

Spring 2012

Place-based Writing Exercises

Kelly Grey Carlisle

Trinity University, kelly.carlisle@trinity.edu

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Draft Assignment: Place-based writing.

At the end of this series of exercises, you will have created a piece of place-based writing. “Place-based” writing is writing that explores a particular place or area. In this class, we’ve read examples of place-based writing like John McPhee’s “In Search of Marvin Gardens,” but we’ve also encountered it in the setting passages of McPhee’s *Oranges* and will do so in Mary Karr’s *Liar’s Club*, Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Travel writing, where a stranger explores a new place, is also a form of place-based writing. Place-based writing almost always requires extensive research about a place as well as extensive first-hand observation of that place. For the purposes of this assignment, you are required to do both.

Exercises B, D, and E will count towards the course’s “Exercises” portion of your final grade. Exercises B and E, because they are simply notes you took, will be graded on a pass/fail (pass counts as an A; fail counts as D) basis, unlike your other exercises. Exercise D will be graded as a normal exercise.

The essay draft and accompanying afterword will count as one of the essay drafts described in the syllabus and will count towards 10% of your final grade.

Exercise A (In Class)

Because we have neither the time nor the budget to do much travelling in this class, our place-based writing must take place here in San Antonio.

If any of these places are unfamiliar to you, read briefly about them online. Then, pick one of the places on the list to write about. I've selected these places because they have certain characteristics that make them easier and more interesting to write about. You may also choose your own place, but you must consult me and get my approval first.

- The Alamo
- Alamo Plaza and environs (hotels, tourist areas, Ripley's, etc.)
- The River Walk
- The Missions
- San Fernando Cathedral
- La Villita
- El Mercado
- The Pearl Brewery
- The Quarry
- San Pedro Park
- Brackenridge Park
- King William Neighborhood

This project will be easier and more enjoyable if you find someone to work with on it. See if anyone else has selected your place and form a partnership or group. **You will NOT be writing your piece together**, but you may pool your research resources and travel together, if you like.

Read about your selected place in ALL of the following resources:

A tour guide to San Antonio (these will be placed on reserve after today's class)

A local history book (these are on reserve after today's class)

The place or organization's website

Take notes from your reading, including important dates, changes, events.

Exercise B Due Monday 1/30/2012

Make an initial visit to your place. You may go with your partner, but you must experience this place separately. Don't talk during the experience. Turn off your phone. Spend at least an hour exploring and observing this place. Be a lurker. Be unobtrusive. Watch people. Eavesdrop. Be on the lookout for evocative objects, incidents, or people. What do you notice about this place? Are there any contradictions in this place? Does this place evoke any emotions in you? **Take notes.** You may turn your phone back on after your observation period to take pictures.

Show me your notes for grade check-off.

Exercise C (In Class)

Monday 1/30/2012

Visit to Coates Library—Library as Flea Market

If you don't think libraries are fun, you haven't been a nonfiction writer for very long. Libraries are like the best flea markets, you never know what fun and unusual things you might find. You can use the library for inspiration or for research to find the facts and details that can enrich and deepen your work.

You will turn in assignments to Anne Jumonville at the end of class.

Exercise D Due Wed 2/1/2012

A) Using what you learned during your visit to Coates Library, choose, find, access, and study **five** of the following (five documents total—not five of each kind, although all five should not be of the same kind):

An account of the history of your place

A newspaper article that refers to your place from before 1975.

A more contemporary newspaper or magazine article.

Historical photographs or other images of your place.

A movie or film in which your place is featured.

An original historic document pertaining to your place. (Online access is acceptable; live access is much more fun)

An article or book from the University Archives that mentions or pertains to your place

A government document that refers to your place

A sketch, work of art, literature, or music that refers to your place

B) Write an MLA citation and a brief description for every resource you access. Decide whether this article is relevant to the narrative you are trying to create and if it is a reliable source. (Or, if it is unreliable, decide whether it is unreliable in interesting ways to your narrative (for humor, ambiguity, mystery, depth). Include these observations in your description.

Turn a copy of this annotated bibliography to me for grading. Share it with your partner, if you have one.

Exercise E Due Mon 2/6/2012

Return to your place for another visit. Observe what you did before, but this time, also try to make connections between what you observe and what you learned through your research. For instance, imagine the past events that happened here—look, even, for the exact place they happened. Try to imagine the people from the past who have been here—their clothes, identities, etc. Then observe the current place and its occupants once more. Finally, to understand this place as it is now, you may wish to talk to the people who live in, work in, or visit it.

What you learn here may help you discover what to write about and how you wish to focus your piece. Once you've discovered this focus, you may need to do additional research at the library.

Take notes. Show them to me for grade check-off.

Assignment: Create a piece of place-based or travel writing.

Due Wed 2/8/2012

Write at least 6 pages (you can certainly write more) on this place. Try to make it a complete piece in the space allotted. You may make the narrator as present and personal as you'd like, but you can also narrate this person in the distant third-person. Include concrete specific detail to make this place come alive for your reader; include evocative details, objects, people, and dialogue. Give your reader an idea of the history and background of this place. Make connections for him or her between past and present. Show your reader what you've noticed and thought about this place through the creative writing techniques we've learned so far. Above all, avoid hokey tour guide travel writing. You're not trying to convince someone to visit this place; you're trying to help them understand it.

As we've discussed in class, published creative nonfiction often does not make use of in-text citation the way scholarly writing does. However, you need to keep track of the information and ideas you learned through your research and which sources they came from. You need to also take care not to accidentally plagiarize by using expressions, phrases, or wording similar to your sources'. This has happened more than once in published pieces, and no matter how good the author's intentions were, it almost always reflects badly on them. **Therefore:** take notes about where you use your sources in your piece. Use these notes to write your "Afterword." Also, cite all of your sources in a "Works Consulted" page. You should list all sources you used to compose your piece, not only the ones you've quoted directly.

Finally, write an afterword that discusses the writing of this piece, your research process, the places you've used your research in the final piece, as well as any other interesting information about the process of creating this piece. This should be specific and detailed. It should be at least a page.

You should turn in your essay, works consulted, and your afterword to me.

If you are happy with your final piece, you should also submit it to Trinity's open sources research page: digitalcommons.trinity.edu

You can post any creative work here of which you are proud and which you wish to be shared with people online.