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## Spring 2020 James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the graduate student instructor submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (second place winners, if any, will receive \$150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics. These sequences probably represent work assigned during a portion of the course rather than all of the essay assignments distributed over an entire semester. Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you prepare students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community. Winning entries will be deposited in the Knight Institute's web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See [creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org) for more information about cc licensing.)

To facilitate future searching of the Institute's archive, we ask that you provide a brief descriptive abstract (about 75 words) of your document, and a short list of appropriate keywords that might not appear in the text. Examples might include terms like "rhetorical situation," "style," "citation," etc. **Any borrowings such as quotations from course texts or handbooks must be cited properly in the document itself.**

Applicants should post this application and their materials to our Canvas site by 5:00 pm on Tuesday, May 26. Follow the link below to access the Canvas site and upload application materials

<https://canvas.cornell.edu/enroll/ARJAWN>

## Spring 2020 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

Instr name Austin Lord Form of Address (circle): **Mr.** Ms. Mx. Other \_\_\_\_\_

Dept & Course # ANTHR 1101-106

Course title "Disasters & Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times"

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Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the assignment sequence in a web accessible archive and make it available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna Newton ([dlo1@cornell.edu](mailto:dlo1@cornell.edu)) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning sequence upon submission of the electronic text.

Cultivating Disaster Literacy: Concepts, Ethics, Vulnerabilities, Temporalities

Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature  Date 1/4/2020

*Application for the James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize**Submitted to the Knight Institute – Fall 2020***Cultivating Disaster Literacy: Concepts, Ethics, Vulnerabilities, Temporalities****Austin Lord****From ANTHR 1101-106 – “Disaster and Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times”****Abstract**

My first-year writing seminar and this sequence of assignments was designed to help students build critical thinking and writing skills that will help them communicate more clearly about the complexities of disaster, climate change, and environmental uncertainties – within and beyond the classroom. Through these assignments, my students developed a unique kind of ‘disaster literacy’ that will help them compose accounts of disaster and climate change that are rigorous, perceptive, socially nuanced, and ethically composed.

**Keywords:** critical disaster studies, ethics of storytelling, social and environmental justice, ethnofiction, time and temporality, citational practice

**Overview**

For my first-year writing seminar, I designed a sequence of writing assignments intended to help cultivate a greater level of ‘disaster literacy’ (one of the course objectives) among my students, while also creating room for alternating between different modes of writing (e.g. analytical/expository and creative/descriptive writing). I also tried to build a bit of flexibility into the assignment sequence, so as to give students a few different options to choose from, as per their interests. The following is an overview of the first four major writing assignments and two of the writing exercises/mini-assignments that I created, which I would like to submit for your consideration for the James Slevin Prize. Each and all of these assignments and exercises were designed in the context of the first two units of the course – which focused on ‘Foundational Concepts’ and ‘Dimensions of Disaster’, respectively. Here, I provide a rough narrative overview which describes the connections between these various assignments and exercises, and which shows how they built on one another as we moved forward with the course.

The first two assignments of the course (referred to as 1A and 1B) were designed to achieve complementary objectives – both are foundational to this course, and both reflect principles that are central to my pedagogical approach. In brief, Assignment 1A examined the ways that concepts (even those that seem most foundational or central to our analyses) are mutable and ever-evolving in relation to discourse - encouraging students to be aware that concepts take shape at the intersection multiple perspectives and definitions, to prepare them to engage in deconstructive and reconstructive analyses,

and to remind them that their concepts too are open to change. Assignment 1B focused on the importance of ethical considerations (particularly when writing in the context of crises or disaster, or when working with or writing about vulnerable communities) – imploring students that we must try to keep ethics in mind at all times, but also that we should also try to make room for ethical and empathetic reorientations in response to new experiences and uncertainty. One of the principal objectives, spanning these first two assignments, was to help students realize that there are no fixed definitions, right answers, or rigid ‘one-size fits all’ ethical frameworks – that understanding is a situated and adaptive process, a path of inquiry rather than a destination.

After students handed in Assignment 1A and 1B, but before they were required to submit Assignments 2 and 3, I gave them two shorter ‘writing exercises’ (in fact, detailed mini-assignments) that were designed to help spark more creative and descriptive writing skills. These two exercises, “Writing with Photographs” and “Objects in Crisis: Tracing Entanglements” are described in more detail below. But briefly, these exercises were designed to help students ‘warm up’ for the next two assignments, which required a greater degree of creative writing.

For Assignments 2 and 3, students were asked to experiment with more narrative and creative (yet theoretically informed) forms of writing - though for each Assignment students had two options, each in a different genre). Both of these Assignments focused on the lived experience of disaster by grounding the more conceptual literature in specific case studies, embodied experiences, and situated vulnerabilities – in short, trending toward an ethnographic style of writing and analysis. In Assignment 2, students were asked to describe the ways that specific communities experience disaster vulnerabilities by mapping out the dimensions of post-disaster aftermaths – some wrote timely op-eds and some wrote more speculative journalistic accounts. In Assignment 3, students were asked to consider the ways that we reckon the times of disaster – how disaster shapes experiences of time and vice versa. For Assignment 3, students were also able to choose a highly collaborative option that introduced them to some of the joys and perils of co-authorship – creating a situation where the cross-pollination of ideas.

Considered as a group, these four writing assignments and two exercises, constitute the official writing required during the first two-thirds of the course. It was my hope that these assignments would help students develop a diverse set of writing skills (and writing tactics) and build an analytical foundation (increasing their ‘disaster literacy’) that would serve them in the final third of the course (which focused on issues related to climate change) and beyond. In the end, I feel that this sequence did accomplish both of those tasks, as evidenced by their excellent submissions for the Final Assignment – titled “Reckoning Climate Change and Climate Futures” – which required this full array of writing skills and analytical tools, as well as attention to ethical considerations and questions.

### **Assignment 1A – “What is a Disaster?”**

The first assignment (‘Assignment 1A’) marks the beginning of our collective inquiry into the nature of concepts, by focusing on the deceptively simple definitional question: what is a disaster? While working on this exercise students will reflect on the multiple ways in which a disaster itself might be defined, considering questions of objectivity/subjectivity, questions of scale or intensity, etc. – and the first few sets of assigned readings will help them along on this journey. This first assignment is also designed to be a ‘Diagnostic Essay’ as defined by the Knight Institute – with more strict parameters and required components, that will help me evaluate student writing. Students will continue to revise, edit, and build from Assignment 1A several times (in response to my feedback and peer review) throughout the first two units of the semester – the first

### Assignment 1B – “Orientations: The Ethics of Writing about Disaster”

I created this second assignment (intentionally referred to as ‘Assignment 1B’, to signal to students that this was an equally foundational assignment) in order to prompt student reflection on the ethics of writing about disaster and engaging with disaster-affected people or communities. Some instructors might view these ethical considerations as too meta for an introductory course, locate them later on within a section on methodology toward the end of their class, or even just include them as a footnote or ‘further reading’. *But for me these considerations had to be front and central* – given my own firsthand experiences of disaster, disaster response, and disaster research over the past five years (e.g. Lord 2015, Lord et al 2016; Lord & Murton 2017; Lord & Bradley in press – with the two underlined publications also assigned as course readings).

In our class, we read a variety of materials focused on the ethics of post-disaster response, disaster research, and engagement (Barber & Haney 2016; Browne & Peek 2014; Browne et al 2020; Liboiron 2015; Seale-Feldman 2020). In short, I wanted students to be thinking about the politics of representation and the ethical issues inherent in gathering information and communicating about disaster as they proceed with the assignments that comprise the rest of the course. This exercise built on the conceptual foundation established in the first third of class and Assignment 1A, but was a bit more complicated and required a greater degree of reflexivity and self-awareness. It was also my hope that if any of my students ever experience a disaster firsthand, then they might remember this assignment and the main issues discussed. This, in my mind, is a critical part of and justification for the kind of ‘disaster literacy’ I sought to cultivate in the course – creating skills to act and write in critical, informed, and ethical ways in the wake of disaster.

### Writing Exercise 1 – “Writing with Photographs”

Both this writing exercise and the following exercise were designed to help students ‘warm up’ for Assignments 2 and 3 – both of which require a greater degree of creative and descriptive writing. For both exercises we began with an in-class exercise that served as a kind of walk through – which gave students some guidance and waypoints that will help them engage with the exercises.

For the first exercise I asked students to write creative/speculative descriptions in response to a series of ‘award winning’ photographs of disaster, which I will share without context or captions. These images were sourced from Reuters ‘Photos of the Year’ in the Disasters category, for 2018 - I intentionally didn’t want to use images from 2020, looking for a recent past, slightly removed. I will ask students to write a response to two of the six images provided. The first part was meant to be more creative, and the second part was more analytical, but building on their creativity – linking student perceptions and descriptions to questions about uneven vulnerabilities and divergent recovery pathways. Throughout this exercise, students were asked to keep our discussions about uneven disaster narratives (Assignment 1A) and the ethical considerations related to image-making and storytelling in mind (Assignment 1B).

### Writing Exercise 2 – Objects in Crisis: Tracing Entanglements

In this exercise, I asked students to *find* or *imagine* distinct and specific objects, and then to examine them through an *implosion* writing exercise – using the instructions and ‘implosion categories’ provided below. By imploding some of the objects that emerge or become in the wake of disaster, and my

tracing the ways they take on significance in stories about disaster – we begin to map the post-disaster landscape, from within. I oriented students to this exercise by asking them to read excerpts from Zeitoun (Egger– paying attention to the ways that certain objects stood out.

The aim of this exercise was to help students write creatively with and from objects - to critically examine details, imagine connections, and use these insights to build their own stories and narratives. Writing about objects can give us a place to begin, a place to anchor or pivot a story. Writing about objects can help us de-center narratives of disaster and bring our readers into a more sensory or haptic relationship with the worlds we describe.

This kind of ‘implosion’ exercise has a rich and glorious intellectual history - my own version of this exercise was adapted and expanded from an exercise that Prof. Rachel Prentice’s created for her course ‘The Anthropology of the Senses’ (which I took at Cornell in 2017), which was, in turn, adapted from earlier exercises and provocations imagined by Donna Haraway and Joseph Dumit (see Dumit 2014). In my version of this exercise, the goal was for students to isolate and then recontextualize ‘objects in crisis’ on their own terms, using their own critical lens. By thinking with objects and writing with these objects, we can begin to understand how such objects can become an agent in our social worlds, or the worlds of others.

## **Assignment 2 – “Writing Aftermaths” (*Two Options*)**

For the third assignment (‘Assignment 2’) I asked students to map out and analyze the immediate aftermath of a disaster of their choice – creating ethnographic accounts that based on independent research. Students were given two options, wherein they could experiment with different genres of writing, composing either a) a creative and journalistic account of the aftermath of disaster, or b) an op-ed or letter highlighting the needs of a specific community struggling in the wake of disaster. The first option was titled “Communicating from the Scene of Disaster: A Creative Synthesis” and the second was titled “Writing as Advocacy: Disaster Vulnerabilities, Disaster Justice”. The students who wanted to engage in a more creative writing assignment chose the first option, while the students who were more focused on disaster policy implications and disaster management systems chose the second option.

For both options, the narratives that students created were semi-fictional – composed based on independent research and grounded in the specificities of place, while mixing some existing content with scenes and conditions of their own imagination. The point here was to get them to connect our theoretical discussions of vulnerability with specific characters or people or communities, highlighting the situated patterns of vulnerability that people may experience in the aftermath a disaster as well as the embodied characteristics of these experiences (Browne 2013; Samuels 2016; Schwartz 2017). In both cases, students were encouraged to consider the challenges of accurately and empathetically describing the vulnerabilities of disaster-affected communities, without reducing their agency. The search for a balance between these two poles was a recurring topic throughout the course, drawing from both assigned readings (Browne 2015; Marino & Faas 2020; Newkirk 2020) and in-class discussions. As students revised their papers, I also prompted them to reflect on the ways that systemic inequalities and structural injustices can create patterns like ‘chronic disaster syndrome’ (Adams et al 2013); to be critical of the ways that resilience is defined and prescribed (Barrios 2017; Cretney 2014); and to, despite all of that, leave space for hope in the wake of disaster (Solnit 2011).

Alongside their first drafts, students also recorded a brief ‘reflection’ about the ways they went about the exercise. In these reflections, I asked them to unpack and share some of the specific methodologies that shaped their writing processes: how they identified and organized source materials, how and where they worked from imagination, how they imagined their audience and what messages they really wanted to get across, the challenges of this kind of writing, etc. Students shared these reflections (short video recordings and text) on Canvas, commented on each other’s, and then we discussed these writing decisions/methods/tactics in class. Eventually, I sampled from their reflections and in-class commentary to create a collectively-generated ‘How-To Reference’ that reflects their shared experience of the creative writing process. The ideas and tactics that came from this sharing exercise were helpful for the following assignment – where some of them wrote *extremely* creative narrative essays in groups – and it is my hope that this brief resource/toolkit will be useful to them in the future.

### Assignment 3 – “Timescapes of Disaster” (*Two Options*)

The fourth assignment (Assignment 3) was designed to help students think more critically about the ways that disasters unfold in and through time, and to consider the different lived temporalities of disaster and aftermath. As with Assignment 2, students had two options – but this time they were two very different assignments. This way, those students who had their fill of creative writing could shift back toward a more traditional expository style of writing; whereas students who were enjoying working in a more creative register could choose a collaborative creative-writing assignment.

Option 1 was a more classic academic essay reflecting on the ‘times and temporalities of disaster’ – building on some of the final readings/lectures in the ‘Dimensions of Disaster’ unit. These readings focused on the diachronic nature of disasters (i.e. the idea of ‘a five-hundred year earthquake’ shaped by histories of colonial exploitation, see Oliver-Smith 1999); patterns of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011) that are often unaccounted for; processes of memory and memorialization (Hastrup 2011; Simpson 2013); and the work of anticipating and forecasting future disasters (Gagne 2018). Student who chose this option were asked to write an essay outlining and examining the ways that the different timelines and temporal experiences of disaster take shape. For this Option, I provided a series of prompts, which foregrounded questions such as: How are disasters unevenly experienced in time? In what ways are disasters temporalized, or organized in time, by certain actors who are positioned in specific way? How do these different temporalities and timelines overlap and interact, and to what effect? How might the aftermath of a disaster be defined in different ways? In what ways can disasters warp our experiences of time? What other theoretical questions might we pose about the different ways disasters are experienced as unfolding in time? These questions are extremely important to the class – as they help students make connections between specific disasters that we might call ‘events’ and the more uncertain and slowly unfolding disasters of climate change – which are not as easily defined, located in time, or temporalized.

Option 2, which was called “Crafting Pathways of Recovery in Time”, built upon previous creative writing exercises and Assignment 2 by asking students to work in (randomly-assigned) groups of three to *\*collectively\** build characters and narratives, working in the genre of ethnofiction. [See the Assignment description for more details]. To begin, students worked both independently and together to conduct research on a given disaster (for example, the Haiti Earthquake of 2010, the wildfires that struck the American West in 2020, floods in Bihar, India) and then came together to write. Given the unique format of the assignment, each student worked on developing three different tales of life in the wake of disaster, focusing on three fictional or semi-fictional people/families who are differently situated within the aftermath. In the end, this collaborative

writing format introduced a certain level of contingency, improvisation, and uncertainty to the writing process that accurately reflected the uncertain timespaces of disaster.

The point here was to consider the different paths that people's lives might take in the aftermath of disaster, in response to a variety of pre-existing factors, contingencies, and patterns of recover. While weaving their stories, students were brought to examine the reasons why some people/families may recover more quickly or easily whereas others may not, and to interrogate normative assumptions about 'resilience' and 'building back better' that are often baked into stories of successful or failed recovery. This collective assignment built directly from our previous assignments focused on the unevenness and subjectivity of 'disaster' (Assignment 1A) and the different vulnerabilities that shape disaster impacts and aftermaths (Assignment 2) – while also building on the 'thick description' writing exercises (Photographs, Objects). In these creative depictions of people affected by disaster, their struggles, and the processes of recovery that give shape to their lives students were creating complex characters who were more than just victims. Throughout the writing process, they were also forced to reckon with the ethics of responsible storytelling and the politics of representation (Assignment 1B) – and that is entirely the point.

This collaborative writing process created a situation where each group member was given a story to begin and end (but where they couldn't control the entire narrative); where each contributor could make important decisions about the direction of the story; where contributors had to work together and be accountable to each other as co-authors; and where lead/primary authors were ultimately responsible for all final edits and revisions. I also instituted a round of inter-group peer review – so that the groups would cross-pollinate each other with ideas. Overall, I think this proved to be an enjoyable process of collective creation, as well as a valuable introduction to the thrills and challenges of co-authorship.

*\*Since students have voiced an interest in working together (fighting Zoom-based loneliness) I will also give students an option to write these 'three stories recoveries' in teams (groups of three). More specifically - each student will write a beginning, middle, and end to the story for one of the three characters/families, writing one section and then passing it off to their partner. The inspiration here is sort of like the children's game when you write draw the legs, body, and head of an imagined monster on a folded piece of paper, you can see the section immediately before, but not the section before that – in the end you get a 'surprise' when you see how each story has now taken shape in three parts. I hope that working with other students will create both additional layers/levels of creativity and a certain element of fun.*

In either case, students were required to build on previous conceptual work and writing, as we closed out the second unit on Disasters and prepare to shift to our final unit on Climate Change.

### **The Final Assignment: Beyond this Sequence**

The third and final unit of the course focused on climate change and deep uncertainty – and though it was initially designed as separate from this sequence, it ended up being extremely connected. I will not go into detail about the fifth and final Assignment, called "Reckoning Climate Change and Climate Futures" here – but, generally speaking, this was a more formal expository term paper (8-10 pages) that built on the writing skills developed through previous assignments, as well as more timely in-class/take-home exercises. For the final assignment, students were asked to incorporate two or three ethnographic vignettes, composed in the genre of ethnofiction or Cli-Fi (climate fiction), based on independent research, that would help them examine some of the general themes of the course (i.e. risk, vulnerability, anticipation, disaster/climate justice, uncertainty, and time – in a



situated context. The papers I received in response to this final assignment were incredibly diverse - but they all struck a nice balance between creative riffs and thoughtful analyses (implicitly and explicitly) steeped in the content of the course. Overall, I was extremely pleased to see how far each of these students had come – and I was happy to see not only that they demonstrated a higher level of disaster literacy, but that they were already putting this increased it to their thinking about climate change.

### **Overall Reflections**

Overall, I feel that this sequence of assignment worked well – though I certainly had to modify some of the assignments and shift some of the parameters on the fly. In general, I feel that this sequence does help cultivate a kind of ‘disaster literacy’ in students. If I were to teach this course again, I would keep trying to think of ways to create opportunities for peer-review and collaborative writing – as that worked extremely well, and many of my students told me that these were the most valuable aspects of the course for them. By the same token, I would also ask them to give student presentations (in the same way that they gave final presentations) earlier in the course, so as to increase the degree of intellectual cross-pollination. But in general, I feel that the recursive pattern of these assignments worked very well, and I look forward to building on this framework in the future.

I must also say that it was a challenging and fascinating and rewarding experience to teach a course focused on these topics this past semester: to be leading a collective dialogue about disaster, climate change, and uncertainty during a time when all of us were living through the COVID-19 pandemic – as well as wildfires, heated political debates over climate change, and other ‘natural’ disasters. In the end, I am thankful for the opportunity to learn with my students this semester, and I feel that my students did gain a certain kind of ‘disaster literacy’ this semester which will help them navigate these increasingly uncertain times.

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**Disasters & Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times**

*Instructor: Austin Lord*

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1A – “What is a Disaster?”**

**\*Assigned on Sept 3<sup>rd</sup> / DUE before class on Sept. 10<sup>th</sup>\***

**OVERVIEW:**

Throughout this course, we will be experimenting with a variety of writing styles, genres, and voices. Our work will begin, however, with a fairly traditional assignment of expository writing – a style of writing that seeks to explain a set of ideas or concepts – designed so that I, as your FWS Instructor, can get a sense of your current writing skills.

For this assignment, you should feel free to build from our course discussion and draw on the first batch of assigned readings, but please do not limit yourselves to these sources. Your previous experiences, personal views, and reflections are highly welcome here, as are other sources of information and inspiration. Please view this first assignment as an opportunity to experiment and test out some new paths of thinking – and to highlight some of the themes and questions you are most interested in.

**Please note: this first assignment will not be graded at this time**, though you will be asked to revisit, revise, and add to this preliminary reflection later in the course. Therefore, you should feel free to experiment now – to test the waters with some new thinking and ideas. As your instructor, I will provide feedback on this essay, suggest pathways of revision, and highlight potential avenues for future inquiry, writing, and research. You will have an opportunity to revise this essay both now and toward the end of the course – and you will be asked to combine this response with Assignment 1B (information to come). To reiterate: your response to this required assignment will only be graded much later, pending an iterative process of revision and recursive reflection.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Please compose an essay that focuses on ‘defining disaster’ and has the following components:

**A. Defining Disaster:**

Please answer any two of the following questions: How exactly do you, personally, conceptualize and define a "disaster"? How might your definition of disaster compare or contrast with other common or popularly held understandings of the concept? What does it mean to call something a disaster? What are the challenges inherent to defining a disaster and its scope or extent?

### B. Outlining Concepts:

Choose 2-3 concepts that relate to and shape the study or experience of disaster – drawing from the list of concepts generated in class discussions during our first class, and the first group of assigned course materials (i.e. vulnerability, hazards, eventfulness). Explain how this concept might shape the ways we come to understand any given disaster. Most importantly, explain how and why these specific concepts are of particular interest to YOU.

### C. Establishing a Citational Practice:

While writing you should also mobilize three short quotes to support or elucidate your arguments. The first and second should be selected from our shared course materials (two different sources, please), but the third quote should be drawn from another source beyond the assigned readings and of your own choosing (of any genre: academic, media, fiction) that focuses on disaster. Briefly discuss how the chosen quotes advance the author's key argument and function in the reading.

Please use a standard format for in-text citations (i.e. Melville, 1934, p.157) and include a short list of sources formatted according to a recognized style of reference (i.e. MLA, APA, etc.).

### D. The Art of Designing Questions

In the concluding sentences of your essay, please pose 2-3 questions that build from your analysis and point toward future trajectories of inquiry. What questions arise from your argument? What are you, as the author of this essay, still uncertain about? What questions do you hope to explore going forward, in this class? Or, what questions seem most important to you, right *now*?

## **TECHNICAL GUIDELINES:**

Your work should be 800-1000 words; double-spaced; typed in a 12pt font of your preference.

Looping back, to reframe the assignment and provide a bit more detail: the purposes of this preliminary and 'diagnostic' writing assignment are as follows: a) to prompt you to experiment with some of the themes and concepts which will be foundational to this course, b) to allow you to highlight some of your principal interests related to the course, and c) to provide you with a space to demonstrate your English-language analytic writing ability, as per the protocols developed for FWS coursework by the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines.

As your FWS Instructor I will be looking for writing skills: clear thesis sentences and well-connected support sentences; a logical organization of ideas with smooth transitions between concepts; and clear and concise use of the English language. This essay (and all other writing assignments to come in this course) should be formally composed and thoroughly proofread.

***\*\*Please submit your work using the course site in CANVAS by the time our third course meeting begins - at 8:00AM on Thursday, Sept 10<sup>th</sup>.***

**Disasters & Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times**

*Instructor: Austin Lord*

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1B**

**“Orientations: The Ethics of Writing about Disaster”**

**\*Assigned on Sept 15<sup>th</sup> / DUE before class on Sept. 22<sup>nd</sup>\***

**OVERVIEW:**

Writing is a process that often begins with research, with the search for data or content that we can transform into evidence for our writing. The process of conducting research, and particularly the work of collecting and sharing the personal stories of others, requires navigating a variety of methodological concerns and ethical complexities. These challenges are especially significant when conducting research in the context of disasters and “where researchers must anticipate potentially high levels of participant vulnerability” (Browne & Peek 2014: 83). Importantly, disasters often exaggerate and/or reshape the inequalities and vulnerabilities that shape everyday life – and recognizing the changing shape of these inequalities and vulnerabilities is an important part of disaster research.

This assignment is designed to cultivate a greater sensitivity to the inequalities and ethical challenges that arise when working in the wake of disaster, and to help you think through the methodological complexities of writing about disasters. As researchers and writers, we have a professional responsibility to describe the impacts of disaster in accurate and appropriate way, and we also have an ethical responsibility to engage with disaster-affected people in respectful and ethical ways.

The aftermath of disaster is shaped by a variety of people and perspectives with different levels of agency and power – navigating this uneven landscape and building relationships is careful work. Often the media itself can create problems (as we have seen in this course) as journalists descend to create simplistic and one-dimensional ‘disaster porn’ – a genre which sells newspapers but does little to help the public understand the experiences of survivors or the challenges they face. How might we portray vulnerable disaster-affected peoples as more than just victims of disaster – how might we show these people in ways that they might want to be seen?

There is no one ‘right’ way to proceed with this work. Learning how to enact these ideas in writing and in practice is an ongoing process which requires self-reflection, and each disaster situation is shaped by a unique gamut of ethical concerns. This assignment is designed to catalyze that long-term process of reflection and reorientation – to help you map out your own ethical framework.

## GUIDELINES

Please compose a short reflection essay (500-750 words) that outlines some of the ethical considerations that one should must take into account when collecting information and composing stories about disaster. For example, your writing might address some of the following questions:

- 1) *What* are some of the ethical issues and sensitivities that we need to be careful of when conducting research in the wake of disaster?
- 2) *Who* are the people, communities, or populations that might be most vulnerable? *How* and why might they be vulnerable?
- 3) *Why* is cultivating an awareness of these issues, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities important?
- 4) *Who* exactly are we accountable to, when writing about disaster?
- 5) *How* might we reorient ourselves so as to take better account of these challenges?

Please try to ground your writing and your answers to these questions with specific examples – perhaps drawn from the course materials so far, perhaps from media coverage of contemporary disasters, or perhaps from your own experiences. Remember that vulnerabilities do not simply emerge from disaster, and that many of the inequities and vulnerabilities that we might need to be cognizant of are pre-existing or even chronic conditions. Put differently, writing ethically about disaster (or climate change) also requires taking an ethical stance on the inequities that shape everyday lives.

In the concluding sentences of your essay, please pose 2-3 questions *that arise from your analysis* and that point us toward future trajectories of inquiry. What new questions emerged during this process of reflection? What ethical questions do you hope to explore further as we proceed with this course? Or, what questions seem most important to you, right *now*?

## LOGISTICS

Please note: your first draft of this assignment will not be graded at this time, though you will receive feedback from me. This assignment essay is designed to complement Assignment 1A – to encourage creative and reflexive thinking, and to generate a ‘snapshot’ of your thinking at an early stage of this course which you will later revisit. As with Assignment 1A, you will revise and resubmit your reflection later on in the semester – eventually the two essays will be combined, based on new guidelines which I will share later on. Please remember that *writing is a process and revision is an expected and necessary part of that process.*

***\*\*Please submit your work using the course site in CANVAS by the time our third course meeting begins - at 8:00AM on Thursday, Sept 22<sup>nd</sup>.***

**Disasters & Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times**

Instructor: Austin Lord

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT 2**

***“Writing Aftermaths”***

*Assigned October 5, 2020*

**Overview:**

For Assignment 2, please compose a piece of descriptive and persuasive writing in response to one of the two prompts given below. This first draft of your writing project should be roughly 3-4 pages, though the final draft will be about 5 pages in total. The first draft of the assignment will be **due on Oct 23<sup>rd</sup>** – the final draft, revised in response to feedback, peer-review, and in-class discussions will be **due on Nov 16<sup>th</sup>**.

Reflections on Method: Regardless of whether you choose Option 1 or Option 2, I would also like each student to record/write a brief reflection explaining how they went about the assignment [see the note at the end of this document for more instructions]. We will then discuss these reflections in class, and they will also be very useful/helpful for your peers as they rework their own writing.

On Sources: For both options, please be sure to acknowledge the sources that helped you generate ideas and that you used to compose your writing (i.e. a photograph from which you built a broader scene, an article about Hurricane Maria that gave you some ideas, or a video you saw online that depicted the aftermath of a wildfire that gave you some ideas). For this assignment, the References/Bibliography at the end of your work can/should include sources of inspiration or information that you do not directly cite in the text. Please look up the correct way to cite your own unique blend of sources and media (read: good practice).

**OPTION 1**

***“Communicating from the Scene of Disaster: A Creative Synthesis”***

Compose a journalistic on-the-ground report written from an imagined perspective 'on the frontlines' in the immediate aftermath of disaster. Please focus on a relatively recent disaster that you feel comfortable writing about (i.e. Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico; wildfires in Australia or California; monsoon flooding in South Asia; landslides in the Himalayan, etc.). Your report should largely be organized around your creative content, but you can/should refer to and draw on a variety of different primary and secondary sources from contemporary media (text, images, video, etc.) as well as some of our course readings.



After gathering and organizing source materials, please write a story that a) creates an overview of the situation, b) constructs a handful of semi-fictional characters facing real hazards and vulnerabilities and c) describes the uneven impacts and challenges that each character and their community is facing in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Each report should include a few references to the course materials, a few genuine statistics that relate to the disaster you have chosen to portray, and your other sources and conclude with a series of rhetorical/theoretical questions that demonstrate a grasp of the critical issues in play in the immediate aftermath of disaster. Remember, the objective of your report is to educate certain publics about the situation people are coping with in the immediate aftermath of disaster, and to elicit empathy or support for those who you are writing about. For this reason, please also consider your audience when writing: who exactly are you writing this for?

## **OPTION 2**

### ***“Writing as Advocacy: Disaster Vulnerabilities, Disaster Justice”***

Compose a short letter, blog post, or newspaper op-ed that seeks to call attention to the needs of a specific community, the challenges people from this community face, and their (collective/uneven?) needs – highlighting specific disaster vulnerabilities and calling for some form of action or response. You should begin by imagining a specific community that is struggling with the impacts of disaster and disaster recovery (in the wake of a recent disaster or a future disaster yet to come) or a community that is facing challenges related to disaster risk management (risks of future disasters, often based on or extrapolated from past events and impacts). This might be a community that you read about in one of the assigned readings, a community you have read or heard about in recent news, or even one with which you are personally familiar (if you are comfortable doing this). What is this community going through? What challenges are these people facing? How is this community defined, and by whom? What are the needs of this community at the moment, and how might a targeted initiative or policy change benefit them?

When writing in this genre, you will also need to consider your forum and audience. Who exactly are you writing to or for? Thinking strategically, where would you try to publish this op-ed, post, or letter in order to maximize the possible response? Put simply, what kind of writing can help make a difference, published where? Once you make up your mind, please find an example to work from, as a template. Please format and stylize your writing for the forum or audience of your choosing – whether it is an op-ed for the NY Times, a guest blog post for a specific website, or a letter to a U.S. Senator.

Toward the end of your letter, please highlight the actions, changes in policy, or shifts in perspective that you think would help this community, now or in the future. Please explain to your readers why these changes/shifts might help. Remember that this is essentially a persuasive form of writing – so be persuasive!

To help make your argument stronger, please also include a few references and at least one quote from our course materials - cited in a way that helps you describe the situated and/or systemic patterns of vulnerabilities you are describing. Similarly, when you submit, please include a list of References of Further Readings that you would recommend to your readers.

**Instructions for Reflections on Creative Methods:**

Once you have completed your first draft of either Option 1 or Option 2, **please also record a short narrative video for your classmates** in which you *informally* explain a bit about: a) how you went about the assignment; b) how you identified, organized, and used source materials; and c) what the basic or specific challenges were for you as you tried to compose your report. If you prefer not to make a video then you can write a brief reflection (1/2 page to 1 page) on these topics instead. Please choose whatever option you are more comfortable with, whatever is preferable to you. Please post these reflections on the Canvas discussion board – with a list of the references and sources of inspiration that you drew on. These reflections will not be graded – no pressure, no judgement. The point here is to promote collective reflection on the process of creative writing; to share a kind of roadmap that might help your peers navigate the assignment during revisions; and to stimulate further discussions with your classmates, in class or beyond.

**Disasters & Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times**

Instructor: Austin Lord

**FWS ASSIGNMENT 3**

***“The Uneven Timescapes of Disaster”***

**OVERVIEW**

This assignment is designed to help you reflect on the ways that disasters unfold in and through time and to describe the different ways people experience ‘times of disaster’. In your writing, you will examine on the temporal dimensions of disaster(s), the ways that differently impacted people mark time differently in the aftermath of disaster, and how disasters shape the ways people orient themselves in relation to differently imagined pasts, presents, and futures.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

Please compose a piece of writing in response to one of the two prompts given below – either an academic essay (composed individually) or a creative ethnofiction project (written collaboratively). These options are designed to give each of you a chance to work in a writing genre of your choosing - students who have had their fill of creative writing with Assignment 2 can shift back toward a more academic/expository style of writing; whereas students who enjoyed the creative aspects of Assignment 2 will be able to continue developing those skills. In either case, your writing will be building on previous conceptual work and writing, and this exercise will help you prepare for the final course unit focused on climate change.

**OPTION 1 – “The Temporalities of Disaster”**

Compose an expository academic essay that a) examines the ways that disasters can unfold in and through time and b) describe the different ways that people experience and navigate ‘times of disaster’. You may choose the specific topic of your essay – but you should pose at least two questions that focus on the time and temporality of disasters, consider the possible answers to these questions, and then provide two answers to the questions you have posed (read: your own unique arguments supported with evidence). Some possible questions (please do not use these exactly) might be: How are disasters unevenly experienced in time? In what ways are disasters temporalized, or organized in time, by certain actors who are positioned in specific way? How do these different temporalities and timelines overlap and interact, and to what effect? How might the aftermath of a disaster be defined in different ways? In what ways can disasters warp our experiences of time? Questions of time and temporality are extremely important when writing

about disasters and climate change – so I think you will find this exercise extremely useful, within and beyond our class.

## **OPTION 2 – “Crafting Pathways of Recovery in Time”**

Working in groups of three, please write three unique stories about three different people or families (fictional or semi-fictional) who are differently situated within the aftermath of disaster and who are struggling to rebuild their lives. Each of the three stories will have four parts - four different ethnographic vignettes, written at four different points in time (during or after the disaster). I hope that working with other students will foster additional layers or levels of creativity and add a certain element of fun.

Instructions: Each student in the group of three will write the first part of one story, and then they will pass on the story to another student who will continue writing based on that story, picking up the thread at a later point in time (maybe in the middle of the night that same day, or at a funeral the following week, or when an aftershock hits 30 days after the disaster, or maybe one year later at an anniversary ceremony, etc). Each student will write and pass on to the next – each team member, will take the narrative in a direction of their choosing, adding new details. Importantly, while writing, you will only be able to see the section immediately before you – so you may not see where the story begins. In the end, each student will receive the story they started, with three sections now written – here you will rejoin the character(s) that you created, you will see more of the journey they have taken since last you met, and then you will have to decide how to write the final chapter.

The main objectives of this assignment are to highlight and describe uneven trajectories of post-disaster recovery, to consider the reasons why some people or families may recover quickly or easily whereas others may not, and to interrogate normative assumptions about ‘resilience’ and ‘building back better’ that are often baked into stories of successful or failed recovery. As you can see, this assignment builds directly from our previous assignments focused on the unevenness and subjectivity of ‘disaster’ (Assignment 1A) and the different vulnerabilities that shape disaster impacts and aftermaths (Assignment 2) – while also building on some of our reading/writing exercises about photographs of disaster and ‘objects in crisis’. While crafting these creative depictions of disaster ‘victims’, the ways they experience the impacts of disaster, processes and pathways of recovery, and their broader struggles, you will also be thinking about the ethics of responsible storytelling and the politics of representation (Assignment 1B) – and that is entirely the point.

*\* The inspiration for this assignment is a children’s game where you draw a ‘monster’ collectively, by folding a piece of paper and taking turns to draw the legs, body, and head of a figure – while seeing only the section right before your turn. In the end, participants are surprised to see where the process they began has led, and they encounter a very strange and perhaps beautiful figure (a ‘monster’) with many different parts that connect in unforeseen ways. In this case, it is not the people you are writing about that are monsters, but the idea/process of ‘recovery’ itself – which takes shape in unknown and often unforeseen ways, as time unfolds.*

**A Note on Sources:** For both options, please be sure to acknowledge the sources (academic or otherwise) that helped you generate ideas and that you used to compose your writing. This may be a formal list of ‘References’ or a collection of citations, links, and materials that influenced the way you crafted the story, included as an Annex – and this can and should include sources of inspiration that you do not directly cite in the text. Please make sure to look up the correct way to cite and/or credit your own unique blend of sources and media, as appropriate.

**DUE DATES** - \*The first draft of your project will be **due on Nov 11<sup>th</sup>**, and the final draft, revised in response to feedback, peer-review, and in-class discussions will be **due on Nov 24<sup>th</sup>**.

**Disasters & Climate Change: Writing for Troubled Times**

Instructor: Austin Lord

***ASSIGNMENT 4 / FINAL ASSIGNMENT***

**“Reckoning Climate Change and Climate Futures”**

*Assigned Dec 1 / Outline Due Dec 11 / Final Draft Due Dec 20*

**OVERVIEW**

For your final assignment, please compose a paper approximately 3,000-4,000 words in length in response to the prompts below. This final assignment will focus on climate change, but it will require a multidimensional analysis - of climate impacts, vulnerabilities, adaptation, resilience, knowledge production, risk perception, anticipation and forecasting, communication, temporal politics, uncertainty, climate justice, possibilities for socio-environmental change, etc. You will choose the dimensions and topics that interest you most. This assignment will require a blend of formal academic analysis and creative/ethnographic writing - though the exact balance of the two will be up to you.

The main idea here is that you will be carefully analyzing the situation of two groups of people, differently situated in space and time, who are struggling to reckon with climate change related problems. In a sense, you will be highlighting two ‘case studies’ (real world scenarios, ethnographically and imaginatively described) and analyzing the ways in which their lives are affected or shaped by climate change, however understood. In your analysis, you will be building from and highlighting some of the main themes, concepts, and issues we have considered during this course, but also building up your own unique arguments.

The three requirements will be that you examine the relationship between disasters (rapid or slow-onset) and climate change, that you portray the situation in all its complexity (shying away from simple narratives of helpless victims, heroes, and bad guys), and that you write in an ethical manner. To complete the assignment well, you will probably need to draw on all three parts of the class, showcasing your own unique blend of ‘disaster literacy’ and applying these insights to examine the ways that differently positioned people might ‘reckon with’ - meaning both ‘attempt to understand’ and ‘face the challenge of’ - climate change.

**GUIDANCE**

The following is a rough outline of the proposed structure - which is designed in a modular kind of ‘choose-your-adventure’ format, which you may modify as you see fit.

## 1. The Case Studies: Focusing Attention on Two Communities

Begin the paper with an ethnographic vignette (~500 words) that describes the ways that a specific community or group of people is reckoning with the challenges of a changing climate. These can be folks immediately experiencing a climate-related disaster, a community worried about future climate adaptation issues (like Shishmaref, though that one is off-limits), a group of climate scientists struggling to understand and prepare for the future, a group of people newly aware of the reality of climate change, an advocacy group trying to fight a disinformation campaign, an NGO representative working on a climate adaptation project, a climate denier farmer whose crops are increasingly subject to climatic volatility, who might be rethinking their position; a human rights group advocating for climate justice... etc. etc. It's up to you to decide where, when, with whom, and how to begin.

Later in the paper (about halfway through) you will also be writing a second vignette about a different group of people, focusing on a different space and time (also ~500 words). I want you all to think about this duality at the beginning - so that you can think about how you might connect these two 'case studies' as your analysis takes shape, highlighting similarities and differences, parallels and contrasts, etc. If you wish, *one* of these two communities can exist in an imagined future - though you must describe the pathway to that future in your description, connecting it back to a real and identifiable community (based on thoughtful analysis, something like scientifically-informed Cli-Fi).

In any case, you should describe the situation/context within which these communities seek to reckon climate change in a detailed and ethnographic style - building from existing sources/materials and using some of the writing strategies and tactics you have developed this semester to create compelling and richly described scenes (i.e. writing with the senses, writing with objects). When describing both communities, please make sure to cite your sources of data and inspiration appropriately.

Remember, there are no 'single stories' - so try to present multiple sides of the communities you describe, highlighting the unique blend of vulnerability and agency that shapes different people's lives.

## 2. Core Analysis: Three Sections, Multiple Analytical Themes

In general, the analysis of your paper should have at least three different sections - two separate analyses of the two 'case studies' which you have identified and a third section that connects these two analyses, leading to a unique set of final arguments. In all of your analyses, you should build and organize evidence from your two 'case studies' as well as other sources.

In your analyses, I expect that you will address at least three major themes from the course, reconfigured as per your own unique interests. Importantly, I hope that you will also focus on problems and themes *of your own design*. The following is a short and incomplete list of some examples of analytical themes, each with a handful of hypothetical sub-questions:

### *Knowing Climate Change*

How do we know what 'climate change' is? How is knowledge about climate change produced, and in what ways does this process shape our understanding of climate change issues? How do we

begin to know what exactly is changing and for whom? What kinds of experience count as *knowledge* about climate change?

### *Sensing Climate Change*

How do people sense changes in the climate, and how might grounded or tangible sensory experiences lead to a more direct understanding of local and global climate issues?

### *Climate Vulnerabilities*

What factors shape climate vulnerabilities? How and why are these vulnerabilities uneven, within and between certain communities? In what ways are these peoples lives animated by a balance of different vulnerabilities and agencies?

### *Climate Change Communication*

What are the most effective ways of communicating about climate change? How can climate scientists and other advocates create stories that help to or guide people in caring about and understanding climate change issues, while also maintaining scientific rigor? How can alternative forms of knowledge and local knowledge be meaningfully incorporated and represented in climate change discourse? What other kinds of communication might be helpful, or worth experimenting with, given the unique challenges of climate change?

### *Not Knowing: Ignorance, Denial, and the Unknown*

How does a lack of knowledge, in all its forms, shape the ways we think about climate change? Why are the unknowns of climate change so important? In what ways is the unknown or uncertain unevenly distributed?

### *Climate Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction*

How do we prepare for uncertain climate futures yet-to-come? In what ways do practices of disaster risk reduction resemble scenario-building for future climate crises? In what ways might the anticipation work of climate adaptation drive a unique process of reckoning?

### *Climate Justice*

What might climate justice mean to differently positioned communities? Why do some communities have to reckon with climate change sooner than others? How do we talk about causation and responsibility amid the inequalities of our world?

### *Alternative Futures*

What alternative futures does reckoning climate change make possible? How do these communities imagine the future and its different possibilities? What other actors or agents (animals, plants, bacteria, deities, monsters, ghosts, etc) might also shape the emergence of these futures?

### *Hope*

What roles might hope play in shaping uncertain climate futures? What kinds of hope are relevant here, and for whom?



Please remember that these are all just hypothetical examples, not the questions you will use! You may build from 2-3 of these themes (reconfiguring, expanding, or adding sub-questions as you see fit)... but I fully expect you to identify your own questions as well!

### **3. Conclusions & Future Questions**

At the end of your paper, I expect that you will do two things - summarize the main arguments that you have developed in the paper and present a few questions that intrigue you now, even after all you have said. As you already know, the art of writing conclusions and the art of generating questions for future inquiry are important and complementary - two sides of the same coin, both important skills for the larger challenge of writing for increasingly troubled times.

### **4. References**

Because this is the final paper for the course and the bulk of the writing will be academic writing, I expect a significant list of references, including course material and your own unique sources. Please be sure to standardize formatting and citational practices.

## **LOGISTICS**

### **Drafting and Submitting an Outline**

By December 11th (11:59pm EST) you are required to send me a short outline of your final paper that briefly summarizes:

- 1) The communities that you wish to focus on, with a description of the time/space and climate-change-related struggles they face;
- 2) Some of the main themes that you will consider in your paper (see above, add your own!)
- 3) A rough sketch of some of the arguments you hope to make - of course you will not have formed any concluding arguments yet, but just a roadmap of where you think you are headed
- 4) A list of at least 5 specific sources that you plan to use to describe your community (this is different than the sources you will use in your analysis, though there may be some overlap)
- 5) Any questions that you have for me at this point in the process (limited to three).

I will give you some basic feedback on these outlines and answer your written questions by Dec 15<sup>th</sup>. You will also complete and receive one randomly-assigned peer review of your outline.

### **Final Submission: Deadline & Grading**

The deadline for the submission of your final draft is Dec 20th. This paper will be graded in the same manner as previous assignments - using a grading rubric specifically developed to match the learning objectives of this assignment and the course.