST 301/ENGL 341  
Spring 2011

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Office hours in HEAV 325B  
Monday, Wednesday, 11:30-12:30 and by appointment

If there was no New Orleans, America would just be a bunch of free people dying of boredom  
--Judy Deck, qtd in Chris Rose, *I Dead in Attic*

Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August, 2005. Afterward, residents of New Orleans and the Gulf coast who survived relocated, returned, rebuilt. In the more than five years since the disaster, Katrina and its effects have been discussed, described, and debated. Musicians, artists, filmmakers, and writers have found in Katrina a kind of muse—terrifying and inspirational.

When the extent of the storm's destruction was understood, the overwhelming consensus in the region and in the nation was that something precious had been wounded. The overwhelming determination was that the region and New Orleans in particular should persist as a community, a cultural center, even a spiritual force deeply meaningful to the United States as a whole.

When the Deepwater Horizon oil rig blew up on April 20, 2010 and began spewing millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf, the new disaster hit a region still recovering—if not still reeling—from Katrina's devastation. Some have argued that the disasters are linked in geographic, environmental, economic, political or even spiritual terms. As with the aftermath of Katrina, cleanup and recovery from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill will take years. Perhaps, as with Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon disaster will also become a muse for creative expression. Certainly, as with Katrina, the disaster has and will spark controversy.

It is our task this semester to understand the events and to analyze the responses to them, whether political, economic, environmental, or (especially) creative. Most importantly, we will seek to understand the connections between the Gulf region and our own, to see the currents of our national character—both the good and the bad—that the events have laid bare, and to see just how the nation as a whole has been exposed, affected, and changed by the terrible events of 2005 and 2010.

Texts (all at Von's Books)

Nicole Cooley, *Breach*

Josh Neufeld, *A.D.: After the Deluge*

Joe Longo, Jarret Lofstead, eds, *Year Zero*

Richard Misrach, *Destroy This Memory*

## Schedule

YOU WILL NOTICE THAT SOME WEEKS ARE NOT YET COMPLETELY DESCRIBED. THIS OUTLINE OF READINGS, DISCUSSIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS WILL CHANGE IN RESPONSE TO STUDENT AND PROFESSOR INTERESTS, RESEARCH, OR TO CURRENT EVENTS.

Jan. 10-14

M Introduction to the course

Assignments (due each of the next class meetings): as you think about today's presentation and discussion and as you read the assignments for Wednesday, keep a running list of topics of interest, directions for research, and issues that you would like to see the class tackle this semester (basically, your reading notes) and respond to the questions posed below. Please type the assignment (times new roman, 12-point; 1-inch margins. Name, class number in upper right hand corner of the page).

W Readings on why New Orleans matters; syllabus planning

Chris Rose, "Who We Are, 9/6/05" from *I Dead in Attic* (Blackboard)

Guide book readings about the Gulf Coast (Blackboard)

Teaching the Levees, lesson 1, pp. 21-24. Found here:

[http://www.teachingthelevees.org/Teaching\\_The\\_Levees.pdf](http://www.teachingthelevees.org/Teaching_The_Levees.pdf)

Questions to consider: we see here three different genres representing the broad significance and meaning of the Gulf Coast region. What do they argue is the value of the region? What do they have in common and how do they differ? How does the form of representation affect our understanding of the region? What assumptions does each piece make about its audience and what strategies does each employ to make the reader care about the region?

F Readings on why New Orleans matters; syllabus planning

Kara Walker, from *After the Deluge* (Blackboard)

Patricia Smith, "Prologue—And Then She Owns You," from *Blood Dazzler* (Blackboard)

Louis Armstrong, "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans," here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXFFI9budNI>

Questions to consider: here we have three more (radical) forms that represent southern Louisiana and Katrina. How would you describe the form each uses? What assumptions does each piece make about its audience, and what (if anything) are they trying to persuade the reader/viewer to believe, care about, understand?

Sometime this week there will be a screening of *When the Levees Broke*. Date and time TBA

January 17-21

M Martin Luther King Day, no class meeting

W *When the Levees Broke* discussion

F Film discussion, continued

January 24-28

- M Film discussion, continued
- W *Times-Picayune* reporting from August 29-November 9, 2005 (specifics TBA)
- F *Times-Picayune* reporting

January 31-Feb. 4

- M *Times-Picayune* reporting
- W Richard Harris, the NPR science journalist who first broke the news that the BP oil spill was many times greater in scale than was being claimed, will be here at the end of the week. We'll read/listen to his and other news reporting (specifics TBA)

Thursday, February 3: Richard Harris will give public talk on the Oil Spill, place and time TBD

- F Richard Harris visit to class

February 7-11

- M Neufeld, *A.D.*  
From Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Blackboard)
- W *A.D.* discussion
- F Class cancelled to compensate for Richard Harris presentation last week.

February 14-18

- M *A.D.* wrap up / Bross reports on Florida Oil Spill conference
- W Professor Tom Hallock visit  
Jennifer Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.," here:  
[http://www.believmag.com/issues/200604/?read=article\\_price](http://www.believmag.com/issues/200604/?read=article_price);  
Price, "An Urban Denizen ...," here: <http://www.grist.org/article/price2/>  
Anne Whiston Spirn, "Restoring Mill Creek: Landscape Literacy, Environmental Justice and City" (Blackboard)
- F Readings TBA

February 21-25

- M *Breach*
- W *Breach*
- F *Breach*

February 28-March 4

- M Professor Nicole Cooley visit
- W Sheryl St. Germain, "Midnight Oil" (Blackboard) and her essay "First Person," here: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05250/566601.stm#ixzz1AAtLgcWA>
- F Professor Steve Wereley visit, readings TBA  
Due: Short research project due

March 7-11

- M Lay responses to the science of the oil spill (Blackboard)
- W Meet with Professor Daniel Aldrich's Public Policy class (place TBA)

Readings: "Fixing Recovery: Social Capital in Post-Crisis Resilience" which is available online at [http://works.bepress.com/daniel\\_aldrich/7/](http://works.bepress.com/daniel_aldrich/7/).

F Professor Steve Wereley visit; discussion of oilspillhub logs.

March 14-18  
SPRING BREAK

March 21-25

M Visual imaging of nature/disaster

Readings: "Unknown Quantities," Peter Galison and Caroline A. Jones. *Artforum*. New York: Nov 2010, vol 49, issue 3: 49-53. (Blackboard)

W Visual imaging, continued

Due: Disaster recovery analysis

Thursday, March 24, Roundtable discussion of oil spill videos

F Class cancelled to compensate for panel discussion

March 28-30

M Presidential commission reports (Blackboard)

W commission reports, continued

F BP response/ads (Blackboard)

April 4-9

M *Destroy this Memory*

Due: 1-page proposal for your final project

W *Destroy*, continued

F *Destroy*, continued

April 11-15

M *Year Zero*

W *Year Zero*

F *Year Zero*

April 18-22

M Readings of a novel/fiction/play, TBA

W final text, continued

F Final text, continued

Due: Final project

April 25-29

Final text wrap up

Final class forum presenting your research projects (time, day TBA)

## Assignments:

### Quizzes/Final (20%)

There will be frequent (at least weekly) quizzes asking questions designed to test your preparation for class discussion (which will be evaluated fairly strictly) and prompts asking you to speculate in order to spark conversation (these will be evaluated with more latitude). You must be in class to take the quiz; I will not offer make up quizzes for absences. In case of illness or other emergency, let me know as soon as possible that you will be missing class, and I will take your circumstances into consideration. Students who have less than a B (85%) average on these quizzes at the end of the semester will sit a final exam, and the exam grade will be substituted for their quiz average.

### Academic hosting (15%)

We will have several experts visiting our class this semester. Small groups will be assigned to host each of them. These groups will research the speakers, suggest reading assignments for the class, introduce them to the class on the day of the visit, be responsible for leading the Q&A session, and, if possible, for taking the speaker out for coffee or lunch. Afterward, each member of the group will submit a 1-2 page discussion of the information pertinent to our study that he or she gleaned from the presentation and the group as a whole will submit a bibliography of sources consulted.

Our speakers:                    Richard Harris, science reporter, NPR  
   Professor Thomas Hallock, English, University of South Florida  
   Professor Steve Wereley, Mechanical Engineering, Purdue  
   Professor and poet Nicole Cooley,  
   Professor Daniel Aldrich, political science, Purdue  
   Professor Lance Duerfahrd, English, Purdue  
   Professor Shannon McMullen, VPA, Purdue  
   Professor Fabian Winkler, VPA, Purdue

### Disaster survival / recovery plan analysis (10%)

Professor Aldrich will introduce us to the idea of “social capital” as a specific resource necessary for a neighborhood or community to recover after a disaster, but of course, the individuals and infrastructure can’t recover unless they have survived. Choose a community in which you are or were member (Purdue, your residence hall, neighborhood, small town, fraternity/sorority, church, high school, place of employment, etc.), research its disaster preparedness and assess its resources for recovery. Write a 3-4 page report in which you briefly summarize your community’s emergency plans and its resources (especially its social capital). Next, analyze the plan for strengths or weaknesses. You may want to consider who has generated the plan—and if there isn’t one, consider why it doesn’t exist. What specific recommendations can you make to increase the possibility of your community’s survival and recovery from a disaster?

### Short research project (15%)

Topics for these projects will be generated by me and by the class in discussion. I have brainstormed a preliminary list, below. 3-5 page reports should be turned in to me by March 11 (they can be turned in early). In addition, you should prepare an in-class presentation on your research (5-10 minutes), which you can schedule any time up until April 15. You may work

individually or in small groups, but if you choose to work as a group, the paper will be scaled up in size. The following topics are suggestions; other topics of your own creating are also possible. Choose your topic with an eye to bringing something to class discussion that will extend and/or challenge what we are already studying.

#### Possible Topics

- Construction of an annotated bibliography of fiction or creative works related to Deepwater Horizon or Katrina that we can use as a ballot to decide the readings for the final two weeks of the class (this one especially could be a small group project)
- Survey/analysis of *Times-Picayune* reporting for August-November 2005 with recommendations for January 26-31 class reading assignments
- Review of/research into *Year Zero* with recommendations for April 11-15 class reading assignments
- Standard Oil of Indiana
- Red Cross work in response to both disasters
- Review of *Teaching the Levees* curriculum as a whole
- Differing effects on wildlife in southern Louisiana/gulf coast (in conjunction with a trip to learn about the Atlantic bottle-nosed dolphins at the Indianapolis zoo, perhaps?)
- Trace the routes and fates of the southern Louisiana post-Katrina diaspora. Have any/many from the region ended up in our own region?
- Gulf of Mexico oil industry and its connections to the southern Louisiana population and economy (*Teaching the Levees* will give you some bibliographic starting points)
- The significance of Drew Brees and the New Orleans Saints, post-Katrina

#### Oilspillhub log assignment (10%)

Each member of the class will be assigned a range of 5 hours from the videos collected on Oilspillhub.org. You will screen the 5 hours and keep a log of “moments of interest” as outlined by Professor Wereley in his presentation to us on March 4.

#### Final projects (20%)

These projects will result in 8-10 page critical essays or in an alternative project of similar scope, determined in consultation with me. I will want a 1-page description of your project in writing by March 28, but you can turn it in a prospectus for my comments at any time.

- Traditional research paper on topic you develop in consultation with me (i.e. comparison of reporting on the two disasters; comparison of other disasters to one Katrina or the oil spill [earlier hurricanes (especially Betsy) or Chilean miners, for example]; research presidential speeches in response; research other photographic collections. Compare “art” photos to photojournalism; read all of *Blood Dazzler* and analyze; watch episodes of *Treme* or Spike Lee’s sequel and analyze; compare print to film representations of the disaster(s), etc.
- Create an anthology of Katrina/Deepwater/some combination with a critical introduction that explains the audience for the anthology, its goals, and its criteria

- for inclusion or exclusion. Provide an annotation for each entry in the anthology (and a copy of shorter pieces that may be hard for me to locate).
- Service-learning project (if you have connections/interest. This option requires my early approval). This could range from working for the local Red Cross to developing and implementing a K-12-based presentation, etc., etc. If you want to do community based work, I will give you some readings that discuss the philosophies for such research. Also, you should know that there are grants of up to \$1000 awarded by Purdue to competitive student projects. See me ASAP if interested!
  - Class documentarian: in consultation with me, create and maintain a course website; post notes, events, e-chat, etc. The final part of the project will be documentation of and a critical review of our final projects forum.
  - Write a syllabus for the next generation of a Katrina/Deepwater class (or for a high school version), including a critical introduction. In addition to content development, you'll also want to do some research into pertinent scholarship of teaching.
  - Create a soundtrack for the semester—or for either the Deepwater or the Katrina part of the semester. With critical liner notes and an introduction.
  - Construct an essay arguing for elements of New Orleans's or southern Louisiana's culture as candidates for the UN's "intangible cultural heritage." For a description, see here:  
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=EN&pg=home>  
 Build on the oilspillhub assignment, logging what you see and offering a critical analysis of it as a visualization of the spill. This possibility will be undertaken under Professor Wereley's mentorship
  - Write a detailed critical review of a major statement—film, book, work of art—having to do with Deepwater Horizon or Katrina.

#### Participation (10%)

I will ask you to sign in at the start of each class, and this log along with the quizzes will register your attendance. But to earn an A in this category, you will need to go beyond simply showing up. An A in participation reflects your preparation for class discussion and your verbal and written contributions to that discussion. I expect that you will come to class having read the assigned texts thoughtfully, and I expect that you will have a copy of those texts with you to refer to during discussion. If you know that you are not a ready speaker in group settings, see me early on to arrange for other ways to register your contributions to the class discussion. Finally, this grade will include your presentation at the final class forum.

Course Policy on Honesty and Plagiarism: As the 2002-2003 University Regulations state, "our foremost interest is toward achieving noble educational goals" (50). I believe that striving to understand and appreciate (with fair-minded criticism) our early American forebears through their written and cultural expression is a noble enterprise. I believe that you will best achieve such understanding and appreciation by reading regularly (even doggedly) through the assigned texts, participating in open discussions inside and outside of class and—perhaps most importantly—by wrestling with early American language and ideas in written work created expressly for this class (that is, you are writing new assignments within the context of this

English class rather than recycling material written at other times or for other classes), using your own intuition, building on your own textual observations for proof, and sometimes, relying on other peoples' ideas as scaffolding, building blocks, skeletons, frames, etc. When you turn to this latter strategy, which is itself a perfectly respectable, even noble academic practice, you should give these other people credit for having gone before you and made your ideas possible.

The problem is, of course, that not everyone has had the kind of introduction to research and citation practices that I assume. How many of us take the time to read through Purdue's Code of Honor or to wade through a standard handbook's explanation of plagiarism and proper citation? (If you lack such a handbook, see the OWL's nifty page:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/plag.html>). As a professor, I routinely direct students to these sources for information about staying on the side of truth and light for assignments in my class—I hope you'll take the time to remind yourself of their contents up front. I assume that you've had an introduction to basic research and citation techniques. I evaluate assignments and grade accordingly. If I find plagiarized material in your work, I will forward the details of the problem to the Dean's Office, and I will assign penalties ranging from a redo on the assignment, a grade of F on the assignment, to an F in the class. Please come and see me if you are a) unsure about how to make proper citations—bring in a past paper if you like, and we can work through it—or b) overwhelmed by an assignment and are starting to get panicky about its completion; the temptation to plagiarize can be overwhelming at such times. While I most likely will not be setting aside time in class to talk about research approaches and citation issues, I am very happy to help you figure these things out on your own, in small groups, or in office hours.

### Campus Emergencies

In the event of a major campus emergency, course requirements, deadlines and grading percentages are subject to changes that may be necessitated by a revised semester calendar or other circumstances. Here are ways to get information about changes in this course: my website: <http://kristinabross.weebly.com/>, our Blackboard site, my email address: [kbross@purdue.edu](mailto:kbross@purdue.edu).

Baum, *Nine Lives*

Kara Walker, *After the Deluge*

Piazza, *City of Refuge*

Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*

Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*

*Life in the Wake*

*Queen City Jazz*

*Streetcar Named Desire*