

**Doing “Nothing”: Exploring How We Think about the Past**  
Honors First-Year Seminar  
Spring 2019, Wednesdays 11:00-11:50

Prof. Susan A. Crane

Office//Hours: Chavez 319 A/B//Tues & Wed 10:00-10:50 and by appointment

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### Course Description

This may be the only course you’ll ever take in which you’ll be required to do Nothing.

The word “Nothing” is often used to express how we feel about the past. “Nothing happened” when we are bored, or if what happened seemed to lack significance. Saying that “Nothing is the way it was” may reflect how alienated we feel from the present, or completely the opposite: how glad we are that things have changed. When we declare that “Nothing has changed,” we may feel sad, glad or frustrated. Those three very different ways of referring to the past demonstrate how flexible “Nothing” is. And every time *Nothing* happened, *Something* did – that’s History.

The course does not require any particular knowledge of an historical era or location; we will assume that all students have had sufficient exposure to the outlines of national and world histories from courses required for university admission. Instead, drawing on the instructor’s research, we will consider a variety of historical case studies in which “Nothing” is an important element. The case studies are drawn from modern histories of Europe and the Americas, and feature both material culture (art, photographs, ruins and urban exploration, postcards) and thematic concerns (injustice, boredom, millennialism).

### Learning Outcomes

- Students will be able to identify and distinguish among a variety of science, social science and humanities disciplines’ approaches to the study of “Nothing” and history, and the relevance of these disciplines to their own educational goals
- Students will learn how to evaluate visual images, particularly photographs, as historical evidence
- The course offers a general introduction to the notion of “the past” as an object of study, rather than history as a discipline; as such, students will learn how to be responsible for historical information and to critically assess sources of information

## Requirements

- **Attendance: Since the class only meets once/week, attendance is mandatory.** If you're sick or must be absent for unforeseen and unavoidable reasons, you must let the instructor know before the class that will be missed and receive an excused absence in reply, or you will lose credit for an unexcused absence.

All holidays or special events observed by organized religions will be honored for those students who show affiliation with that particular religion.

Absences pre-approved by the UA Dean of Students (or Dean's designee) will be honored.

- **Reading/Writing: Assigned readings are available on the course D2L website or online, and must be completed before the class for which they are assigned. Students will write a coherent, thoughtful paragraph\* about Nothing each week.**

The paragraph should be relevant to the next class discussion and submitted to D2L/Discussion by 9:00 AM on Wednesdays. On days when reading is assigned, write about the assigned reading that is due; on days when there is no reading assigned, reflect on what you have learned about Nothing to date OR about the previous class' discussion.

\*Definition of "paragraph": has a clearly stated THESIS supported by evidence cited from the assigned reading. No footnotes required: you should cite using (author, page) at the end of the sentence. Use of first person is permitted if it will substantially enhance the point being made. It does not have to have five sentences.

## Grading

Weekly writing: 50%

Class participation: 50%

Unexcused absences will count against class participation.

## HISTORY DEPARTMENT ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY

Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated. All assignments submitted for this course must be original and must be performed individually unless otherwise permitted. Every incident of academic dishonesty will be strictly punished. The history department mandates that academic dishonesty be punished by **a failing grade for the course**. Additional sanctions may include a permanent record on your academic transcript and suspension or expulsion from the university. For more information on UA policies concerning academic integrity see:

<http://deanofstudents.arizona.edu/codeofacademicintegrity>.

**If you have any concerns about what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, consult the Main Library** <http://www.library.arizona.edu/applications/quickHelp/tutorials/search/term:plagiarism>.

## GRADING PHILOSOPHY

A “grade” is a single letter given to indicate the level of performance attained in scholastic work. It is the professor’s evaluation of the accuracy, depth and quality of expression found in students’ written assignments for this course. Although it is not a precise measure, each letter has a meaning that conveys important feedback about the quality of academic work. An “A” is reserved for the very best work in the course. It means that the student *far exceeds normal expectations* for work at this level in all aspects of the assignment (accuracy, depth, quality of expression). Grades in the “B” range indicate that while accurate and adequate in depth and quality of expression, the assignment could still be improved significantly in one or more of these aspects. *Grades in the “C” range indicate that the student has met minimum expectations for undergraduate work in the course*, but that his or her work is undistinguished in accuracy, depth and/or quality of expression; considerable room for improvement exists. A “D” grade indicates that student work is below expectations for undergraduate work and that serious deficiencies need to be addressed. An “E” or “F” indicates that the student has not performed the assigned work.

## HISTORY COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Write clear, well-organized prose.

Analyze primary sources in light of their historical context, audience, and author’s intent.

Recognize and evaluate competing historical interpretations.

## ACCESSABILITY AND ACCOMODATIONS

It is the University’s goal that learning experiences be as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience physical or academic barriers based on disability, please let me know immediately so that we can discuss options. You are also welcome to contact Disability Resources (520-621-3268) to establish reasonable accommodations.

Please be aware that the accessible table and chairs in the classroom should remain available for students who find that standard classroom seating is not usable.

For further information about university policies and procedures related to the safety and integrity of this course and its classroom, see “The Fine Print” at the end of the syllabus.

## ...AND FINALLY:

The information contained in the course syllabus, other than the grade and absence policies, may be subject to change with reasonable advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.

## Course Schedule

Jan. 9 Introduction: What do we think about when we think about the past: “Nothing Happened” or “Nothing is the Way it Was”?

Jan. 16 Doing “Nothing”: Boredom and Inactivity

Read: Peter Toohey, *Boredom: A Lively History* (EBook, UA Library: read preface and browse contents); *New Scientist: Nothing* pp. 182, 192-97 [D2L]

Jan. 23 “Nothing [significant] Happened”, or why we call medieval Europe “The Dark Ages”  
View in class: Saul Bass, “Why Man Creates” (1968) and [Annals of St. Gall website](#)

Jan. 30 “Nothing Happened” to the Perpetrators: Justice in Abeyance  
Read: Alessandro Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli” [D2L]

Feb. 6 Nothing Happened, and that’s a Good Thing: It Wasn’t the End of the World, Part I  
Read: David E. Hoffman, “Prologue”, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and its Dangerous Legacy* [D2L]

Feb. 13 Nothing Happened, and that’s a Good Thing: It Wasn’t the End of the World, Part II  
Read: Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails*, pp 3-5, 30-32, Chs. 2 and 5 [UA Main Library/Open Access]

Feb. 20 “Nothing Works”: The Placebo Effect  
Read: Gary Greenberg, “What if the Placebo Effect Isn’t a Trick?” [New York Times Magazine, 11/7/18](#)  
\*\*Prepare for Mar. 13: see list of recommended contacts on D2L, drop in office hours or request meeting with your chosen interview subject BEFORE spring break  
\*\*Prepare for Feb. 27: choose reading in class today

Feb. 27 Natural Histories: Of Zero and Bees  
Half of you will read Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing that Is*, ch. 12-13 (and if you’re interested in math particularly, check out Greek, Mayan or Indian conceptions of zero in the relevant chapter, Ch. 1-8) [UA Main Library]; and half of you will read James Gorman, “Do Bees Know Nothing?” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/07/science/bees-intelligence-zero.html>.

Mar. 6 NO CLASS ~~ SPRING BREAK

Mar. 13 “Nothing” Happens all over Campus  
Locate and interview a U of A faculty member who works on any kind of Nothing;  
submit paragraph about interview on D2L

Mar. 20 “Nothing is the Way it Was”: Ruins of the Past  
Read: Brian Dillon, [“Fragments from a History of Ruin”](#) *Cabinet* 2005/6  
\*\* *Meet at UA Museum of Art* \*\*

Mar. 27 “There is Nothing Left”: Why we save some ruins, but eliminate rubble  
Read: Jeff Byles, “Ch. 7: There Goes the Ghetto” in his *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition* [D2L]

April 3 “Take Nothing but Pictures, Leave Nothing But Footprints”: Urban Explorers

Browse: [“Ruins of Detroit” website](#); explore Urban Explorer websites (cautiously), compare/contrast ruins photography

April 10 “There is Nothing Left” (on purpose): Erasure of the Undesired Past  
Read: Eichstedt and Small, “Symbolic Annihilation and the Erasure of Slavery” [D2L]

April 17 “There is Nothing Left”: Marked, Unmarked, Remembered Historical Sites  
Read: selections from Andrew and Alex Lichtenstein, *Marked, Unmarked, Remembered* [D2L]

April 24 “Nothing But the Truth”: Sodium Pentothal and WWII  
Read: Alison Winter, *Memory* ch. 2 or 4 [UA Main Library]

May 1 Wrap up: *There Is Nothing Left to Say*  
Final paragraph: tell me what you learned about Nothing this semester

## The Fine Print

### **Absence and Class Participation Policy**

The UA’s policy concerning Class Attendance, Participation, and Administrative Drops is available at: <http://catalog.arizona.edu/policy/class-attendance-participation-and-administrative-drop>  
The UA policy regarding absences for any sincerely held religious belief, observance or practice will be accommodated where reasonable, <http://policy.arizona.edu/human-resources/religious-accommodation-policy>.

Absences pre-approved by the UA Dean of Students (or Dean Designee) will be honored. See: <https://deanofstudents.arizona.edu/absences>

**Requests for incomplete (I) or withdrawal (W)** must be made in accordance with University policies, which are available at <http://catalog.arizona.edu/policy/grades-and-grading-system#incomplete> and <http://catalog.arizona.edu/policy/grades-and-grading-system#Withdrawal> respectively.

### **Classroom Behavior Policy**

To foster a positive learning environment, students and instructors have a shared responsibility. We want a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment where all of us feel comfortable with each other and where we can challenge ourselves to succeed. To that end, our focus is on the tasks at hand and not on extraneous activities (e.g., texting, chatting, reading a newspaper, making phone calls, web surfing, etc.).

The use of personal electronics such as laptops, iPads, and other such mobile devices can easily be distracting to the other students and the instructor. Their use can degrade the learning environment. If this becomes an issue in our classroom, students will not be permitted to use these devices during the class period.

### **Threatening Behavior Policy**

The UA Threatening Behavior by Students Policy prohibits threats of physical harm to any member of the University community, including to oneself. See <http://policy.arizona.edu/education-and-student-affairs/threatening-behavior-students>.

### **Notification of Objectionable Materials**

This course may contain material of a mature nature, which may include explicit language, depictions of nudity, sexual situations, and/or violence. The instructor will provide advance notice when such materials will be used. Students are not automatically excused from interacting with such materials, but they are encouraged to speak with the instructor to voice concerns and to provide feedback.

**UA Nondiscrimination and Anti-harassment Policy**

The University is committed to creating and maintaining an environment free of discrimination; see <http://policy.arizona.edu/human-resources/nondiscrimination-and-anti-harassment-policy>