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21L.007 World Literatures: Travel Writing
Fall 2008

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Final essay

This essay, like the first two, should be 5-7 pages. It should have an interesting title. Most of the topics presume some degree of comparison, but the level of detail and the number of texts explicitly considered is up to you. The goals are twofold: first, to look back over what you've read and thought this fall, and put some of that thinking together into an interesting shape (interesting to you, that is); second, to show me what you know. One good way to do this, and also to make your points more concrete and prose more vivid, is to quote frequently but concisely from the texts you're discussing; when you do so, remember to pay attention to context (both reminding the reader where in the narrative you're citing from, and considering the implications for your argument of what surrounds the text you quote). I'm far less impressed with vague, hand-waving generalizations than with well-defined claims that correspond clearly with evidence. I like to learn something from an essay, not necessarily new facts but new perspectives, new questions, new connections. I don't need to be impressed by your vocabulary or held at arm's length by your prose; I like an essay that is simply trying to communicate to me something that has captured the writer's attention. Finally, I like clear structure that stays clear as the essay progresses (where are we in the argument, what is coming next, why it's coming next).

The only *firm* requirement for this essay is to pay *some* attention to a text that you haven't written about yet, whether from the last part of the semester or earlier.

TOPICS

1. Travel might be said to have two "end points": getting "there" (wherever we hope to arrive. or "the inner cave") and getting back. Either of these could be the focus of an essay: moments of arrival (how do we know when we get "there," what do we find, how does it meet our expectations, what does it enable us to do, how does it change the traveler or the conditions of the journey) or moments of return (how do we feel about the end of travelling, what do we bring back -- tangible or intangible, what have we left behind, how does home look once we have been away, was the journey "worth it").
2. In similar terms, an essay could be focused on the initial "call to adventure" (to borrow from Jonathan and Yasemin): what initiates the journey? With what hopes or desires, needs, regrets, or fears, does the traveler separate him or herself from home? How does the experience of the journey match these expectations?
3. What makes a "good" explorer, or a bad one? To answer this question, I would need not only to list the qualities such a person has, but also to consider the criteria which judgment is being made; I would have to scrutinize what I think exploration should accomplish, and what it should not do. I would also probably reflect on some of the different audiences potentially engaged in making judgements: scientists and other knowledge professionals? the government? the public? officers? bearers and paddlers? hotel clerks? Adelie penguins? a howling mob?
4. What is a journey? How far do we need to go before we can say we are on one? How much do we need to see? Must it have an objective? Must it succeed in its initial aims to be a "success"? What happens to travelers and to their narratives when voluntary travel becomes a struggle for survival?
5. What would be an ideal journey? where would you go? what would you bring? what would happen, both in terms of events, and in terms of your own experience? why should we fund you? what would be the outcome? (Note: even with this topic, you must find a way to "show me what you know.")

6. Do "journeys" only exist in books, or do we live out these patterns as well? Do we have to dress up in pith helmets or paddle birch bark canoes to be explorers or to have an experience of discovery? How does the phenomenon of modern travel, ordinary travel (on planes, trains, buses, subways, etc.), compare with the historic experiences of quest, exile, exploration and so on that have been our focus for most of this semester? (Caryl Phillips' description of his own travel could make a place to begin).
7. Planes, trains, automobiles, pagazis, compasses, sextants: just for something different, think about the role played by transportation and the technology of location in the experience of travel. What difference does it make, qualitatively as well as practically, to the traveler's experience to be travelling by one medium as opposed to another? (For those who are interested, one Lewis and Clark wiki focused on the technology of mapping).
8. Other: this *is* a literature class, so attention to a writer's prose style and the quality of his language will always be welcome, whatever your topic. I haven't provided an explicitly historical topic (how travel has changed over time, how travel narratives reflect and affect their times) because these seem, in my opinion, to require more research than is appropriate for the final essay in this particular subject, and we haven't discussed how that kind of work would need to be done. However, you can certainly consider historical time as one dimension of comparison for several of the topics above.
9. Bonus: if you have come up short of the 20pp. minimum for your writing in the class, or simply if you're interested, add a postscript to your essay proposing a book or movie that I might add to the syllabus, and tell me why you think it would be interesting. Suggestions from regions of the world other than those we've covered would be especially welcome, and they need not be non-fictional accounts of travel.