

A Field Guide to the American Literature Survey: "Doing the Reading" and
Literary Tourism¹

Alisa Marko Iannucci, Boston College

When I moved to Boston for graduate school, I couldn't wait to head out and explore the many places of literary fame in the region. I made my pilgrimage to Walden Pond, poked around old Salem, and took a tour of Emerson's house; there was always a new place to discover. Several years later, when I got the opportunity to teach an American literature survey course, I wondered if I could find a way to infect my students with the same enthusiasm, and take advantage of the area's rich history.

I designed the Field Guide to American Literature as a class project for American Literary History I, which is the first third of an elective survey offered by the English Department taken by a variety of students of all years. As I developed the syllabus, I wanted to counteract the speed and scope inherent in a survey course with assignments that allowed students to engage with texts more deeply and in the context of their own culture. Since our class was without prerequisites and included non-English majors, I felt it appropriate to experiment with a different kind of writing assignment. The field guide project would help establish a cultural studies approach to the (mostly canonical) texts, by asking students to use their reading of literary texts in class as a tool in the cultural analysis of places they visited.

Part guidebook and part literary commentary, the project was created by students and catalogs and describes tourist destinations of literary interest along with students' experiences in visiting them while studying the associated texts. Each student created a chapter of the field guide, and each chapter covered one site, providing basic logistical information, a description of the student's experience there, and

¹ This has been adapted from a presentation at the May 2009 ALA Conference in Boston, MA

commentary on how studying texts informed the reading of the place and vice versa.

Assigning students to read "texts" outside the classroom makes sense; after all, place is the characteristic that defines American Literature. While transnational studies are stretching the geography of that rubric in appropriate and interesting ways, the fact remains that the category itself is bound by connection to a place. Why not, then, encourage students of American literature to explore – to experience – the relationship between texts and places? The field guide assignment encouraged students to gain insights on the larger place ("America") by exploring specific places within their reach. I wanted students to sample the literary resources of the local area, and find out how having "done the reading" affects tourist experience.

In the first week of class, students chose their sites. Before venturing out, they studied the associated text(s) and researched the site's history and promotional materials. Once prepared, students set out and visited their sites, with instructions to act as tourists would, and to take notes and speak with at least one person associated with the site (docent, fellow visitor, etc.). Students then wrote essays that connected their experiences visiting the site and studying the associated texts. Photos or other visual materials were incorporated, and the essays, along with title pages created in a standard format, were submitted on compact discs. In the last week of class, I uploaded the student chapters to the web. An index page listed the places visited and texts read by the students. Following a link to each chapter led to that chapter's title page, which presented information on how to visit the site, and a link to the student's essay. Most students simply added photos or other images to their standard-format essay (and this met the requirements of the assignment—all they had to do was save their word-processed essays as html files); a few used their knowledge of web design techniques to enhance the look and structure of their chapters.

In all, the Field Guide had chapters on twenty-five sites of literary interest. Most were in or around Boston, but a few students wrote about places in their hometowns that they could access during the semester. Example sites included some with obvious literary connections (Walden Pond, the Emerson House, the House of Seven Gables); some historic landmarks not directly associated with texts but within the period covered by the course (cemeteries, churches, parks); and some that held period artifacts (museums). In cases where the literary connection was not clear, students made their own connections to texts we read in class. This latitude resulted in some of the most interesting projects. Pairings of place and texts that students explored included Hudson River School paintings (at Worcester Art Museum) and Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, the Old Town Burying Ground in Cambridge and the poems of Anne Bradstreet, and the Weetamoo Woods in Rhode Island and the *Narrative* of Mary Rowlandson.

Students made meaningful connections between their reading of texts and their reading of places. The student who visited the Emily Dickinson Homestead wrote about her discomfort with dissonance she felt in the domesticity emphasized by her tour guide and the expansiveness she found in the poet's work. After visiting the Longfellow house, another student wrote a long description of the unexpected experience of having the ranger guide there recite lengthy bursts of poetry to his tour group—a part of the routine tourist package the site offers. Once she got over the novelty, she writes, she could appreciate at last the immense popularity Longfellow enjoyed in his time. Gazing at the collections of silver and fine furniture in the early American galleries of the Museum of Fine Arts, a third student came to better understand Jonathan Edwards's motivation in writing "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

While I was fortunate in the richness of our location in terms of sites to explore, I believe the project could be done in other areas of the

country. Certainly, in different settings, modifications in the assignment would be called for. In the absence of easily-accessible places of known literary significance, historic buildings, works of art, reservations, or monuments could be visited and read by students. Alternately, since some historic sites and societies are building a greater online presence, students could connect texts to virtual places. I don't believe, however, that these sites are the only way for readers of early American literature to connect place and text. The subject of an American literature course, is, after all, at least in part, America; even classes meeting overseas may be able to find places where the American influence can be read. What would Thoreau make of the local McDonalds? William Bradford of city hall? Whitman of an industrial farm, Franklin a YMCA, or Wheatley a megachurch? These projects would admittedly stray from the traditional literary critical approach but might produce fascinating cultural studies insights.

This type of project would also work in writing-oriented classes. Having to connect assigned reading with assigned "travel" led some nervous students to schedule multiple meetings with me to discuss their work, and I found this a welcome opportunity to talk about reading and writing. Particularly since the Field Guide was created as an Internet (and thus public) project, it would have been nice to have more time devoted to craft.

The field guide project required students to use early American texts to read a place in their world. Making connections between seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century texts and the "real world" of today meant that students were thinking about those texts in a cultural context, and then using that context to gain insights into our own cultural moment. How we read literature, and how we assign literary and historical meaning to places, says a lot about us. The field guide writers glimpsed the ways in which history (and literature) is marketed for consumption; they felt how "doing the reading" complements and complicates tourist

Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice
Summer 2009 (3:1)

experiences deemed educational. All in all, this was an interesting project that I hope to try again. I think the students enjoyed flexing their writing muscles and getting out of the classroom; I certainly enjoyed reading their projects and seeing the texts and the places through their eyes.