

Strangers and Journeys
CC Alumni Reading Group Syllabus
Spring 2014

When we reflect on our most meaningful travel experiences, we often highlight significant relationships fostered by a change in context. Sometimes these are friendships with fellow travelers whose attractiveness we'd grown accustomed to and forgotten at home. On other occasions we meet strangers and allow ourselves an intimacy and candor that would seem gratuitous among our normal crowd. Or perhaps we find ourselves in a strange new relationship with the place itself. We wander through the streets of an unfamiliar city exhilarated by the fragrance of foreign breads in a bakery, the sound of hooves on cobblestones, or the haze of neon outside a discothèque.

Some wanderlust then may be explained by boredom. At times we travel to flee our problems and ourselves. As the theologian Rowan Williams puts it, "the hardest thing in the world is to be where we are." We reward ourselves with travel and it has become commonplace for travel agents and study abroad programs to claim that travelers "find themselves" overseas. But of course a journey can mean more than its pilgrim. Missionaries and ambassadors are travelers also. Nor is all travel a matter of choice. Inevitably, strangers discover our little corner of the globe, and we may be forced to reckon with the larger world before we ever leave our homes.

Whatever their motivating factors, departures and arrivals afford unique opportunities to ask questions about our worldview, to nuance our relationship with what seems alien or strange, and to test (not just survey) the ego. As a result, art is saturated with narratives of voyages and voyagers. Tolstoy recognized this when he wrote that "all great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town." With that quote as a starting point, the guided discussions in this packet will challenge us to explore notions of strangeness in literature and film through historical, sociological, and theological questions in addition to those of conventional literary study. And while our texts address the themes of strangers and journeys from radically different perspectives, each will facilitate a set of central questions that will likely recur in many conversations. These include:

- Are there certain things that one can learn only outside "normal" contexts?
- What does it mean to have a home? What does it mean to leave it? And what does it mean to admit a stranger?
- What role does the passing of time play in our journeys? Is all travel "time" travel?
- To what degree are all strangers and all strange places dangerous? What is at risk in travel?
- What are the moral responsibilities of travelers and hosts?
- How, and to what extent, does our experience of art constitute a kind of traveling?

Our Texts:

Unit One: Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*

Unit Two: Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*

Unit Three: Terrance Malik's *The New World*

Unit Four: Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Unit Five: Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast*

For each meeting, I will outline a few potentially helpful approaches along with some guiding questions. Ideally though, your own queries and insights will be shaping an enriching and challenging conversation in ways this syllabus will not attempt to anticipate.

Unit One

All the Pretty Horses

“They were saddened that he was not coming back but they said that a man leaves much when he leaves his own country. They said it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other and they said that the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not easily come by otherwise.”

The first text in our study, Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for 1992. The novel was also a bestseller despite the significant challenges it presents for readers. McCarthy characteristically eschews standard punctuation, or at least quotation marks and most commas; he relies heavily on a polysyndetic syntax, extending gestures of description with a chain of conjunctions that manipulates rhythm and pace (see the last sentence quoted above); and, although the sense of most conversations is clear through context, a sizeable portion of the novel’s dialogue occurs in Spanish. These features are interesting not just as the quirks of a literary stylist, but also, and much more importantly, as elements that dramatize the novel’s shifting familiarities and strangenesses.

There is a sense then in which John Grady Cole is always at home riding and talking to horses. With him, readers take pleasure in the sprawling cadences of an untamed landscape seen from horseback. On the other hand, McCarthy’s protagonist is rarely comfortable speaking with others, even his father and his best friend, Rawlins. He is fluent in the languages of horses and men, but extremely reserved when he speaks with the latter. From the opening pages of the novel it is clear that speech can have terrible consequences, that words in any language are a test of one’s character, and that talk can precipitate violence.

All the Pretty Horses is the first novel in McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*, though here “trilogy” can be misleading since the three narratives are chronologically disconnected and no single character ties the books together. They are united more fundamentally by a place: the high plains north and south of the Rio Grande, a line that acts not only as a border between countries, but one that also separates modernity from the past and the rule of law from the rule of might and tradition. Though he crosses with little ceremony, we understand that John Grady’s choice has spiritual as well as practical implications.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) In passages like the one quoted above, the vaqueros express the notion that, ultimately, true immigration, in the sense of assimilation, is extremely difficult because fate ordains

the circumstances of our births: our mothers and our motherland. Though the boys enter Mexico with a fairly clear picture of the life they want there, they fail to “belong” even after they find work and companionship at the hacienda. Is their failure due in some way to their character as Americans?

- 2) John Grady’s command of Spanish often necessitates that he take the lead in the boys’ dealings, but it’s not just his facility with the vocabulary that allows him to acquit himself so well in a foreign tongue. How does his speech set him apart and demand respect? What is the value of silence in John Grady’s conversations with strangers? On the other hand, what does he fail to adequately express? What types of language does he misunderstand or devalue?
- 3) It can be easy to forget that the central characters in this novel are teenagers. Adults rarely treat them as such, nor do they view themselves as “minors.” One exception is John Grady’s estimation of Blevins and it is from his perspective that we sometimes see the group’s third member characterized as a child, of “insufficient substance to be the object of men’s wrath.” For contrast, consider the story the captain tells of his coming of age with “the woman” in Nuevo Leon: “A man cannot go out to do some thing and then he go back...a man does not change his mind.” In the world of *All the Pretty Horses* and in the minds of its characters, what constitutes adulthood? Where do characters disagree on this topic or reject it as a meaningful distinction altogether?
- 4) One night early in the novel John Grady “lay a long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him and the wildness within.” What is this wildness inside him? Is this just the confusion of adolescence or is there something more there? Is this interior wildness something that sets John Grady apart?
- 5) Horses are often compared to people in *All the Pretty Horses*, and in such comparisons human beings are frequently found wanting. How do horses function as a metaphor throughout the novel? What does a horse symbolize for John Grady? When he risks his life to recover Redbo, to what extent is he reclaiming more than property?
- 6) We might say that *All the Pretty Horses* takes place between two funerals and is the account of a great mourning, not for an individual but for a place and a way of life that is going extinct. What role does history play in the narrative? Are these characters victims of their time? Of course the feeling that one’s home has been irrevocably distorted is not unique to the Texas of 1949. Consider the effect of cultural change on the way we view our own homes and our own home countries. When is relocation necessary to maintain

a way of life? What are the consequences of such moves and what would cause you to uproot?

Additional Suggested Reading/Viewing:

The Road, Cormac McCarthy

Runaway, Alice Munro

A Wild Sheep Chase, Haruki Murakami

Elegy, Larry Levis

Unit Two

A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories

“The children have been to Florida before,” the old lady said. “You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee.”

G.K Chesterton observed that “the globe-trotter lives in a smaller world than the peasant.” A seasoned traveler compares one city to another (Chicago to London to Timbuktu) and in so doing shrinks her universe, but to the peasant who lives in Timbuktu and never leaves, that town is the universe. With that in mind we might note that while Flannery O’Connor’s characters rarely leave the state of Georgia, their world is so tightly circumscribed that even a trip just outside Atlanta or a solicitor’s visit may cause profound disruptions. To be fair, the strangers in O’Connor’s fiction are more than the bible salesmen they at first appear, but it’s frequently the small mindedness of O’Connor’s homebodies, their stubborn refusal to empathize with others, and their tendency to greatly overvalue their own perspective that makes them easy victims in a crisis.

For the purposes of this discussion we will be focusing on two stories: the title piece, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” and “Good Country People,” a pair that approach our topic from opposite directions (one recounting a journey, the other a stranger’s visit), but which give us similar insights into what we might call the peasant’s worldview.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) O’Connor’s central characters are often master manipulators who persuade others by appealing to their fears and vanities or by bullying them intellectually and spiritually. In a story like “Good Country People” we find several characters engaged in a kind of psychological standoff, each with her weapons trained on the others’ vulnerabilities. Of course the manipulator must know the target intimately in order to achieve the desired control. Is manipulation (as O’Connor presents it in these stories) a corruption of empathy? Consider how Manley connects with and betrays Joy. Does he know her better than her mother? If so, does that explain his great capacity to hurt her? Are there any possibilities for empathy to replace manipulation in the story’s conclusion?
- 2) In “A Good Man is Hard to Find” both the grandmother and Red Sammy see themselves as ambassadors of a past when “people did right,” but it’s a flaw in the grandmother’s memory (or more specifically, her embarrassment at that flaw) that causes a car accident and propels her family into mortal danger. How else does O’Connor critique the notion of the past’s moral superiority? To complicate this question further, consider *The Misfit’s*

remarks on the factual validity of the resurrection: “I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t...It ain’t right I wasn’t there...if I had of been there I would have known and wouldn’t be like I am now.” Does *The Misfit* have a point? Is the past always suspect? Does O’Connor suggest it should be?

- 3) Mrs. Hopewell seems at times incapable of speaking (or even thinking) without resorting to clichés and bromides, but there are several other characters in these stories who confuse truths and truisms as well. What does O’Connor imply about those who live by platitudes? How do these stories, both of which draw on stock phrases for their titles, critique their characters’ slogans? How does O’Connor play with names (*Manley Pointer*, Mrs. Hopewell, Joy/Hulga, *The Misfit*) to undermine and problematize our love of labels?
- 4) Both *The Misfit* and *Manley Pointer* are more or less directly compared to Jesus. Why does O’Connor make such comparisons, or allow her characters to make them? Are these stories driven by theology? What do they have to say about the active work of God in our world? Are there ways in which these evil men take part in the saving work of Christ?
- 5) What are the essential symptoms of the “peasant worldview” as O’Connor diagnoses it? What do we make of the fact that it is Joy/Hulga, the character with the most education and worldly experience, who suffers a great deflation in “*Good Country People*”? Does O’Connor suggest any remedy for provincialism?
- 6) In her 1960 essay “*Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction*” O’Connor noted that there is a difference between literary realism and factual depictions of normal life: “I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs.” O’Connor’s point is well-taken; readers want a good story not “reality”, but the moral components of her fiction still suggest hard questions our day-to-day behavior. Does fiction like O’Connor’s “load the dice” in favor of the globe trotter? What does she suggest about the tension between humility and “broadness”?

Additional Suggested Reading/Viewing:

Waiting for the Barbarians, J.M. Coetzee

Bel Canto, Ann Patchett

Unit Three

The New World

“Eden lies about us still. We have escaped the old world and its bondage. We can make a new beginning, create a fresh example for humanity. We are the pioneers of the world, the advance guard sent on through the wilderness to break a new path. Our youth is our strength and our inexperience is our wisdom. God has given us a promised land.”

For *The New World*, Terrance Malick shot over a million feet of film. This production is big and long, not just in its budget and running time, but also in the scale of its images and Malick’s aesthetic ambitions. Although this, his third feature-length film, is now frequently listed among the best pictures of the last decade, early reviews were mixed. Perhaps it’s easy to see why. *The New World* takes a significant commitment of attention. It combines a generally unhurried pace with an appetite for digression, frequently wandering away from what we usually think of as “the Jamestown story.” As a result, both those who expect to see the violent clash of peoples and those who are primarily interested in a love story are likely to be disappointed. *The New World* certainly contains those narratives, but the film is really something else entirely. Malick will linger on the image of Pocahontas’s shoulder or stare back into Smith’s adoring gaze, but it’s not only the human characters who receive his deliberate and protracted attention. Many of the film’s longest shots depict no more action than the wind’s rustling of grasses or the turning of ripples in a creek.

In his Washington Post review of the movie, Stephen Hunter pointed out that one striking aspect of *The New World* is how comfortably it adopts surprising perspectives. We meet the British through the eyes of the natives and throughout the film it’s often the Europeans who seem most deeply savage and strange. When John Smith is captured and we move to Powhatan’s city, the perspective is reversed and we share in Smith’s confusion and distress. Then there are the many “scenes” that contain no human characters whatsoever and one favorite perspective looks straight up into a sky framed by wild grains or pines. These “nature sequences” are anything but random, and as they escape the human action they demand that we encounter them as “plotted,” not just some flourish of setting.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) When Smith meets Powhatan, the Algonquian chief asks if he comes from the sky. Smith corrects him, but Malick allows us to view the Europeans as alien visitors. Consider the symbolic treatment of gunpowder and fire arms throughout the film or the religious language the natives sometimes use to speak of white men: “gods.” How else does the film capture objects, attitudes, and ideas that further separate cultures rather than connecting them?

- 2) In Powhatan's city John Smith is led through a series of ceremonies. He is showered in chaff. He has smoke blown on his face and chest. He is carried through the community on men's shoulders. He is poked with sticks. What is the purpose of these rites? Is he being cleansed? Initiated? Disciplined? How else do we see strangers introduced to foreign societies in this movie? How do we lead strangers through cultural ceremonies and what do those rituals accomplish?
- 3) One of the film's most emotionally complicated sequences takes place when Pocahontas leads a group of Algonquians to bring food and furs to aid the starving, freezing British. She and John Smith stand facing each other in the center of the fort. They speak in whispers and glance over their shoulders. What keeps them from touching as they clearly want to (we see his fingers graze the fringe of her wrap)? What has changed since their last meeting? How does the context of the fort complicate and shame their relationship in ways Powhatan's city did not?
- 4) In certain sections of the film Malick weaves interior monologue with dialogue and montage. John Smith, Pocahontas, and John Rolfe each narrate at length. In the cases of Smith and Rolfe, the thoughts we overhear often seem to be questions they would like to ask Pocahontas, and in a few cases her spoken dialogue seems to directly answer their thoughts. Many of Pocahontas's monologues addresses her distant father, who never answers. What are the effects of these voice overs? How do they chart shifting relationships in the movie?
- 5) Is Pocahontas naïve or simply guileless? What does her innocence consist of? How does Q'orianka Kilcher, the very young actress who plays her (and won an ALMA for the performance), bring these aspects of the character to life?
- 6) Late in the film when Pocahontas and John Smith meet again in England, she asks him if he ever found his Indies. He answers that he may have sailed past them. What does this metaphor suggest about the difficulty of understanding one's own desires in an unknown place or context? How do other characters in our texts recognize or miss their "Indies"? How does a traveler know when to stop traveling?

Additional Suggested Reading/Viewing:

"The Lost Colony," Susan Stewart

The Tempest, William Shakespeare

The Tree of Life, Terrence Malick

The Last Samurai, Edward Zwick

Unit Four

Invisible Cities

Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan's palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which outside.

Unlike our other texts, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is not a narrative, but a series of lyrical vignettes punctuated by an imagined dialogue between the Mongol emperor, Kublai Khan, and the great explorer, Marco Polo. More philosophical than dramatic, this book will allow us to consider the notion of travel through a series of thought experiments in which each city acts as a metaphor for our encounter with new parts of the world.

Invisible Cities is highly structured. Fifty-five cities are classified by some focal concept (memory, desire, death, etc), but each section of the book braids cities of several classes. The result is that even as we move between types, disparate notions play off one another, complicating each city with examples of its opposites, inversions, or exaggerations. In the Polo-Khan passages that bookend each rotation, the various philosophical/epistemological questions that have been suggested by individual cities are developed more directly. Polo and the Khan posit answers, but their responses are often contradictory or paradoxical and rarely seem intended to resolve our concerns. If anything, Calvino uses their propositions spur us into new queries, which may or may not be answered by the next stop on our itinerary.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Before he learns the Levantine tongue Polo communicates with the Khan by relying on his displays of images, souvenirs, and gestures. How does this unspoken communication trump the descriptions the explorer is eventually capable of in language? How do emblems communicate subjects as multi-faceted as cities? Recall the scene in *The New World* when Pocahontas acts out the vocabulary she wants to learn from Smith: "sky," "sun," "water." Later in the movie the explorers bring back not only Pocahontas, but also tobacco, eagles, and other wildlife to display for the king and queen. Is there a sense in which a single well-chosen symbol might say more than a book-length travelogue? What do souvenirs say about the places we have traveled? How do we choose them? Through what other means do we remember our travel?
- 2) Over the course of *Invisible Cities* we see a number of possible motivations for travel dramatized and questioned. Men and women move to explore, to trade, to recover memories, or, in the case of the Eutropians (Trading Cities 3), they move to escape lives

that have lost the capacity to thrill. Eutropia consists of a number of empty city-shells. Each new iteration reproduces the old city's scenes, but "with the actors changed." The woman who is tired of her life as a baker in the old city may now become actress, a doctor, a mother. The process repeats indefinitely. Does Calvino suggest (here and in other cities) that travel is ultimately futile, that all new cities are simply reconfigurations of their predecessors and that on the deepest levels travel fails to supply our lives with meaning? Or does Calvino maintain that travel's meaning is connected to its endlessness, that only by travelling continually can one continue to accrue and develop meaning?

- 3) From the book's first sentence Kublai Khan doubts the cities Marco Polo describes and regularly questions their existence. Interestingly, Polo encourages these doubts and even goes so far as to suggest that no mind could possibly contain or communicate a city in its "real" complexity. Even within individual descriptions there is the suggestion that each traveler experiences a city differently: "It is the mood of the beholder which gives the city of Zemrude its form" (Cities and Eyes 2). If this is true, what is the ultimate purpose of Polo's travelogues? Why does the Khan prefer Polo to his other ambassadors and messengers when their news gives him no pause?
- 4) The notion of a city's impermanence recurs frequently in this book, but perhaps nowhere more vividly than in the image of Octavia (Thin Cities 5), the spider-web community that depends from a great net strung between two mountains. Polo ends his description of her features by noting that "the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will only last so long." How do other cities answer the promise of change? How does Calvino imagine cities embracing and resisting time? Do some cities seem determined to destroy themselves?
- 5) Who truly knows and possesses a city? The immigrant who views the place with the objectivity of detachment, or the native who has breathed the local air all her life? This is the argument the Lares and Penates wage in the city of Leandra (Cities and Names 2), but the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," John Grady, Pocahontas, and John Smith have stakes in the question as well. Where would those characters fall in this debate? Do their narratives and Polo's support their cases?
- 6) Irene (Cities and Names 5) is the name of one city Polo does not actually claim to have visited. Rather from a high plateau where it is discussed endlessly by shepherd and hermits, "Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes." This description implies that our experience of a place is as fickle as our experience of other people or even ourselves, that we are constantly redefining our understanding based on where we stand now. It might also suggest that we can never truly know a place. As we walk

away it will change again. Is this true? Can we think of exceptions? Are there places and destinations that become more fully themselves the more we change our perspective? Can we know a place objectively?

Additional Suggested Reading/Viewing:

Sexing the Cherry, Jeanette Winterson

Fictions, Jorge Luis Borges

The Brief History of the Dead, Kevin Brockmeier

Unit Five

Babette's Feast

"You must also know that I shall be with you every day that is granted to me from now on. Every evening I shall sit down to dine with you. Not with my body which is of no importance but with my soul. Because this evening I have learned my dear that in this beautiful world of ours all things are possible."

Isak Dinesen's short story "Babette's Feast," from which Gabriel Axel's film is adapted, was originally set in Berlevåg, Norway in a community of colorful houses nestled along a fjord. Yet after Axel surveyed several potential Norwegian sites, he worried they were too picturesque and the location was changed to Jutland. Ultimately he had a set of a small, gray houses constructed around a 13th Century Romanesque church near the isolated town of Lønstrup. Explaining the choice, Axel commented that "there is a lot that works in writing, but when translated to pictures, it doesn't give at all the same impression or feeling. All the changes I undertook, I did to actually be faithful to [Dinesen]."

This logic notwithstanding, critics have occasionally accused the film of oversimplifying its subject (and Dinesen's) by exaggerating certain reductive dichotomies. While *Babette's Feast* has been almost universally praised, it is frequently classed as a fable: charming and inspirational, but perhaps overly moralistic. It may be precisely those features of the film, however, that will allow us to revisit our earlier readings with an eye for their ethical implications.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) In the words of the film, Lorens Löwenheim's "destiny" is "upset" by his visit to Jutland and his aborted relationship with Martina. When he returns to his post in the Swedish cavalry he rejects the "merry" life he had led before and embraces an ethic of rigorous ambition. What leads him to this profound change? What logic precipitates his sudden departure from Jutland and what exactly is it that cannot be? ("...in this world there are things that are impossible," he tells Martina.) How does he use his experience in Jutland to further his new pursuit of "prestige"?
- 2) One of the film's most memorable scenes moves back and forth between the bright living room where Philippa rehearses with Achille Papin and the dining room where Martina and the minister sit holding hands in the dark. While Philippa sings, her sister and father pray. It's clear they believe her soul is at stake, and indeed the song itself takes the form of a temptation. Papin: "Come now don't fight against it..." Philippa: "I'm fearful of my joy." How else is song used dramatically in *Babette's Feast*? One of the sisters' favorite hymns

contains the lines, “never would you give a stone / to the child who begs for bread.” In church the congregation sings a prayer that looks forward to the dissolution of heaven and earth. How are these lyrics played with and how are their meanings transformed over the course of the film?

- 3) The tension between northern Protestantism and French Catholicism is relatively subtle throughout most of *Babette’s Feast*, but we do see it directly acknowledged when Achille Papin comes to visit Philippa. Of course the sisters take their names from Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchton and when Babette is first introduced our attention is called to how strange it is that she works for these “Puritan” women. How do competing religious perspectives bump into one another in *Babette’s Feast*? What role does Babette’s faith play in the narrative? To what extent is it important that this is a “French” meal?
- 4) We often think of traditions as enlivening our culture, but as we see in *Babette’s Feast*, they can easily grow stale. Over time unexamined rituals may lose their original capacity to facilitate transcendence. What causes this debilitation of ceremony? Which traditions in the film are problematic? Why in *Babette’s Feast* is it dangerous to try to please the past (or a figure from the past) with our present practice?
- 5) How important is it that Löwenheim attends the feast? Do we need others to model how we should experience unfamiliar (“strange”) art? Who hosts the feast, or are there multiple hosts? What are a host’s responsibilities?
- 6) *Babette’s Feast* may be the “happiest” text in this syllabus, but there is deep sadness here too. In his letter of introduction for Babette, Papin imagines Philippa surrounded by a crowd of children and dreams of a heaven where she will be the artist “God intended [her] be.” Does Löwenheim’s dinner toast answer the abiding sadness convincingly? (“And lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us, and everything we rejected has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth are met together.”) How does his sentiment echo that of Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities*? How does travel allow for this experience? How does art?

Additional Reading/Viewing:

Chocolat, Lasse Hallström

The Tiger and the Snow, Roberto Benigni

Baltics, Tomas Tranströmer