

English S412: Personal Geography

Course instructor: Colleen Kinder

Yale Summer Session 2021, Session B: July 12-August 13

Meeting times: T, Th 1-4:15

COURSE DESCRIPTION

"Place is where the 'I' goes," claims fiction writer Dorothy Allison. "Place is what that 'I' looks at, what it doesn't look at." Every writer—whether a memoirist, novelist or journalist—must deal with the challenge of how to capture a sense of place with precision and force. And yet in any atmospheric rendering, subjectivity is at hand. Always, atmosphere refracts through the prism of one gaze and one sensibility: the author's—whether they are native, outsider, or a hybrid.

This course examines a wide range of place-based literature, from long-form urban portraits to travel memoir excerpts, with a focus on the particular authorial persona driving each piece. How is this writer bringing the landscape to life and imbuing it with a distinct ambiance? What are they choosing to enunciate, question, romanticize, or criticize? What do we learn about the writer through the prism of place? How is the setting of the essay or story a "character" in and of itself?

Readings by writers such as Gretel Ehrlich, Binyavanga Wainaina, Jan Morris, Andrea Lee, Leslie Jamison, James Baldwin, Geeta Kothari, Teju Cole, and Pico Iyer will acquaint students with the techniques by which journalists and writers capture the essential qualities of a place, and negotiate their own presence within the context of that place portrait.

Founded on the creative principle that "constraints bear fruit," this course demands that students employ specific writing prompts—creative directives that develop their skills in rendering place in evocative and singular ways. Editing is also a major component of the course, as students are paired with a different "writing partner" every week and charged with responding to that writer's work with rigor and insight. Students have the option of incorporating a multimedia element into their final assignment (a photo-essay, an audio/video piece, an illustrated essay). Finally, within one week of the course's conclusion, every student will submit an article pitch or fully-realized essay to a publication of their choice.

TEXTS

- Course Packet: exemplar essays in the place-writing genre
- Course Workbook: a collection of quotes and excerpts relevant to rendering place

SEMINAR. 11-1 (Mon); 11-1 (Tues); 11-1 (Friday). Three times a week, we'll come together to delve into the major readings and to do impromptu writing exercises for the purpose of:

1. developing varied techniques for rendering place with specificity and force;
2. generating ideas and fodder for student essays;
3. deepening our analysis of exemplar texts via creative experimentation.

CONFERENCES *Wednesday & Thursdays*

Once a week, each student will meet for a 20-25-minute conversation with the course instructor, in which the instructor will survey and critique the writing submitted by the student in the preceding week—both the short, daily essays and a draft of that week's major essay assignment.

WRITING PARTNERS

Every week, students are assigned a “writing partner”: a fellow student whose writing they must respond to throughout the week. These daily critiques serve as supplements to the feedback of the course instructor and also function to develop the editing faculties of each student. The challenge is to point fellow writers in the direction of higher potential for every work they author, by underscoring what’s effective in a first draft and also articulating possibilities for betterment of each piece. Students will be informed of their writing partner for each week in the very beginning of the course and are expected to develop a daily schedule with this person for “swaps”—a schedule tailored to both of their writing practices and daily rhythms.

WRITING PRACTICE

Students are granted weekday mornings to focus on their writing and urged to keep this space sacred and as uncluttered as possible. Plan well with writing partners, so that the partners are intersecting at an optimal time: once they've fully tapped their creativity and need outside input in order to push their ideas and stories further.

MICRO ESSAYS

Three days a week (Mon-Wed), students will author and submit an essay of 400-600 words. Each essay will respond to one of the writing prompts for that particular week. Essays should not exceed one page (any spacing or font size is fine, so long as students keep within the word count and single-page limit). At the top of the page, students should identify which prompt their essay is in response to, and also include a word count. All micro-essays are expected to be highly polished and free of spelling and grammar errors. If a student wishes to push the parameters of a given prompt, the student must make their case to the instructor.

in person and garner permission to depart from the terms of the prompt. Students are allowed to take one “day off” from writing a micro-essay, and required to inform the instructor, on the day of their break, that they won’t be submitting an essay.

MACRO-ESSAYS: “DRAFTS” & “FINALS”

Three longer essays are produced in this course - in the second, third, and fourth week of the course. Prior to conferences during these weeks, each student turns in a draft of their essay. While referred to as “draft,” this essay should be *as developed and polished as possible*. Writers who turn in undeveloped and unrealized work will inevitably get less nuanced and sophisticated feedback in response to their work. The most ideal scenario is one in which:

- 1) the writer evolves their essay to the greatest extent possible;
- 2) the writer receives, metabolizes and applies the feedback of their writing partner;
- 3) the writer submits a highly developed draft of their essay;
- 4) the instructor administers a critique to catalyze final revision insights;
- 5) the student puts their draft through a rigorous revision in the final weekday of our editorial cycle, and submits a highly polished and evolved essay by Friday.

FEEDBACK

Students will receive grades for their four macro-essay assignments, whereas the micro-essays are appraised and graded as a portfolio at the end of the course. While the quality of the writing (aptness of form, thrust of narrative, strength of voice, success of style, degree of clarity) is the main basis of the grade, the writer’s willingness to experiment and revise their work in radical and fearless ways are also taken into consideration. Furthermore, overall improvement (which encompasses developing stylistic and formal range as a writer, as opposed to “playing to one’s strength”) is noted, valued and considered in the grading of the micro-essay portfolio. Students are asked not to approach the instructor with questions about grades, but rather to treat this course as an intensive creative training, and to focus all questions instead on how to improve their *writing*.

GRADES

30%: class participation (seminar + writing partner input); 35%: major essay assignments;
35%: micro-essays.

PUBLICATION REQUIREMENT

Within a week of the completion of the course, students must submit either an article pitch or a completed essay to a publication of their choosing. The publication does not have to be a “travel publication” per say, but the work itself should ideally exemplify place writing and/or vivid description. In order to show proof of this pitch or essay submission, students

are required to either bcc their instructor on the email submission, or forward a receipt of e-submission.

FINAL PORTFOLIO

All micro-essays (15 total); all first and final drafts of macro-essays (6 total).

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Absences during YSS cannot be tolerated. Students must be committed 100% to their summer studies. If a student missed too much of the course, withdrawal may be the only viable option. There are no dean's excuses in the summer.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All source material must be scrupulously documented. Students must make clear when a particular text is drawn from an outside source. If you have any doubts about whether something needs sourcing, you are urged to *ask the instructor*. Plagiarism is a very serious offense and will be treated as such. Erring on the side of caution and citing sources wherever you suspect they may be necessary is the best way to avoid this offense.

READINGS - SUMMER 2021

Week One

Mon. Seminar 1.1: The Art of Noticing

- Dorothy Allison, "Place," *The Writer's Notebook*
- Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook," *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*
- Monte Reel, "How to Explore Like a Real Victorian Adventurer," *The Believer*
- Ilan Stevens & Josh Ellison, from *Redaiming Travel* (Ch. 2 & 3)

Tues. Seminar 1.2: Interrogating the Genre

- Andrea Lee, "Notes on the Exotic," *The New Yorker*
- Jamaica Kincaid, from *A Small Place*
- Oindrila Mukherjee, "How to Survive a Visit to India: The Ethics of Representation," *The Essay Daily*
- Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*

Friday. Seminar 1.3: The Opening Move (*excerpts from Workbook*)

- Sarah Menkedick, from "The Beaten Track" (Kindle Single)
- Susan Orlean, from "All Mixed Up," *The New Yorker*
- Bruce Chatwin, from *The Songlines*
- Mary McCarthy, from *Stones of Florence*
- Beryl Markham, from *West With the Night*
- Audre Lorde, from "Notes from a Trip to Russia," *Sister Outsider*
- JJ Sullivan, from "Upon This Rock," *Pulphead*
- Sara Wheeler, from "No, No, Nanook," *Access All Areas*
- Elizabeth Kolbert, from *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*
- Eula Biss, from "Goodbye to All That," *20-Something Essays by 20-Something Writers*

Week Two

Mon. Seminar 2.1: Involving the Self

- Ariel Levy, "Thanksgiving in Mongolia," *The New Yorker*
- Mary Morris, from *Nothing to Dedare*
- Lawrence Durrell, "A Landmark Gone," *Spirit of Place*
- David Sedaris, "Journey Into the Night," *The New Yorker*

Tues. Seminar 2.2: Inhabiting Otherness

- James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes of a Native Son*

- Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "The Weight of James Arthur Baldwin," *Best American Essays 2017*
- Noo Sarawija, from *Looking for Transwonderland*
- Suketu Mehta, "Personal Geography," from *Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found*

Friday. Seminar 2.3: The Taste of Place

- Calvin Trillin, "Three Chopsticks," *The New Yorker*
- Geeta Kothari, "If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?" *The Kenyon Review*
- Pete Wells, "As Not Seen on TV," *The New York Times*

Week Three

Mon. Seminar 3.1 : Portrait of a City

- Italo Calvino, excerpt from *Invisible Cities*
- Colson Whitehead, excerpts from *The Colossus*
- Vivian Gornick, "On the Street," *Approaching Eye Level*
- Ian Frazier, "Antipodes," *The New Yorker*
- Federico Garcia Lorca, "The Dawn," *Elsewhere*(translations 1 & 2)

Tues Seminar 3.2: Humor & Satire

- Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa," *Granta*
- David Foster Wallace, "Shipping Out," *Harper's*
- Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist*
- Nora Ephron, "Dear Frequent Traveller," *The New Yorker*

Friday. Seminar 3.4: Experiment

- Susan Sontag, "Project for a Trip to China," *The Atlantic Monthly*
- Jess Walter, "Statistical Abstract for My Hometown, Spokane, Washington," *McSweeney's*
- Rebecca Solnit, excerpt from *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*(book available in Auillar)

Week Four

Mon. Seminar 4.1 : Activating History

- John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens," *The New Yorker*
- EB White, from *Here is New York*

Tues Seminar 4.2 : Decoding Culture

- Peter Hessler, "Wheels of Fortune," *The New Yorker*
- William Least Heat Moon, "Nameless, Tennessee," *Blue Highways*

- Susan Orlean, "The Place to Disappear," *My Kind of Place*

Friday: Seminar 4.3: You, Reader

- Jan Morris, opening page from "In Ruritania," *Journeys*
- Leslie Jamison, "Indigenous to the Hood," *The Empathy Exams*
- Letter to a Stranger, *Off Assignment*
 - Meron Haderer, "To the Man Who Sold Me Shoddy Film"
 - Amber Meadow Adams, "To My Grandmother, %the Mush Hole"
 - Anjali Sachdeva, "To the Father Paused Under the Tree"

Week Five

Mon. Seminar 5.1: The Quest

- Gideon Lewis-Kraus, from *A Sense of Direction* (thru p.64)
- Anne Carson, from "Kinds of Water," *Plainwater*
- Alain de Botton, from *The Art of Travel*

Tues. Seminar 5.2: Extreme Climes

- Gretel Ehrlich, "From a Sheepherder's Notebook: Three Days," from *The Solace of Open Spaces*
- Nikki Gemmel, "Into Unknown Climes," *Better Than Fiction*
- Jake Rubin, "From on High," *N+1*
- Mark Strand, "The View," *The Best American Poetry 1998*

Friday: Seminar 5.3: Closing Moves; Student Selections

- 3 Course Packet Picks
- "Ithaka," Constantine Kavafy