DRAFT SYLLABUS

Encountering New York: Memoirs of Place

Spring 2018
Monday, 12:30-3:00
Room TBD

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Room 420

COURSE OVERVIEW

In “Washington Square, 1946,” Cynthia Ozick recounts the most embarrassing of freshman mistakes: how she arrived at New York University for classes the day before they started. She walked around, unaware of the rich history of the neighborhood and the artists working nearby, having faith that her education and her experience in the city would eventually “awaken” her. In this class we will immerse ourselves in writings about New York and will come to know the city through the eyes of the people who have come before us. Readings will cover major authors who have written about the city but will also include pieces by lesser-known writers, like the journalist Wong Chin Foo, who can help us glimpse what it was like to be a Chinese journalist in the city in 1885. This will serve as a jumping off point for students to write a series of urban mini-memoirs as a way to explore their writerly voices, their experiences of the city, and the voices and experiences of those who came before them.

Classes, which will be loosely chronological, will draw from the huge wealth of voices writing about the experience of New York City, from Dickens and Whitman up through Whitehead and more recent writers. Readings will consist of a mixture of essays, reportage, vignettes and poetic responses to the city, along with longer treatments. As readers we will be invited to consider how a sense of place, and a sense of history, can shape our own identities and expectations.

TEXTS UNDER CONSIDERATION

Writing New York: A Literary Anthology, edited by Phillip Lopate
Here Is New York, by EB White
Poems of New York, edited by Elizabeth Schmidt
Non-Stop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas, edited by Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

GRADES

10% Presentation: Leading class discussion on one of the required texts
20% First Paper (4 pages)
20% Second Paper (4 pages)
20% Third Paper (4 pages)
30% Research Paper (8 pages)

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Please note that because the very nature of this course thrives on discussion and in-class writing, on-time attendance and preparedness are absolutely mandatory.
Students will write three out of four “memoirs of place” listed below. Each will start with a response to a class reading, which students will put in conversation with their own personal experiences of that place, other readings and artworks, and topics they will research. A final paper will require a more in-depth investigation of a particular place in the city.

Memoir of Place #1: On the Cusp of an Initiation

Think back to last term at a particular moment when you had arrived on campus before classes had begun. Take some time to revisit those places and take notes so you can write about them vividly. Then recount the experience, modeling it on the way Ozick does in “Washington Square, 1946.” What did you feel on the verge of? What did you not know then that you know now? As you do this, put your own experience in conversation with Ozick, just as she does with her surroundings. What is similar and different about your experiences? Where do they overlap and diverge? What, if anything, does it mean that both you and her were aware that you are part of a long line of people having these experiences across generations?

Memoir of Place #2: Urban Geography

... I am sitting at the moment in a stifling hotel room in 90-degree heat, halfway down an air shaft, in midtown. No air moves in or out of the room, yet I am curiously affected by emanations from the immediate surroundings. I am twenty-two blocks from where Rudolph Valentino lay in state, eight blocks from where Nathan Hale was executed, five blocks from the publisher’s office where Ernest Hemingway hit Max Eastman on the nose, four miles from where Walt Whitman sat sweating out editorials for the Brooklyn Eagle, thirty-four blocks from the street Willa Cather lived in when she came to New York to write books about Nebraska, one block from where Marceline used to clown on the boards of the Hippodrome, thirty-six blocks from the spot where the historian Joe Gould kicked a radio to pieces in full view of the public, thirteen blocks from where Harry Thaw shot Stanford White, five blocks from where I used to usher at the Metropolitan Opera and only a hundred and twelve blocks from the spot where Clarence Day the Elder was washed of his sins in the Church of the Epiphany (I could continue this list indefinitely); and for that matter I am probably occupying the very room that any number of exalted and some wise memorable characters sat in, some of them on hot, breathless afternoons, lonely and private and full of their own sense of emanations from without. . . . New York blends the gift of privacy with the excitement of participation and better than most dense communities it succeeds in insulating the individual (if he wants it, and almost everybody wants or needs it) against all enormous and violent and wonderful events that are taking place every minute. (from EB White’s “Here Is New York”)

Writing from your dorm room, research and create a geography of the city that locates you. Make this a combination of events that would be meaningful to you, but also events that will be meaningful to other people as well. In short, you will have to research what happened nearby. From there, write a short essay that responds to some of the claims in White’s essay. How do you see loneliness and privacy in similar and different ways than he observed in the city? How does the city both resemble and differ from the city he presents to us in 1948?

Memoir of Place #3: Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Ritual of Memory

Research newspaper accounts and eyewitness descriptions of the tragedy. Visit the site where it happened and record what the place looks like today as well as your experiences.
walking through that space (even or especially if you were oblivious to what had happened there). After this preparatory work, attend the memorial ritual, which should be on the anniversary, March 25. Take notes of the ritual itself and how it chooses to remember the event. Take notes on how passersby as well as your own experience. Use this as a platform to write about the following questions: To what extent can a place hold a memory? What does it mean to memorialize an experience, and how close can any memorial get to an historical event itself?

Memoir of Place #4: Urban Pilgrimage

Research a specific place (such as the Brooklyn Bridge or Coney Island) that is evoked by one of our readings. Research the origins of that space, how and when it was developed, and what populations have lived there in the past. Go and make observations about the space, include interviews with people you meet.

CLASS SCHEDULE
Week 1: Jan 22
Week 2: Jan 29
Week 3: February 5
Week 4: February 12
  Memoir of Place #1 due.
Week 5: February 26
Week 6: March 5
  Memoir of Place #2 due.
Week 7: March 19
Week 8: March 26
  Memoir of Place #3 due (tentative)
Week 9: April 2
Week 10: April 9
  Memoir of Place #4 due
Week 11: April 16
Week 12: April 23
Week 13: April 30
Week 14: May 7
  Final research paper due.