

SII 199H1S (Section L0231)
Political Spaces: Blank Spots and Sacrifice Zones

University of Toronto, Winter 2015
Mondays, 2:00-4:00pm, Wetmore Hall 74 (New College)

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Office Hours: Mondays, 12:30-1:30pm; Tuesdays, 10am-noon

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Course Website: Accessible through <http://portal.utoronto.ca> (see below)

Course Description:

In a 1988 *New York Times* article on toxic nuclear weapons factories, engineers at the U.S. Department of Energy referred to such sites as “national sacrifice zones.” While grimly humorous, this was nonetheless an extraordinary admission: that certain locations in the United States (and American-controlled territory overseas) had been *sacrificed* in the name of national security. At the same time, scholars were beginning to treat these sacrificial actions in the language of environmental injustice, or what has more recently been labeled “slow violence.” Put simply, Cold War militarization, including but not limited to nuclear testing, has disproportionately affected some places and peoples.

In recent years “sacrifice zone” has acquired a broader resonance. For instance, it has been applied to the vast resource extraction projects of mountaintop-removal coal mining (and in Canada, the Alberta tar sands), along with the exploitation or near-abandonment of certain communities – most infamously Detroit, Michigan. These are intriguing and contentious arguments, and as we survey the American geography of ‘sacrifice’ in this course, they will no doubt be debated at length. At a minimum, we will question the tendency to focus on spectacular cases, the imaginative compartmentalization of certain zones, and the treatment of these realms as utterly lost or devoid of alternative narratives. Our *regional* emphasis will be on the United States, but American cases are connected in important ways to the wider world, and of course the U.S. is itself global in various ways.

Our *analytical* focus will be the creation of sacrifice zones, their persistence, and precisely how, to quote the polemicist Chris Hedges, some “pockets have slipped completely off the radar screen,” their inhabitants erased “from consciousness.” The story of the nuclear West suggests that neglect is not the only or even the best answer to this question. There is also the matter of secrecy – of governmental or corporate limitations on knowledge about certain places. In some instances, these restrictions have created what the photographer and geographer Trevor Paglen calls “blank spots on the map.” Studying these two concepts in tandem encourages us to move between local contexts and larger arguments, and to appreciate the importance of critical geographical inquiry.

Evaluation:

The course is structured like a fourth-year or graduate seminar; there is no final exam.

Participation (including 'Opening', 'Closing', and group discussions):	25%
One-Page Reading Responses (3):	15%
Interpretative Essay – Proposal:	10%
Interpretative Essay:	30%
Interpretative Essay – Revised:	20%

Key Dates:

One-Page Reading Responses:	At least 2 of 3 must be submitted on or before February 9
Essay Proposal due:	January 30 (electronically) (returned by February 9, before class)
Essay due:	March 11 (electronically) (returned by March 25)
Revised Essay due:	April 8 (electronically)

The Readings:

This is not a course that lends itself to a textbook. The reading list is drawn from four sources:

1. Journal articles accessed through the U of T Library E-Journals portal **(E)**
2. Web-based media **(W)**
3. Book chapters and other material posted on the course Blackboard site **(B)**
4. A book: Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (Nation Books, 2012) **(HS)** [A copy of this book is on course reserve at Robarts. You can also purchase it from the retailer of your choice, and you have time to do so, as we will be reading it late in the term.]

If you are unable to access any source, e-mail me. Searching using the Library's E-Journals tab is not always easy (make sure to search for the journal *title*), but it's a useful skill.

While the benefits of 'free' readings are clear, you will consume a significant amount of paper if you print all of the sources listed below. I encourage you to work with PDFs online or print creatively (two pages per page, double-sided, on recycled paper...).

Class Schedule and Required Readings:

Week 1 (January 5): Introduction
(No reading)

Part One: In the West

Week 2 (January 12)

- Mike Davis, "The Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country," *New Left Review* 200 (July-August 1993), 49-74 **(E)**
- Ellen Meloy, "The Terrain of Strategic Death," in her *The Last Cheater's Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest* (1999), 23-86 **(B)**

Week 3 (January 19)

- Rebecca Solnit, "From Hell to Breakfast," in her *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (2000), 3-37 **(B)**
- Tom Vanderbilt, "Survival City: This is Only a Test," in his *Survival City: Adventures Among the Ruins of Atomic America* (2002), 68-96 **(E)** (<http://go.utlib.ca/cat/8861126>).

Week 4 (January 26)

- Trevor Paglen, "Late September at an Undisclosed Location in the Nevada Desert," *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006), 293-300 **(E)**
- Trevor Paglen, "Limit Telephotography," slide show at (<http://www.paglen.com/?l=work&s=limit>) **(W)**
- Jonah Weiner, "Prying Eyes," *The New Yorker* 22 October 2012, 54-61 **(W)** (at www.paglen.com/pdf/Paglen-NewYorker_20121022.pdf, or through the Library website)

ESSAY PROPOSAL DUE JANUARY 30 (electronically)

Part Two: Islands

Week 5 (February 2)

- David Vine, "Introduction," in his *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia* (2009) (<http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i8885.pdf>) **(W)**
- JoAnn Wypijewski, "This is Only a Test," *Harper's* December 2001, 41-51 **(E)**

Week 6 (February 9)

- David Gonzalez, "Guantánamo's Surreal Prison Landscape," *New York Times* 10 October 2014 (<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/10/guantanamos-surreal-prison-landscape/>) **(W)** [Have a look at the accompanying slide show.]
- Barbara Harlow, "'Extraordinary renditions': Tales of Guantánamo, a Review Article," *Race and Class* 52.4 (2011), 1-29 **(E)**

- Paul Kramer, "A Useful Corner of the World: Guantánamo," *The New Yorker* 31 July 2013 (www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/07/a-useful-corner-of-the-world-a-history-of-guantanamo-base.html) **(W)** [Have a look at the accompanying slide show.]
- Samir Naji al Hasan Moqbel, "Gitmo Is Killing Me," *The New York Times* 14 April 2013 (www.nytimes.com/2013/04/15/opinion/hunger-striking-at-guantanamo-bay.html) **(W)**

Week 7 (February 16): NO CLASS (Reading Week)

Week 8 (February 23): Essay Discussions, Part One
(No reading)

Week 9 (March 2): Essay Discussions, Part Two
(No reading)

Part Three: Urban/Rural

Week 10 (March 9)

- Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, "Days of Siege: Camden, New Jersey," in their *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (2012), 59-114 **(HS)**
- John Patrick Leary, "Detroitism" *Guernica* 15 January 2011 (www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/) **(W)**

ESSAY DUE MARCH 11 (electronically)

Week 11 (March 16)

- Hedges and Sacco, "Days of Devastation: Welch, West Virginia," in *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, 115-176 **(HS)**

Week 12 (March 23)

- Nancy Heimstra, "'You don't even know where you are': Chaotic Geographies of U.S. Migrant Detention and Deportation," in Dominique Moran et al eds., *Carceral Spaces: Mobility and Agency in Imprisonment and Migrant Detention* (2013), 57-75 **(B)**
- Listen to Brett Story's 2013 CBC *Ideas* radio documentary, "Alone Inside" (www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2013/09/03/alone-inside/) **(W)**

Part Four: Contexts and Conclusions

Week 13 (March 30)

- Derek Gregory, "The Everywhere War," *Geographical Journal* 177.3 (2011), 238-50 **(E)**

- Dana Priest and William Arkin, “An Alternative Geography,” in their *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State* (2011), 56-79 **(B)**

REVISED ESSAY DUE APRIL 8

The Course Environment:

Your primary obligations are to do the reading each week and to foster conversations about this reading during class hours – and perhaps beyond! But these are not your only obligations within our weekly two-hour block.

It should go without saying that everyone must feel comfortable contributing to course conversations. You are a heterogeneous group, with your own distinct biographies and academic pursuits. This may work in our favour, but creating a respectful classroom space still takes effort. Just as I will set the table for discussion each week, I am responsible for facilitating an enjoyable, open, and safe environment for conversation, but that responsibility is ultimately *collective*. Our subject material is unsettling and upsetting, but it is also (I think) tremendously important that we confront it through discussion and debate. Please do not hesitate to speak to me after class or during office hours if you have concerns about anything pertaining to the course.

Attendance and Participation:

With the exception of brief, 30-minute ‘table-setting’ lectures each week (slides will be posted on Blackboard), this will be a discussion-based course. It will challenge you to develop your own ideas in response to the readings and class conversations.

I strongly encourage you to visit during my office hours in the first few weeks of the course. A brief conversation will help me to learn about your academic background and interests, and this in turn should improve our discussions in class.

The 25% assigned to participation covers the entire term, but two elements are particularly important:

A) **Opening and Closing.** Aside from the Week 2, where I will lead the discussion, each week one person will open and one person will close our conversation. Both tasks should last about 10 minutes. I will pass around a sign-up sheet in Week 2.

The class opener’s responsibilities include:

1. Situating the week’s readings in relation to the course as a whole. How do the readings fit into the themes of the course? How do they relate to other work we’ve read?

2. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the readings. Which aspects of the reading are helpful in thinking about “blank spots and sacrifice zones”? Where is the work less helpful, and what might improve it?
3. Offer at least three straightforward, substantial questions about the readings. These should relate to the argument of readings, and the way authors frame issues or make cases. It’s important that these questions open up discussion, rather than focusing only on details.

The class closer’s responsibilities include:

1. To provide some answers to the opener’s questions, either as a result of the subsequent discussion or (if discussion has not fully answered certain questions, in your opinion) on your own.
2. Raise any outstanding questions or issues that we’re left with at the end of discussion.
3. Summarize the class discussion: Have we come to any resolution about the issues discussed? Was there consensus? Disagreement? Uncertainty?

B) **Essay Discussions.** On both February 23 and March 2, approximately ten of you will present brief (3-4 minute) synopses of your essays-in-progress. There will then be 5-6 minutes of time for comments and questions from your classmates.

Please turn your cellphones to silent during each class, and slip out of the room to text or talk. I prefer that you use a pen and paper, but if you wish to take notes and work on a laptop, please speak to me. Recording class proceedings requires permission from the instructor.

The Assignments:

The One-Page Responses

Please submit three short reading responses (no more than **one page single-spaced, two pages double-spaced**, 12-point font) over the course of the term. **At least two** of these responses must be submitted on or before **February 9**.

Each response should address the readings for a specific class; bring a paper copy of your response to class on the day in question. Whether you write them immediately after you complete the readings, or wait a day or two to reflect on the texts, responses should contain two elements: a brief (2-3 sentence) summary of one or more readings (the argument, the evidence used; the field); and your own engagement with the readings. This engagement should move beyond a description of content to compare, contrast, and critique the readings, noting an author’s significant contributions but also points where you disagree or are left puzzled. An ideal response is *both analytical and intertextual*, identifying particular themes and tracking them across multiple readings.

These one-page responses should make clear references to readings (with page numbers noted where appropriate), and they should be based on close reading rather than general impressions. As always, spelling, grammar, and sentence structure are crucial – particularly here, because you are trying to *convince* the reader.

The Interpretative Essay

The major writing assignment in the course is an essay of **8-10 double-spaced pages** (12-point font) that considers one of the specific sites covered in the course, or a similar site in the United States (or its 'possessions' abroad).

Through synthesis of sources (variety and depth of research will be rewarded), your paper should attempt to answer this question: *How* did the site you have chosen become a 'blank spot', a 'sacrifice zone', or both? This, then, is a historical project of sorts, based on the premise that there is nothing inevitable in the making of blank spots and sacrifice zones. We will discuss this in greater detail during class time.

This paper will require you to conduct library research. Be sure to use **five or more scholarly sources** (not including sources from the course reading list, which you are certainly free to use in addition). These should be both serious books and journal articles.

Start with a **2-3 page proposal** that includes three components: an 'idea statement' detailing how you intend to approach a particular site; a tentative structure for your paper; and a few relevant sources that you have identified. **This proposal is due on January 30** (electronically), and will be returned by February 9.

The essay itself is due on March 11 (electronically), and will be returned by March 25. Complete citations and a bibliography are required. Instructions for assignment submission will be provided early in the term.

Finally, you must submit a **revised essay** that responds to my comments and suggestions on the first 'draft'. Your revisions will probably lengthen the original essay, but only by a few pages. You **must use the 'track changes' function** in Word or a similar program so that your edits are visible. Complete citations and a bibliography are required again. When reading your revised essays, I will be looking for additional material and sources, but also for the reorganization and reshaping of your original arguments. This revision stage is a crucial element of academic writing, and many other types of writing as well! **Your revised essay is due on April 8 (electronically)**, and it will be returned to you by the end of the exam period.

The penalty for late submission of all assignments will be **5%/day**, or the closest number value to that percentage, *including weekend days*. Please maintain electronic copies of your assignments. Legitimate excuses aside, assignments submitted more than a week after the due date will not be accepted.

For more information on U of T writing resources and support, see www.writing.utoronto.ca and www.geog.utoronto.ca/resources/wit-program. You can also consult your College Registrar's Office for information on writing skills labs and courses.

Course Administration:

Extensions will be granted only in the case of illness, and only on the receipt of a completed University of Toronto medical certificate. Please consult your college registrar should you be having difficulties during term that prevent you from completing your course work due to extenuating circumstances. For more information, including on Counseling and Psychological Services, see <http://healthandwellness.utoronto.ca/>.

You are certainly encouraged to collectively discuss course content. However, plagiarism and submitting an assignment under your name that you have not completed are offences under university policy. Plagiarism is quoting (or paraphrasing/summarizing/borrowing!) the work of an author without a proper citation. Have a look at www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize, and the "Rules and Regulations" section of the Arts and Science Calendar (www.artsandscience.utoronto.ca/ofr/calendar/rules.htm), for further information.

If you require additional accommodations, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca or www.accessibility.utoronto.ca.

The Course Website:

Once you have logged in to the "Learning Portal" (portal.utoronto.ca) using your UTORid and password (see www.utorid.utoronto.ca), look for your **Courses**, where you'll find the link to the SII199 website along with all of your other Blackboard-based courses. The course website will contain copies of the syllabus, lecture slides, and some readings; it will also include a Discussion Board where you can submit your three discussion questions when it is your week to do so.

All students should have a valid UofT email address, and you should also ensure that this address is properly entered in the ROSI system. Forwarding your utoronto.ca e-mail to an external account (Gmail, Hotmail, Yahoo, etc.) is not recommended.