

Writing The City
English Writing 1200
Summer 2017

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Texts:

All the readings are either on Courseweb or online

A Journal (which I'll give you)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is about the practice of introspection and articulation. These are two necessary tools for those who travel and so find themselves in unfamiliar places, among strangers, having to learn to speak or think in a new way. Our aim will be to increase both our observational and expressive skills. We'll start with some writing about ourselves, ask ourselves questions, and then move outward toward seeing in new ways and organizing our perceptions into new structures. Your experience as a traveler will be our central subject matter. Central to the work of the class will be your ability to be messy, to trust in your creative process and to allow yourself liberty to say things that might make you feel very vulnerable. Not only will we be writing about our own obsessions, questions, and interests, we'll also be reading contemporary work by native writers, and engaging with the architecture, art, landscape, history and people around us.

Generally our class time will follow this pattern: Warm-up writing exercise, a discussion of a short piece of writing and then 20 to 30 minutes writing to an in-class writing prompt. Some days we will be writing in a generative sense—writing new work—but every third day or so, depending on the rhythm of the class and our travel schedule, we'll spend time workshopping pieces we've written, reading work to each other, and/or revising pieces for publication on our blog at pittinedinburgh.wordpress.com. Expect to bring your journal to every class and to write 1000-2500 words per week in it.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

To develop the habit of writing everyday

To become conscious of the ways that writing leads to thinking, rather than the other way around

To begin to articulate and integrate, via writing, our experiences as travellers with our previous experiences

To experiment with a number of compositional techniques

Grading will be based on the final drafts of your writing:

Blog pieces: 25%

Travel piece: 25%
Walk piece: 25%

Class participation and attendance: 25%

Disability Resource Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890, as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Academic Integrity Policy

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. (For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html.)

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on **Edit Forwarding Addresses**, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html.)

Tentative schedule

Week 1, Class 1

Hour 1

Introductions

Hour 1. 9 to 10

On board: Writing Your Name

Read: Amy Krouse Rosenthal, Amy
Robert Hass, My Name is Dmitry..."

Write for 20 minutes about one of your names--its origin, its history, its meaning, its weights, its meaning, its implications, its associations, its stories...

Hour 2 10 to 11

Read: Terrance Hayes, Wind in a Box

Write for thirty minutes taking on the form of Terrance Hayes' poem: in which you think about the what, who, when, and so on, that you come from, including both imagined things, particular stories, true stories, and facts. You don't have to write it as a poem but you are certainly encouraged to do it if you want. Who are you? If you had to describe what it feels like to be you, how would you do it? What are the important stories, myths, images, moments?

Class 2

Hour 1. 9 to 10

Models:

Kimiko Hahn, Firsts in No Particular Order

Max Frisch, Catalogue

Write:

What are your first impressions of the city, the country, as a list or as prose? 20 minutes?

Starting with Description

Talk about description and detail, learning to wait for the sensory detail rather than jumping to an opinion, learning to slow down your noticing. As a way to dissolve your use of clichés and easy snap decisions.

Hour 2 10 to 11

Read: Read: Cynthia Ozick, "The Shock of Teapots"

Revision of First Impressions piece: Choose one object from your earlier list and really concentrate on it in a new piece, extending those first thoughts by describing the object, as well as the environment around it, and then pivot and examine how your own state of mind, your expectations, and your education might be influencing the way you see this thing. In what ways does this self-examination change the way you originally saw your object?

30 minutes

Everybody reads out loud.

Homework:

Turn one of your impressions into a 500 word piece. You'll give those to me in class tomorrow. Feel free to write me a note about your experience as a writer, as well as your hopes and goals for this class.

Class 3

Hour 1. 9 to 10

Write: Choose a new object from yesterday's list of impressions or from something new you encountered yesterday and describe it to someone who has never seen it or who might misunderstand it. (20 minutes)

Read:

Kathleen Norris, Rain

Sven Birkerts, In Another City

Notice how Norris and Birkerts get us involved in their pieces. Take 15 minutes and see if you can't imitate in some way both of their approaches.

30 minutes

Hour 2 10 to 11

Write: Taking

David Young, Four About Heavy Machinery

Take either the object you just worked on or another object from your initial list and approach that thing from four very different directions. What directions does Young approach Heavy Machinery from? How does he use the initial subject and where does he drift away from it?

Read and quick workshop of pieces.

Homework: Revise one of your pieces for the blog. Bring in enough copies for everyone.

Class 4

Workshop Day

All class-- 9 to 11

In-class workshop. Everyone reads his or her piece for the blog.

Questions for listeners:

We'll try to respond in this order--

Is the story there?

Are there any basic construction and clarity problems?

Then, where are there clichés or a lack of precision in the imagery?

Then, last, in terms of style/texture. Can the writing be improved/sharpened?

Homework: by midnight tonight

Post on Courseweb at least one piece of writing you'd be willing to put up on the class blog.

Homework for next class:

Reading Assignment for next class: Read Adam Hochschild, *Travel Writing*

Victor Merina's *Reporting Across Cultures*

S. Mitra Kalita's *Reporting On Your Own*

Assignment:

For next class, bring in a 250-500 word description of at least one stranger you see today.

Week 2, Class 1

Hour 1. 9 to 10

Talk about the Hochschild, Merina, and Kalita pieces. What do they all say about writing across cultures? Is there anything you'd add/modify/disagree with, based on your experience so far?

Read:

Read in class: Mary Oliver, Singapore
Dorianne Laux, Laundromat
Birkerts, Starbucks

Hour 2 10 to 11

Walkabout:

Write a portrait of a mysterious person you encounter as you're walking around. Be careful to describe the person, what he or she is doing, and where they're doing it. Be equally careful, once you've established those details, to interrogate your own perceptions. Describe this person vividly and accurately, so we can see why they seem mysterious to you—is there some discomfort about what they look like or what they're doing? Are there any differences between you and this person in terms of race, class, gender, and so on, that you might be able to notice? Stay away from making judgments until you've provided details to justify them.

Let's shoot for a piece of about five pages of description.

Homework:

Read Birkerts' essay Everyday

Assignment for next class: write a 500-750 word portrait of someone no one else might notice, but who strikes you for some reason. Describe that person. Don't try to explain his or her thought except through the evidence of his or her actions, the details. You can say, "I imagine," but then be clear why the evidence leads you to imagine what you do...

Class 2

Hour 1. 9 to 10

Bring in your portrait(s). We'll do a read around first and then break into peer review workshops.

Hour 2 10 to 11

Henry Louis Gates, Sundays
Sheila Squillante, Four Menus (@Brevity)
Alison Townsend, Valentine (@Brevity)

What have you eaten here so far? What is surprisingly new or surprisingly common? Where did you eat it? Was there a story around it? Did you eat it on a dare or by mistake? Does it have a history to it? Write about an encounter with either a strange food you've encountered on your travels OR a familiar food you want people to see in a new way. See if you can't get all the senses in your piece somehow, although try not to use the words: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell.

20 minutes.

Homework:
Bring in one of your portraits (of a person or an dining experience) for next class.

Class 3

9 to 11 Workshop Day

In-class workshop. Everyone reads his or her piece for the blog.

Questions for listeners:

We'll try to respond in this order--

Is the story there?

Are there any basic construction and clarity problems?

Then, where are there clichés or a lack of precision in the imagery?

Then, last, in terms of style/texture. Can the writing be improved/sharpened?

Class 4

Hour 1. 9 to 10
Preparing to Travel: Two Forms

Read: Kimiko Hahn, Utica Station
Wang Ping,

Work on a zuihitsu--choose a word from the envelope

Let your mind work associatively--what connections are there to make? What disconnections? Is there a general connection/conclusion/question by the end? How does this end?

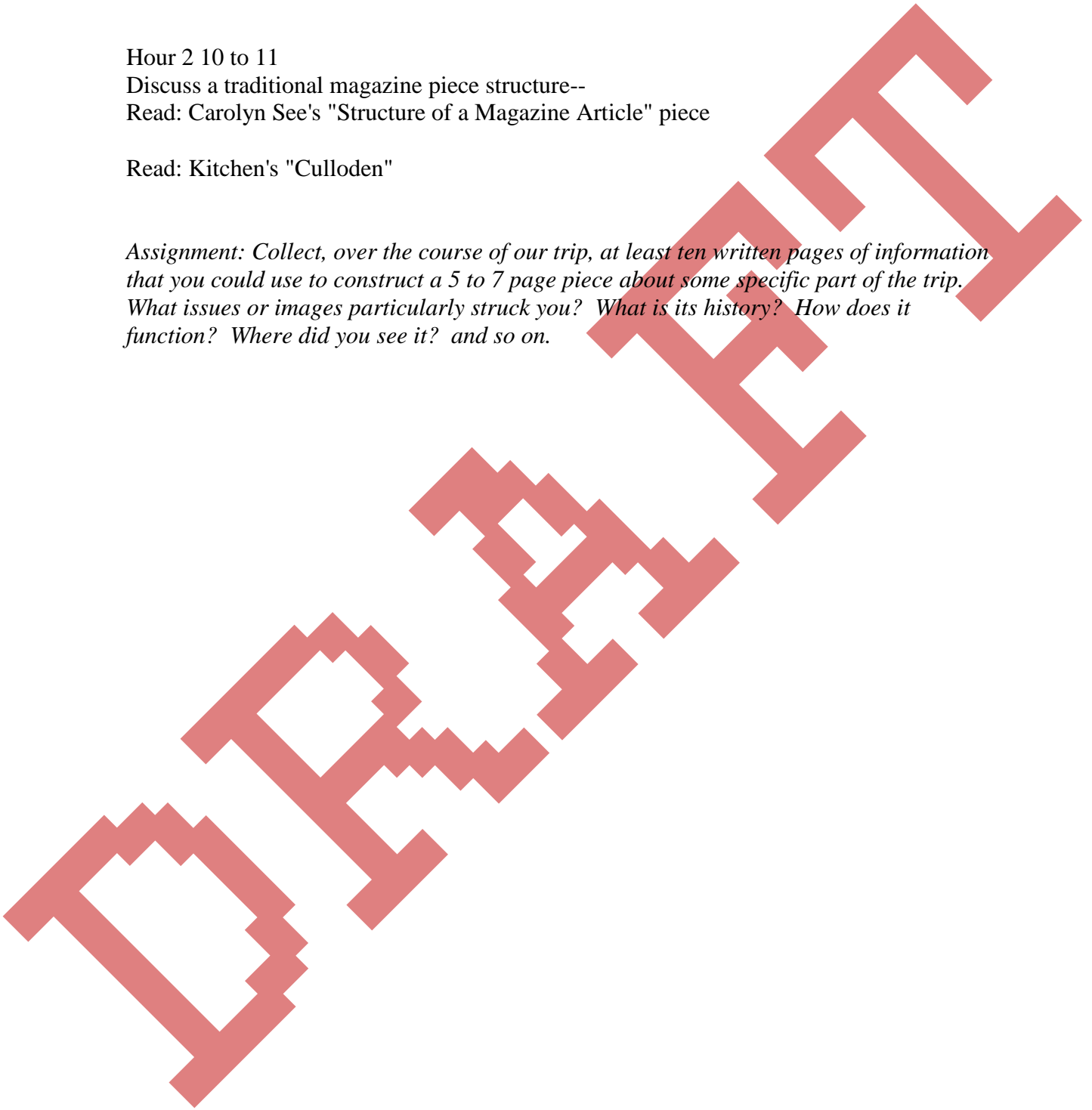
Hour 2 10 to 11

Discuss a traditional magazine piece structure--

Read: Carolyn See's "Structure of a Magazine Article" piece

Read: Kitchen's "Culloden"

Assignment: Collect, over the course of our trip, at least ten written pages of information that you could use to construct a 5 to 7 page piece about some specific part of the trip. What issues or images particularly struck you? What is its history? How does it function? Where did you see it? and so on.



Week 3, Class 1

Bring in your journals and any notes you've collected over the course of the trip.

Warm-up: Read Emily Hiestand, Afternoon Tea.

Try to think of some interesting words that are important to Scotland, that someone traveling here should know.

Hour 9:30 to 11

Let's go back to the Kimiko Hanh piece Utica Station and the Judith Kitchen piece Culloden. Discuss the way the pieces are organized differently.

Choose either the looser form of the zuihitsu or the more structured form of the travel article, and begin your piece about the trip. Where will it start? Was there a word you might want to begin with, one that became more and more important or mysterious or resonant over the course of our travel?

Write for thirty minutes on the travel piece. Aim for at least five to seven pages. I'll be coming around in case anyone wants to talk something out.

Class 2

Peer workshopping travel pieces for organization and content development.

Class 3

Peer workshopping for basic editing issues and correctness.

Class 4

Travel pieces are due.
Conferences with me about travel pieces

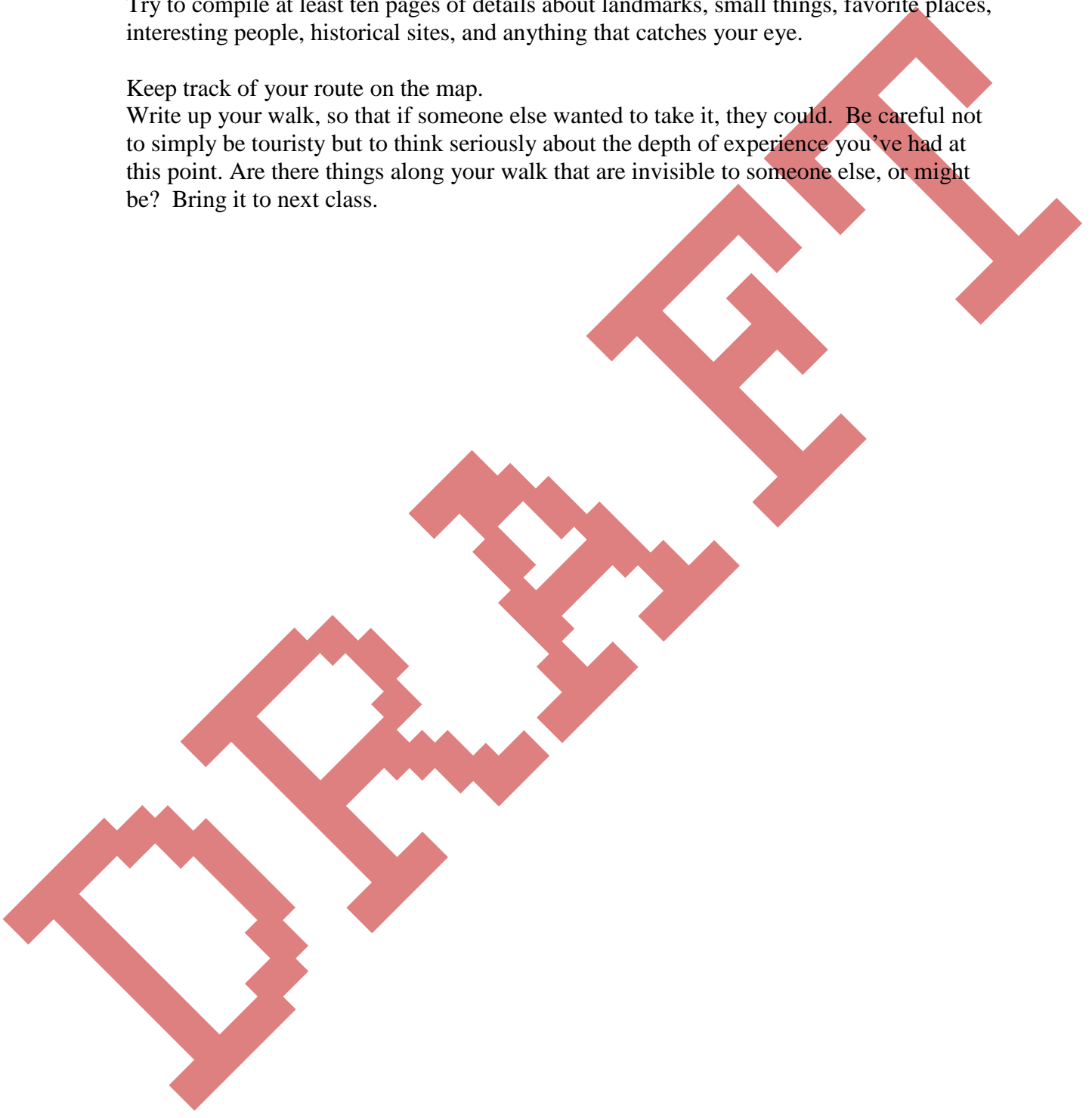
Homework: Get a map and some colored pens or pencils. Read the Edwin Muir and Bill Bryson pieces about Edinburgh. Circle or note important terms they use and how they use the city itself as a way to think about issues. Then, take a walk yourself to someplace you know or someplace you've wanted to explore. Write down anything that strikes you as interesting or important about your time here. You can take photos but try not to do

that first. Try to describe things first, and to work on small details first rather than the large ones anyone could see.

Try to compile at least ten pages of details about landmarks, small things, favorite places, interesting people, historical sites, and anything that catches your eye.

Keep track of your route on the map.

Write up your walk, so that if someone else wanted to take it, they could. Be careful not to simply be touristy but to think seriously about the depth of experience you've had at this point. Are there things along your walk that are invisible to someone else, or might be? Bring it to next class.



Week 4, class 1

Class 2

Talk about the Edwin Muir piece about Edinburgh.

in-class: Where in your walk did you make use of Muir's ideas or perceptions? Where have you found a different or similar experience to his?

Hour 2 10 to 11

Talk about the Bill Bryson piece

Where in your walk did you make use of Bryson's ideas or perceptions? Where have you found a different or similar experience to his?

Homework: Try to incorporate both Muir and Bryson (and any of the other writers or artists we've encountered on this trip) into your Walk piece. Bring a copy of it to class tomorrow.

Class 3

All class: revision groups

We'll be reading and commenting on your Walking Around pieces.

Class 4

All class: Revision Groups

Final pieces due July 2nd.

Your final portfolio should include your travel journal of 60 pages (which I'll look at on the final class day), and then at least 3 Blog (500 words each), your travel piece (1500-2000 words each), and your Walking Around piece (1500-2500 words).

Please mark any pieces that you DO NOT want me to post on the blog.