

**Confrontations With the Unknown World**  
**Texts and Ideas**  
**Spring 2017**  
**Tu & Tr 11:00-12:15**

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### **I. Course Description**

Several interlocking ideas and questions underlie the conception and design of this course. We begin with the realization that, until the most recent times, very nearly all of our planet remained far beyond the ken of most human beings. The typical person simply could not, and did not, travel beyond his or her immediate surroundings. Thus, the world was almost entirely unknown, a mysterious, and often frightening, place. Precisely this, however, excited the intellectual curiosity, or the greed, or the megalomania of some, and thus drew those individuals inexorably into the unknown.

Nowadays, however, humans face precisely the opposite situation. There is pretty well nothing left in this world, which is unknown. And yet, there are still journeys of discovery being undertaken. The point here is that the unknown world has arguably shifted – largely, from without to within. These days, we are wont to go into a known wilderness, so as to discover some unknown world within ourselves.

All of this raises a large, and perhaps an important, question. Do human beings require a realm of the unknown? Must they, or will they, always seek out such a space? If so, and if the ways in which we humans go about this have shifted definitively (or at least, definitively, so long as we are confined to this planet), then have we lost some key connection to our mates who preceded us on Earth? Or, is there some link to them, which we can still discern in (say) the recent literature of confrontations with the unknown – or perhaps more accurately, confrontations with areas that still are relatively wild? We possess only one avenue by which we might undertake an inquiry regarding such matters – the literature of travel, discovery, exploration; the literature of confrontations with the unknown world.

We will start in antiquity, move through the medieval period, pause in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then pass on to our own times. We will read books by both men and women. We will read both eastern and western texts. In doing so, we will approach this literature from various angles. Why did a given author choose to undertake the journey, which he or she would ultimately describe? What does she or he tell us about the experience – and in what form, or format, is this accomplished? What are the literary, or otherwise, traditions of these accounts? Is what the author writes ‘true,’ or does (s)he fabricate? Ultimately, though, we will be interested in attempting to understand just what confronting the unknown has meant to, or for, the authors we read. What do these texts do with the unknown world? Or, put the other way around, what do these books and their authors make the unknown world do for them?

In the end, we might even ask the one very large question alluded to just above. Do present day explorers have anything at all in common with the explorers of times long past? Or, has our changed relationship with the physical world somehow irreparably

estranged us from our predecessors? In short, does Chris McCandless, qua explorer of the unknown, have anything at all in common with Ibn Battutah? Or, does he not?

In all of this, we will be interested in the journey itself, but then equally in the written account of that journey. Can the two be equated? Or, does some unbridgeable cleft intrude? And in particular, can we see any influence of earlier written accounts upon subsequent voyages into the unknown, and the written descriptions thereof? So, for example, how far did the model of Alexander the Great, which was initially preserved largely by Arrian's writing, act on subsequent explorers and conquerers, or on the chronicles of their adventures? Or, what did Marco Polo, and his story, actually mean for Christopher Columbus? In short, is there an imaginative chain of thinking and doing over the course of time, that we will be able to discern in our texts?

Ultimately, we will engage in a rich investigation of a number of human emotions – curiosity, greed, megalomania, restlessness, fear, confusion, and more – and how these play themselves out in literary accounts of confrontations with some unknown world. And indeed, if we accept that the movie “Quest for Fire” tells us something real and accurate about prehistoric humans, then we will have followed this inquiry over something approaching the entire course of human existence on this planet.

Finally, the following should be said. The Texts and Ideas component of the NYU Core Curriculum aims to provide you with an appreciation of the importance of humanistic learning. One of the great efforts belonging to this enterprise was the discovery and description of the unknown physical world – a project that has by now been effectively completed (with, perhaps, the exception of the very deepest oceans). This course will introduce you to some aspects of that grand undertaking. But, another of the monumental humanistic efforts has always been the discovery of the self. We will also be engaging with some recent versions of that venture. In short, you are a human, and as such, both of these enterprises are part of your past and your present. With luck, this course will compel you to think about yourself in the larger human context, and to keep doing so for many years to come.

## **II. Course Requirements**

### *A. Participation (10 %)*

You will be graded on your participation, especially in the recitation sections. It is expected that you will have done the assigned reading by the date on which it is due, and that you will be able and willing to discuss those texts in class with your colleagues and the teacher.

### *B. Two Exams (45 %)*

There will be two exams.

The first will take place on Thursday, March 9, and will function as a midterm exam. It will count as 20 % of your final grade.

The final exam will take place on **ADD DATE WHEN KNOWN**. This will count as 25 % of your final grade.

The exams will seek to ascertain that you have completed and comprehended the assigned reading. You will be expected to recognize and comment briefly on passages from these texts.

### *C. Three Papers (45 %)*

You will be asked to write three papers. Each of these papers should be about 5 pages (so, ca. 2,000 words). Each paper will count as 15 % of your final course grade.

In writing these papers, please pay very careful attention to the following. When you interpret a text, you cannot merely say things about that text, without showing your reader very explicitly just why you think what you think. In order to do this properly, you must cite passages from the text, which serve to support the various things you are saying about it. Therefore, be absolutely certain that in writing your paper, you carefully support your points with references to specific passages in your text, or indeed, with actual quoted passages from it. And please note: you must always supply page numbers from the text. Otherwise, the reader of your paper, who would like to go back to the text itself, so as to compare it with what you are saying, will not be able to do so. And, if the reader cannot check your points against the original text, that reader has no obligation whatsoever to give what you write any consideration at all. Arguments, which lack proper documentation, are useless and worthless, and will be graded accordingly (i.e., you can receive a failing grade for a paper, which does not do this properly).

Paper 1 (due Thursday, February 23): You will have read, by now, Arrian, Al Biruni, Ibn Battutah, and Marco Polo. Pick one of these accounts, and write an essay discussing your sense of what the author was trying to accomplish in writing the book he did.

Paper 2 (due Thursday, April 13): By now, we will have shifted into the modern period. So now, as with the first paper, think about either Burton, Pfeiffer, Heyerdahl, or Hillary. Why does your author write what (s)he does? What seems to be the goal of the book you choose to write about?

Paper 3 (due Monday, May 8): For this paper, pick one of the themes, which has concerned us over the course of this semester, and trace that theme through three of the texts we have read. Just one example might be the matter of telling the 'truth' about what one describes on a journey into the unknown world. A few other potential themes could be: authorial self-aggrandizement; empathy, or the lack thereof, for the new cultures encountered while on the trip; the author's goal in traveling altogether; exploration/adventure and self-discovery.

### **III. Weekly Plan**

#### **Week 1 (Jan. 24 & 26)**

This week will be devoted to starting our thinking about the literature we will read, and the problems it will raise. To begin the discussion, please watch the movie "Quest for Fire." We will discuss the film in class on Thursday.

This is a 1982 movie, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud. It is an adaptation of a 1911 novel by J.-H. Rosny. Briefly, the plot is that a group of Paleolithic people loses the fire, which it had carefully tended as a kind of pilot light (they do not know how to start a fire from scratch). Therefore, three members of the group are sent into the unknown, to try to find new fire for their community. A question to think about: Is plain necessity, at some most basic level, the driving impetus for wandering into the unknown?

This film can be rented from Amazon.com, and I will try to have it available for you on NYU-TV. Please be forewarned: the movie does involve both violence and sex.

Watch:  
“Quest for Fire”

### **Week 2 (Jan. 31 & Feb. 2)**

We will now turn to an account of Alexander the Great’s expedition to conquer the Persian Empire, and the continuation of this campaign beyond Iraq, and all the way out to India. The events took place in the late fourth century BC. However, Alexander never composed anything about his expedition. The accounts we will read, both of the campaign and of India, were written by a Greek-speaking author from a town (Nicomedia) in modern-day Turkey: Flavius Arrianus. His books were composed in the mid second century AD – so, something on the order of half a millennium after Alexander lived – and depended upon reports that had been got up by some of Alexander’s companions. So, here we have not a description produced by the traveler himself, but instead, texts written entirely at second-hand, or an even further remove. We will have to concern ourselves with that fact.

Read:

*Arrian. Alexander the Great. The Anabasis and the Indica.* Trans. M. Hammond. Oxford World’s Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013. ISBN 978-0-19-958724-7.

### **Week 3 (Feb. 7 & 9)**

In the 1020s AD, Abu Arrayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al Biruni (who was from the area of modern Uzbekistan) goes in the company of a ruler named Mahmud of Ghazna (a town in present-day Afghanistan) on a journey of conquest to India. Al Biruni was already a well-known scholar. The trip through India allows him to collect, and study, many Indian writings. Then, on the basis of what he has both observed and read, he produces an account of India. His account is our topic for this week.

Read:

*Alberuni’s India.* Translated by A.T. Embree. New York: Norton 1971. ISBN 978-0393005684

### **Week 4 (Feb. 14 & 16)**

Roughly three hundred years after Al Biruni traveled and wrote (in June of 1325 – to be exact), Ibn Battutah left his hometown of Tangiers in Morocco to go on a haj. Having reached Mecca, he simply decided not to return home. Instead, he spent some thirty years wandering through the Middle East, and much of Asia. Ibn Battutah appears to have been driven by simple Wanderlust. And while he covers much of the ground that Alexander and Al Biruni did, this travelogue is nothing like our first two.

Read:

*The Travels of Ibn Battutah.* Abridged, introduced and annotated by Tim MacKintosh-Smith. London: Picador 2003. ISBN 978-0-330-41879-9.

### **Week 5 (Feb. 21 & 23)**

### **[Paper 1 due: Thursday, Feb. 23]**

A generation before Ibn Battutah left Tangiers, another young man had set out from from Venice, Italy, and would cover much of the ground Ibn Battutah did. Marco Polo's journey, though, was not driven by simple curiosity. Trade had set his wanderings in motion. Nor, for that matter, was Marco at all devoted to the idea of writing. In fact, the account of his experiences was only put together when he, later in life, found himself imprisoned at Genoa with a man named Rusticello of Pisa, the author of various romances. Rusticello, upon hearing Marco tell of his adventures, realized immediately that here was something worth the spilling of some ink. And so, *The Travels of Marco Polo* was born. Here is yet another twist on the travel account, and on its potential meanings and interpretations.

Read:

*The Travels of Marco Polo*. Translated by Ronald Latham. London: Penguin 2004. ISBN 978-0140440577

### **Week 6 (Feb. 38 & March 2)**

When Christopher Columbus left Europe in 1492, and headed west across the Atlantic Ocean, he was carrying with him a copy of Marco Polo's *Travels*. The book would serve him well, he must have supposed, because he soon would be in Asia – at which point, Marco's narrative might easily become a kind of Fodor's guide for Columbus. In short, Marco's words were a constant companion for Columbus. Columbus himself kept journals as he sailed; but, these are no longer extant. Rather, his son, Ferdinand, as well as Bartolomé de las Casas, had access to these journals, and they used those to construct accounts of the voyages, quoting Columbus himself often, and at length. So, just as with Alexander, and also as with Marco Polo, we have Columbus principally as he has been given us by others.

Read:

*The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Edited and Translated by J.M. Cohen. London: Penguin Books 1969. ISBN 978-0140442175

### **Week 7 (March 7 & 9)**

#### **[Midterm Exam, Thursday, March 9]**

Columbus was followed by a crowd of Spaniards, who all brought hopes and plans with them to the "New World." And some, for example, Hernán Cortés, would produce accounts of their own doings in the Caribbean, México, or the Americas. Bartolomé de las Casas eventually became incensed – both by what he experienced when he was present in the region, and by the lies he found others, especially Cortés, to be writing in their own accounts of their doings. Therefore, he produced what he hoped would be a corrective to what Charles V had been hearing from others. With this book, then, we are not reading a narrative of discovery, exploration, or travel, but rather, an attempt to expose the gruesome crimes of many conquistadors, and to correct their often mendacious accounts of their own actions. In short, here is a blistering condemnation of confrontations with the unknown gone badly astray.

Read:

Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. Edited and Translated by Nigel Griffin. London: Penguin 1992. ISBN 978-0140445626

## **Week 8 (March 14 & 16)**

No class this week. Spring break.

## **Week 9 (March 21 & 23)**

### Tuesday:

For Tuesday's class, please watch the following movie: "Aguirre, the Wrath of God." This is a 1972 movie, directed by Werner Herzog. The movie is based on the exploits of the conquistador, Lope de Aguirre, who in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century led an expedition into the Amazon jungle, looking for the (as it turned out) mythical city of El Dorado. Herzog's film offers up the madness of chasing a myth into the unknown.

This film can be rented from Amazon.com, and I will try to have it available for you on NYU-TV.

### Thursday:

We will now move into the modern era, and will begin our journey in this period by tackling Richard Burton. Burton was a kind of chameleon, who traveled to, and assimilated himself into, various places around the globe. We will read about his attempt to discover the source of the Nile River, and thus, of his travels into the center of the African continent. Indeed, the Nile's source was a riddle, which had already exercised the curiosity of Alexander the Great; there was a long tradition of hope about finding the origin of this great river. Burton's own hope, in this particular undertaking, and in his writing about it, seems to have been to make a great name for himself.

Read:

Richard Francis Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa: From Zanzibar to Lake Tanganyika (Volume 1)*. Torrington, Wyoming: The Narrative Press 2001. ISBN 978-1589760622

## **Week 10 (March 28 & 30)**

Fourteen years before Burton set out for Africa, another traveler departed from Vienna on a journey of exploration. Ida Pfeiffer, who by 1842 had raised her children into young adulthood, now decided to fulfill a longstanding dream: she would visit the Holy Land. Pfeiffer chronicled the adventure, which her publisher eventually spoke of thus: "Few men were found to possess the degree of strength and endurance requisite for the carrying out of such an undertaking; but that a delicate lady of the higher classes, a native of Vienna, should have the heroism to do what thousands of men failed to achieve, seemed almost incredible." Here, then, we have something quite different from all we have read before – an account of a most difficult journey, produced by a woman, who was also able, because of her gender, to describe the lives of the women she encountered in ways that were impossible for male explorers to do.

Read:

Ida Pfeiffer, *A Visit to the Holy Land, Egypt, and Italy*. Trans. H.W. Dulcken. London: Ingram, Cooke, and Co. 1853. Reprint Lexington, KY: Filiquarian Publishing, LLC.

### **Week 11 (April 4 & 6)**

This week, we will tackle an adventure in both space and time. In 1947, Thor Heyerdahl and his crew sailed from South America to Polynesia on a raft made of balsa wood. This was a physical adventure for him and his crew; but, it was also a scientific adventure, whose goal was to demonstrate that just such a trip could have been made by prehistoric sailors, and that therefore, Polynesia could have been populated by people from South America. As Heyerdahl himself writes in the forward to the 35<sup>th</sup> edition of *Kon-Tiki*, “It may seem at times as if invisible fingers move us about like puppets on strings. But for sure, we are not born to be dragged along. We can grab the strings ourselves and adjust our course at every crossroad, or take off at any little trail into the unknown.” Here is his account of one such diversion into an unknown world of time and space.

Read:

Thor Heyerdahl, *Kon-Tiki. Across the Pacific by Raft*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks 2009 [orig. publ. 1948]. ISBN 978-0-671-72652-2.

### **Week 12 (April 11 & 13)**

#### **[Paper 2 due: Thursday, April 13]**

In the preface to the 2003 edition of his book about the first ascent of Mt. Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary writes this: “The explorers of the past were great men and we should honor them. But let us not forget that their spirit still lives on. Today, it is still not hard to find a man who will adventure for the sake of a dream or one who will search for the pleasure of searching, and not for what he may find.” This week, we will transition most clearly into a more modern world, where the adventure and the adventurer come together, and where the things discovered lie more within than without. The physical, geographic goal is known. The inner, spiritual objective is what remains unknown.

Read:

Sir Edmund Hillary, *High Adventure. The True Story of the First Ascent of Everest*. New York: Oxford University Press 2003 [orig. publ. 1955]. ISBN 978-0-19-516734-4.

### **Week 13 (April 18 & 20)**

#### **[Thursday, Paper 2 Due]**

A dream, or the pleasure of searching – such things apparently drove Edmund Hillary into the unknown. Fear was the motivator for Geoffrey Moorhouse. Having become persuaded that people’s lives are dominated by their fears, or at least, that his own life was subjugated to his own angst, Moorhouse decided to root the problem out by means of a journey into the unknown. He would traverse by foot, from East to West, the entire Sahara desert. The book’s title alone is most revealing in the context of our course.

Read:

Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Fearful Void. Across the Implacable Sahara, a Man Goes in Search of Himself*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. 1974. ISBN 0-517-57114-5.

### **Week 14 (April 25 & 27)**

“Long captivated by the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute...When the boy headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found, in abundance.” Thus does the journalist John Krakauer describe his subject, Chris McCandless. A young man wearies of the known, the usual, the given. So, he forsakes it all, and wanders off into the unknown. Ultimately, this journey of self-discovery costs him his life.

Read:

John Krakauer, *Into the Wild*. New York: Anchor Books 2015 [orig. publ. 1996]. ISBN 978-0-385-48680-4.

### **Week 15 (May 2 & 4)**

#### **[Paper 3 due: Monday, May 8]**

“It was a world I’d never been to and yet had known was there all along, one I’d staggered to in sorrow and confusion and fear and hope. A world I thought would both make me into the woman I knew I could become and turn me back into the girl I’d once been. A world that measured two feet wide and 2,663 miles long. A world called the Pacific Crest Trail.” This is Cheryl Strayed’s description of her unknown world – a physical, geographical world she had read much about, for which she had accurate maps, of which she had seen photos; but, this was also unknown terrain, a place where she would discover – herself.

Read:

Cheryl Strayed, *Wild. From Lost to Found on the Pacific Coast Trail*. New York: Vintage Books 2013. ISBN 978-0-307-47607-4.