Travel Writing from Home
December 28—January 15
Professor John D’Agata
Travel Writing from Home

- Creative Writing course
- Three weeks during winter break
- December 28—January 15
- Worth 3 credits, easily transferable to the English major and other majors
- No previous writing experience necessary
- No additional book expenses
What’s it about?
In some ways it’s about what we’re all doing right now...

Sitting at home on Zoom...

Attending a travel fair... on Zoom.

The irony of this is something that we’ve gotten used to, but we certainly aren’t any less frustrated with it.
We’re cooped up, we’re antsy.

It’s been seven months.

It’ll probably be several more.

And yet there’s so much world just waiting to be explored...
What’s a travel-lover to do?
In this course “Travel Writing from Home”

we’re going to explore what travel writers have done for centuries whenever they’ve found themselves in a predicament like ours . . . unable to travel far from home.

• Maybe they couldn’t afford to travel.
• Maybe they were in jail and literally couldn’t leave where they were.
• Maybe their maps, like this one, were so preposterously inaccurate that it would have been too dangerous for them to try to travel.
Whatever restrictions they faced, travel writers throughout history have managed to make do.

In fact, travel writing is one of the oldest forms of literature we have.
Why Has Travel Writing Been So Popular throughout History?

Because Travel Writing gives us the opportunity to explore and encounter new cultures and ideas, & to simultaneously learn new things about ourselves.
So, when travel writers couldn’t travel, what did they do?
Some writers used preexisting texts in order to create their own “armchair travelogues.”

- The 14th century Italian writer Francesco Petrarch is the best example of this.

- Petrarch secretly hated to travel—he was afraid of it. But he was a great researcher. During an era that was still technically the Dark Ages, Petrarch could find anything he needed in a library as long as he looked hard enough.

- He wrote *Petrarch’s Guide to the Holy Land* without ever even leaving Italy.
Some other writers just blatantly made things up.

- The 16th century British writer David Ingram is one of a number of writers who published books about impossible journeys they claimed to have taken.

- For example, Ingram said hiked diagonally across North America from Mexico to Nova Scotia in 1568, discovering along the way human-sized birds, a crystal city a mile high, and elephants.

- He called his book *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation*
And some writers simply redefined the meaning of travel.

- While serving in the army in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the French writer Xavier de Maistre was placed under house arrest for dueling without permission.

- To bide his time, he wrote a travel book—but not about any of the places he had visited as a soldier; instead, he wrote a travel book about the room in which he was incarcerated.

- His book \textit{Journeys Around My Room} is now considered a masterpiece of travel writing.
In “Travel Writing from Home,” we’ll read some of those writers from history who found “alternative” ways of traveling while they stayed put at home, thus giving birth to the phenomenon of the so-called “armchair travelogue.”
And we’ll also explore the work of some contemporary writers and artists who’ve taken a cue from history by creating travelogues that stretch the definition of what a travelogue can even be.
We’ll read the German writer Judith Schalansky, whose travelogue *Atlas of Remote Places* became an international bestseller, despite the fact that it’s about places around the world she herself has only read about in other writers’ books.

(note the coy subtitle: *Fifty Islands I Have Never Set Foot on and Never Will*)
We’ll read the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, whose travelogue *How to Write about Africa* satirizes how European and American writers have relied on the same tired clichés about the continent for hundreds of years—and have therefore never really written about anything but their own prejudices.

“Always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title.

We’ll even look at the work of some visual artists for inspiration, examining the images of travel photographer Erin Sullivan, who usually travels around the world capturing images of people and places few of us get to see in real life.

But for the past several months, the pandemic has made that impossible. So Sullivan has invented a new way of taking travel photos.

(This stone arch that Sullivan photographed in a desert canyon at night is actually just a paper bag that she crumpled up in her bedroom.)
This image of hikers moving through a wintry forest is actually just a few sprigs of rosemary stuck into a bed of cotton.
And these beautiful photographs of people fishing peacefully off a dock at sunset . . .
Are actually photographs of little model figurines sitting on top of tinfoil with a flashlight shining behind them.
What can we learn from these writers and artists?

How inventive can we get while travel writing from home?

What liberties can we take while trying to write about the world?
We’ll explore and discuss all of these questions in “Travel Writing from Home”

• We’ll read classic and contemporary versions of travel writing that rely heavily on the imagination

• We’ll experiment with writing our own travelogues using a variety of different constraints

• We’ll workshop our writing in small, supportive, and yet challenging groups

• And finally, we’ll put our travel writing to the test by virtually visiting exciting destinations abroad and then writing about them
Our “Virtual” Trip Abroad Will Bring Us to Either:

GREECE!

Where a professional archaeologist will meet with us each day to give us tours via Zoom of:

• The ACROPOLIS
• The ANCIENT AGORA
• MYCENAE
• OLYMPIA
• DELPHI
• PLATO’S ACADEMY
• & many other amazing locations throughout the country
Or . . .

SEVEN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES IN ONE WEEK!

Instead of meeting one tour guide in one country, we’ll meet seven different writers around the world who’ll take us on walks through their favorite parts of their cities, such as:

- SINGAPORE (pictured here)
- ISTANBUL
- KUALA LUMPUR
- ATHENS
- MEXICO CITY
- HAVANA
- BRUSSELS
And to wrap up the course, we’ll then write about our “virtual” tours.
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APPLICATIONS DUE OCT 23
Feel free to write to me with any questions:
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