RHET 303 Writing about Travel: Composition as Reflection on Time Abroad

When you use memories as a source, they're no different from any other source -- the composition still has to be made. -- E. L. Doctorow

People returning from study or travel abroad are often asked: “How was Peru/London/Tibet/Zanzibar?” Frequently, after such travelers have replied “fine,” “great,” or “really tough,” the conversation stops. But what more would such travelers like to say? How can we make sense of our trips? How can we explore what they mean for us and convey that meaning to other people?

This course will create a community of writers and travelers; in it, we’ll both read and create various texts of writing about travel. Our work will help travelers process their time abroad; it will engage you in writing and reading assignments designed to help you describe and shape your experience and thus integrate it into your larger personal and intellectual journeys.

Foremost, we’ll be concerned with making meaning out of travel. You’ll work to make sense of your journeys abroad – a sense that others can access. (See the epigraph.) The key for us will be figuring out how to take our private memories and journal entries and shape them into something that others can connect to, understand, and even be moved by.

Caveat: Please note that if you are interested in the kind of travel writing published in the Sunday NYT or that provides directions and advice for other travelers, we won’t be doing that, and this may not be the class for you.

Course goals
You will:
• gain perspective on your time abroad through writing and talking about it
• practice and understand various parts that go into making sense of travel: description, narrative, scene creation, characterization, genre, self as character
• develop your abilities to draft, compose, organize, and revise your work
• develop your ability to comment on other people’s work
• recognize that there are different genres of travel writing and work consciously within various ones

In addition to the above, you can expect to:
• write a lot -- daily, even.
• participate in a community of writers and thinkers
• reflect on travel in both a broad and specific sense
• read and analyze examples of travel writing
• contribute to and perhaps even lead class discussion
• bring several pieces through major revisions
**Required texts:**  Bill Roerbach, *Writing Life Stories*
   The New Granta Book of Travel
   Many, many things on Bb; figure out of a way to have the texts in class with you: this is important.

**About the schedule and workload:** Please note that there is often a lot assigned for a Tuesday. I’m accounting for you to carry out this work over the five days you have between classes, so please plan accordingly. At times you may be tempted to skip the readings in order to focus on writing: don’t do that. You need the readings to get a sense of what has been done, what’s possible, and what needs to be reimagined.

**About Roorbach:** We will be working with Roerbach’s *Writing Life Stories*. Please note that he seems more concerned with publication – or bringing your writing up to those standards – than this course generally will be. *We are concerned with finding ways for you and me to make meaning of time abroad through writing.*

**About the blog:** We’ll be using the blog feature on Bb; these blogs will only be visible to people in the course. As we go along I will add prompts and questions to get you starting on a blog entry. Each week, you should choose at least one prompt to respond to on-line; maybe you have your own ideas, and won’t need them. It’s also possible that, as we work together, I might ask you individually to pursue something particular to your needs and interests. The idea is to do a bit of free-ish writing every week; writing a blog piece is meant to shake ideas loose, to help you explore and think out loud, as it were. Blog are due on Bb on Friday each week. (If for some good reason you don’t want to make your response public, you may email it to me.) Once they are on Bb, feel free to comment constructively and enthusiastically and thoughtfully on each other’s blog entries.

**About Matan, our writing associate:** I have asked Matan to be our writing associate because he is an excellent listener and reader, and you can depend on him for expert feedback and guidance on your work. Expect to work closely with him on your writing; he will also offer responses to your work. During the first two weeks of the course, you are all required to meet Matan to get acquainted. He will offer weekly office hours as well.

**Policies and Procedures**
- In order to receive credit for the course, you must complete ALL writing and reading assignments in a timely and acceptable fashion. Please: no late papers or assignments.
- I expect you not to miss class unless you are quite ill. If you miss more than three unexcused classes, it will affect your grade.
- I expect you to arrive at class on time.
- Please shut your cellphones OFF. If you must use your laptop for readings, then shut off the Wifi. I’m serious. If I find you reading email or Twitter or some such crap in class, you will face the wrath of my eternal ire.
- **Email.** I often use email to communicate with you about assignments, questions, changes, etc. Please be sure to check your email at least once a day.
- When you post things on Bb, please do so by both copying your work into the message and by attaching your doc as.doc and .docx. Otherwise, no one will be able to read them.
- **About participation:** In a class such as this, you must contribute helpfully and daily. Certainly,
when we have discussions, workshops, or do small group work, you should speak up and contribute. You can also participate by being present, awake, alert, and looking engaged; sometimes this engagement even leads you to ask questions, offer a comment, or respond to my queries or to those of your peers. **Attendance** is integrally tied to participation.

- **On grades:** This course focuses a lot on process – on the many ways you process your experience, write, re-write, and revise. Because of this, I am loath to grade each individual piece. Instead, I will look at your work more holistically. I will give you extensive feedback on longer assignments and drafts. I will check to see that you have completed all the smaller assignments and respond briefly to them.

  We will use a contract-grading method for this course. That means that I will not grade individual pieces; instead, I’d like us to focus on building community, creating a productive conversation, and engaging deeply with the issues that we’ll face as writers and travelers. If you

  1) attend regularly, 2) participate in course activities, and 3) do all assignments in a thoughtful way, you will earn a B+ for the course. If you honor the contract and go a step further to show exceptional commitment to your work, you will move into the A range. If you don’t meet the contract (due to absences or late arrival, lack of preparation, and lackluster performance on assignments) your grade will lower. I will let you know at mid-term where I think you are. At the end of the semester, you are invited to submit a final self-evaluation if you wish; I will consider this when I determine your grade.

- **On classroom climate, risk-taking, and community:** Writing about other people and places is an inherently fraught enterprise. It’s important that writers feel free to express their ideas and take risks. It’s important for readers to be patient with writers, to ask questions rather than simply react or assume. I want to foster a community where it’s okay to take risks, where it’s okay to be wrong, and it’s okay to ask questions of each other. All this requires listening, thinking, and not jumping to conclusions.

- **On cover letters and response letters:** We will use these to inform our responses to each other’s work. I include them descriptions of them here for you to refer to throughout the course. Cover messages should be include BEFORE the work to be reviewed.

**COVER LETTERS:** Please include a “cover message” with your work in which you respond to the questions below and present any other concerns you have. Think of this as an opportunity to ask for the kind of feedback you need.

- What do you see as the main point or idea of your piece?
- What do you think is good about what you’ve done?
- What’s your number one question about your piece? Do you have any other questions?
- If you were going to start revising today, what would you focus on?

**RESPONSE LETTERS:** In these you should prepare some written comments for the writer. Your job is NOT to edit or proofread the piece but rather to respond as a thoughtful and helpful reader, using the writer’s own responses to guide you. Print out your response, bring them to class and plan to give them to the writer.

You should expect to spend **at least** 30 minutes reading and responding to the draft. As you carefully read each draft, write marginal notes to the writer on anything that puzzles you, then write a letter to the writer in which you address these questions:
• In your own words, what is this piece about? (What’s its idea?) At this stage in the process, this may be different from what the writer thinks.
• What do you see as the strengths of the draft?
• Identify two elements of the writing (coherence, scene, etc.) that you think the writer should focus on in revising, and discuss these in relation to the draft. Try to point to specific sentences and paragraphs whenever possible.
• In the cover letter, the writer has asked one or more questions. What answers do you have to offer?

SCHEDULE of assignments: subject to change – check your email!

**Meanings of Travel**

2/4 First day of class
2/6 Roorbach, Intro & ch. 1, Getting Started. Do exer. 1, 5 & 6.
   Eric Leed, from *The Mind of a Traveller*, Bb, 22pp
   Pico Iyer, *Why We Travel*, Bb, 10pp

Over the weekend: Watch *The Wizard of Oz*. As you watch, consider the meanings given to travel in this film and what they might say about travel and certain American myths and dreams.

2/11 Assgt. 1 posted by class time: Write up a memory from a recent trip (1-2 pp single-spaced)
   James Clifford, *Traveling Cultures*, Bb, 15 pp
   Farai Chideya, *Traveling While Black*, Bb

**Memories, Notes, Fragments**

2/13 Read Roorbach, ch 2, “Memory” and do exercises 1-5. Bring exercise 1 to class. Do it up!
   But instead of a map of your childhood, choose a site of your travels.
   Kathleen Cann, *Utterly Outside*, Zine
   Theroux, Five Travel Epiphanies

2/16 Assgt. 2 due; post on Bb by 11 pm.
2/18 **Read everybody’s piece before class time.** Then meet in assigned groups to discuss each other’s pieces. Refer to the handout for Assgt. 2.
2/20 Bruce Chatwin, *The Road to Ouidah*, *Granta*, 11pp
   Bennett Walls, *Stranger* (Postscript to Zine), Bb
   Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian*, Bb, 11pp

Revision of Assgt. 2 due 2/23

**TECHNIQUES**

**Stories:** Note again, we may not discuss all of these on Tuesday, but you’ve gotta be ready!
2/25 Adam Hochschild, *Travel Writing: Inner and Outer Journeys*
   Bill Bryson from *Notes from a Small Island*, Ch 1, Bb, 21pp
David Sedaris, Turbulence. BATW06, Bb, 7pp
Kira Salak, Mungo Made Me Do It, Bb
Ari Kaplan, Sky Mall, Zine
Andrew O’Hagan, How It Ends, Granta

2/27 Assgt. 3: Write a “Story.” Post it on Bb before class.

Scenes
3/4 Roorbach, ch 3. Scenemaking. Do exercise 1, but choose something from Chatwin or from another text we have already read for class. Bring your stuff to class. Do exercises 2-4
Bruce Chatwin, excerpt from Songlines, Bb
Truman Braslaw, Steve and Flagel, Zine
Ariel Lewis, Beach Days in Glyfada, Zine
3/6 Large Workshop 1.

Meet in your small workshop groups over the weekend.

Characters and Character
3/10 Assgt. 4 due: Writing: Tell a travel story in which you think especially about characters. Post it on Bb by 4 pm.
3/11 Roorbach, ch 5, Characters and Character, ex. 4-7 and 9-11, and 17
Alice Ollstein, Samaritans, Zine
Molly Bradley, The Gambian, Zine
3/13 Bennett Walls, From the Lake, Zine
Alex Krohn Drinking With the General
Richie Chevat, The Screenwriter’s Vacation, BATW04, Bb, 4pp
3/14 Revision of something very good and important due by 4 pm.

Peer workshop in and outside of class.

3/18 Large Workshop 2
3/20 Reading. Midterm project due in class.

Spring break: You will get a midterm grade.

4/1 Essays/Big Ideas
Roorbach, ch. 4, pp. 65-78, ex. 4-5. Post your exercises on Bb by class time.
Didion, A History Lesson, Bb, 2 pp
James Hamilton-Paterson, When I Was Lost, Granta, 13 pp
Binyavanga Wainaina, How to Write About Africa, Bb

4/3 Roorbach, ch. 4, pp. 78-86, ex. 7-8.
Dory Trimble, Creation Myth, Zine
Stevenson, Trying Really Hard to Like India, Bb

4/7 Assgt. 5 due by 4 pm.
4/8  Large Workshop 3. Plan to read and comment on three essays before class.
4/10  **Contact zones:**
     Stephanie Mora, Spacing Immigration, Zine
     Ochero-Okello, Arrival, *Granta* 14 pp
     Dave Eggers, The Man at the River, Bb, 3 pp
     Decca Aitkenhead, Lovely Girls, Very Cheap, Granta, 25 pp

     Begin your final project

4/15  **Others, Otherness, Being Othered**
     Mary Willem, For American Girls on Indian Trains, *Zine*
     Rose Chasm, India: The Story You Never Wanted to Hear, Bb
4/17  Heather Eliot, Sandbags in the Archipelago, BATW 2004, Bb
     Paul Theroux, The Lepers of Moyo, Bb
     Tobias Schneebaum, A Drive in the Unknown, Bb, 23pp

4/22  Workshop 4
4/24  George Saunders, The Incredible Buddha Boy BATW 2007, 26pp
     Kevin Fedarko, High in Hell, BATW 2007, 18pp
     Uwem Akpan, An Ex-mas Feast, Bb

4/29  Workshop 5
5/ 1  Jonathan Stern, The Lonely Planet Guide to My Apartment, BATW 07, Bb
     Dory Trimble, 36 hours: Salt Lake City, *Zine*
     Ian Frasier, A Kielbasa Too Far, BATW 2007, Bb

5/ 6  Workshop
5/ 8  Workshop
Final exam period: Saturday, May 17, 9 – 11 a.m. Class reading

Things I love but didn’t have a place for:
If you want to think about form, see especially:
Combe, Alpert, and Cann “Synethesia” in the Zine, as well as anything by G. W. Sebald
If you want to think about history or reporting or getting the “facts” down, see especially
Rory Stewart’s “Dervishes” in Granta, and William Darymple on Bb