First-Year Research Seminar: Road Trips
FIRST-UG 769
Gallatin School
New York University
Spring 2016
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:30-4:45 p.m.
1 Washington Place, Room 501
Prof. Amanda Petrusich
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Office Hours (by appointment, please): Tuesdays, 11-12, 2-3; Thursdays, 2-3, 5-6; 411 Lafayette Street, Room 375

Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you.
You must travel it by yourself.
It is not far.
It is within reach.
-- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Course Description:

“Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road,” Jack Kerouac famously wrote in 1957’s On the Road, summarizing an optimistic (and particularly American) ethos: Just Go. America is a frontier country, and hitting the open road – in search of catharsis, transformation, answers, a new beginning of one kind of another – is a venerated and beloved American tradition. This first-year research seminar will examine how the great American road trip has been depicted in literature, film, and music: what it entails, what it connotes, what it requires, what it actuates. What should happen during a road trip? How might a person expect to be different at the end? Paying especially close attention to the role music plays – a tour being, of course, the ultimate road trip – we’ll look at how the idea, the practice, and the myth of the road trip has been presented in books, essays, photographs, films, and records, from Robert Frank’s “The Americans” to Terrence Malick’s “Badlands” to Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run,” and write and workshop three short, researched pieces – including at least one first-person essay incorporating original reportage – and a final research paper analyzing a notable road trip from art or history.

Course Objectives:

By now, most of us here have internalized the road trip impulse – the idea of hitting the road in search of some necessary epiphany – but may not have yet had the opportunity to contextualize and analyze that craving. This course will question both the origins and utility of that impulse, and through readings, assignments, and discussions, we will consider interdisciplinary approaches to the road trip as it's
been depicted in American art, using it as a vehicle to help cultivate and refine new and sophisticated ways of researching and writing about those experiences.

**Required Books:**

*Blue Highways*, William Least Heat-Moon  
*The Americans*, Robert Frank  
*America Day by Day*, Simone de Beauvoir  
*Driving Home*, Jonathan Raban

*Full-length texts will be routinely supplemented with in-class handouts, films, songs, and emailed links.*

**General Policies:**

**Attendance:** You may miss up to two classes without direct penalty, but you remain singularly responsible for making up any work completed/assigned in class or any important information regarding assignments, etc. that may have been relayed that day. Any more than two absences for reasons other than illness, family emergency, or religious observance will have a direct and detrimental impact on your grade.

**Academic Integrity:** As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website ([http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)).

**Devices:** I am sympathetic to the utility of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and the like, but given the nature of our seminar and the kind of work we’ll be reading and parsing, let’s choose to truly be in this room together for a few hours every week. This means that when class begins, your phones should be silenced and your computers put away. You will also need to print out any assignments or papers needed for class ahead of time.

**Grading:** 60% of your grade will be based on the strength and competence of your writing assignments (*15% per essay*); the remaining 40% of your grade will be based on in-class participation, preparedness, and workshop discussions (per the workshop guidelines below), with **20% for the quality of your peer responses and 20% for attendance and discussion**. Please note: just showing up is not enough to earn you a desirable participation grade. Writing workshops are contingent on constructive, thoughtful discussion.
Workshop Guidelines:

As a member of this workshop, you’re responsible for three pieces of original writing, submitted on time per the workshop schedule. (If you want to bring something significantly longer or shorter than what’s specified, speak with me beforehand.) You’re also responsible for thoughtfully – and thoroughly – reading and responding to your classmates’ work each week, and coming to class prepared to discuss it analytically and enthusiastically. Your work as a reader will be as closely evaluated as your work as a writer. The writing workshop provides a home for a lively, conversational exchange of ideas and support between artists. It should be challenging, fun, and, on occasion, exhilarating.

Before class, please print and read all the submissions and write a response of 1-3 paragraphs to the author of the piece (this can either be a typed note you attach to a printout of their draft, or a handwritten one at the end of the piece). Try to focus your thoughts on a larger theme or idea (ie. What is this piece really about? How does it work?) and avoid – whenever possible – a laundry list of micro-criticisms. When you’re finished reading, consider the entire draft with a diagnostic eye: What’s the one big thing the writer should concentrate on for his or her second draft? In general, don’t worry about line-editing extensively (that’s my job), and be sure to address the piece on its own terms, always being mindful of authorial intent.

Remember that praise – for a particularly stirring image or scene, for an innovative structure, for a sound or song well-rendered – can be as useful as criticism, although in this course, we’re generally reading with an eye towards revision. All feedback should be focused on how to make the piece succeed. If you found an approach or a style unsuccessful, I want to know why and how to make it work. If you found something fantastic, I want to know why and how to harness that magic. Be candid but be careful.

I’ve found it tends to work best when the person whose work is being discussed absorbs the conversation without participating in it too heavily – this is not a hard and fast rule, but it helps to keep the workshop from feeling like a debate. (The author will always have time to ask questions once everyone has offered their comments.) For those participating in the discussion, I encourage you to listen closely and carefully to your colleagues’ critiques – this includes taking notes – and to reference their advice as you give your own. A good workshop operates like an engaging conversation, with organic digressions, movement, and occasional cross-talk.

Workshop Logistics

Successful writers and critics MUST be able to hit a deadline. Magazines, newspapers, and even websites and blogs operate on very strict publication schedules, and this workshop is no different. Writing assignments are due at 5 p.m. on the Sunday before they are scheduled to be workshopped. THIS DEADLINE IS NON-NEGOTIABLE.
This way, everyone has almost two full days to read the submissions before class meets on Tuesday. Submissions should be emailed to me (petrusich@gmail.com), and I will distribute them to our class mailing list on Sunday night. Please read over the syllabus and note when assignments are due, and schedule your semester accordingly. You might want to get a head start of some of these pieces now.

So that we have time to address everyone’s work, the class will be divided into four groups: A, B, C, D. Groups will workshop on alternate weeks. We will loosely plan on spending 20-30 minutes discussing each submission. Again, YOU MUST BRING PAPER PRINTOUTS, WITH YOUR THOUGHTS/SUGGESTED EDITS IN THE MARGINS.

Course Schedule:

Week 1:
January 26: Introduction / Welcome / The World Through A Windshield
January 28: The Question of Going
“Why Travel?” and “Driving Home” (from Driving Home, Jonathan Raban); “Driving Alaska’s Dalton Highway” (Alan Feuer, the New York Times); excerpt from “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” (Hunter S. Thompson)

Week 2:
February 2: Who Owns the Road?
“Green Screen: The Lack of Female Road Narratives and Why it Matters,” from The American Reader; “The Truck Stop Killer,” from GQ (Vanessa Veselka)
February 4: On the Run / The Road as (Literal) Escape
“Thelma and Louise” (1991; written by Callie Khouri, directed by Ridley Scott); “Badlands” (1973; written and directed by Terrence Malick)

Week 3:
February 9: NO CLASS
February 11: How Do We Define the Road?
“Mississippi Drift,” from Harper's (Matt Power); “Mississippi Water” (from Driving Home, Jonathan Raban)
Essay #1: Write a 1000-word personal essay about a time in your life in which you felt compelled to “just go” – to leave one landscape (internal or external) for another. Groups A&B, due Sunday 2/14 at 5p.m.; Groups C&D, due Sunday 2/21 at 5p.m.

Week 4:
February 16: WORKSHOP A
February 18: WORKSHOP B

Week 5:
February 23: WORKSHOP C
February 25: WORKSHOP D

Week 6:
March 1: Visions of the Road/Visionaries on the Road
Robert Frank, “The Americans” – READ KEROUAC’S INTRODUCTION (in-class writing exercise: Frank’s Guggenheim application)

Week 7:
March 8: Why We Take To the Road
Excerpts from “Wild” (Cheryl Strayed); excerpts from “A Walk in the Woods” (Bill Bryson); excerpts from “Rolling Nowhere” (Ted Conover)
March 10: America from the Outside
Simone de Beauvoir, “America Day by Day” / In-class visitor: Dan Saltzstein, travel editor, the New York Times

Week 8:
March 15 / March 17: SPRING BREAK
Essay #2: Over Spring Break, you’ll each have the chance to take a brief road trip: a voyage where the primary utility of the trip wasn’t to get from a literal Point A to a Point B, but to discover something en route. Write a 1500-word personal essay describing the experience, using various sources to supplement and contextualize what you saw beyond its personal significance. Groups C&D, due Sunday 3/27 at 5p.m.; Groups C&D, due Sunday 4/3 at 5.p.m.

Week 9:
March 22: WORKSHOP D
March 24: WORKSHOP C

Week 10:
March 29: WORKSHOP B
March 31: WORKSHOP A

Week 11:
April 5: America from the Inside
April 7: **CLASS VISIT TO BOBST**
Essay #3: Pick a destination – it can be personal or symbolic; somewhere you’ve never been, somewhere you’d never want to go, somewhere you’re positively dying to go – and write a 1200-1500 word research paper on what might draw a traveler to this particular spot. What’s happened there? How have those events/occasions informed the character of the place? *This
assignment must include citations and a bibliography* Groups C&B, due Sunday 4/10 at 5p.m.; Groups A&D, due Sunday 4/17 at 5p.m.

Week 12:
April 12: WORKSHOP A
April 14: WORKSHOP B

Week 13:
April 19: WORKSHOP C
April 21: WORKSHOP D

Week 14:
April 26: Representations of the Road in the American Songbook
Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run”; Bob Dylan’s “Highway 61 Revisited”
April 28: In-class presentations / Pick a song that represents, either musically or lyrically, the promise of the road: road as absolution, road as escape, road as freedom. Prepare a 3-5 minute discussion of the song’s significance and (if it’s not available on YouTube), bring a copy of it to class.

Essay #4: Write a 2000-2500 word researched, annotated essay analyzing a road trip depicted in literature, film, visual art, or music (for literature, it may be a work of fiction or nonfiction). Why did the author undertake it? In what ways did he or she succeed? How can you historicize or contextualize the artist or character’s particular narrative within the canon of road stories? *DUE MAY 12, ALONG WITH THE REST OF YOUR REVISED PORTFOLIO*

Week 15:
May 2: Catch-up day / In-class viewing: “Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle” (2004; written by Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg; directed by Danny Leiner)
May 5: END-OF-SEMESTER PIZZA HANG