DRAFT SYLLABUS

Encountering New York: Memoirs of Place

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

Professor Christopher Wall
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411 Lafayette Street 4th Floor
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
The Colossus of New York, by Colson Whitehead
Essays of EB White, by EB White
How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York, by Jacob Riis
Notes of a Native Son, by James Baldwin
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.
PAPERS

Students will write three “memoirs of place.” 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 an in-depth investigation of a particular place in the city that students will research and visit multiple times.