Knowing your Place: Human and Social Geography

INSTRUCTOR: Drs. Marcy Sacks & Ian MacInnes (Albion College)
CREDITS: Varies depending on home college policies

COURSE DESCRIPTION
The information age has increasingly privileged the virtual over the real, from social media to digital archives. Historically, however, humans have defined themselves in part through a sense of place, both geographical and social, and we continue to inhabit physical places and warm bodies. This course uses the resources of the Newberry Library to explore the documentary evidence of a sense of place from the ancient world to the modern era, to interrogate the current trend away from the embodied and toward the virtual, and to examine the role of the archive itself in a digital era.

The sense of physical or geographical place as the foundation for cultural and individual identity permeates texts throughout Western history. The Homeric Hymns and Hesiod’s *Theogony* for example, demonstrate the extent to which the ancient Hellenic gods were tied to the landscape, both in their essence and ceremonially, through their festivals, temples, and forms of worship. Homer’s *Odyssey*, with its focus on the hero’s journey homeward (the *nostos*) created links between narrative, place, and identity which undergird fiction to this day. In the Middle Ages, the popularity of pilgrimage and the interest in relics demonstrates a deeply embodied and place-specific spirituality, while chivalric quest narratives represent the meeting of Self and Other through a journey into the marvelous. Renaissance exploration and the colonialism that followed offered new and competing ways of understanding place as the ground for emerging categories such as race and nation, and the Western narrative of manifest destiny resulted in an intense focus on the places and spaces of the Americas, often at the expense of native peoples. In the modern era the focus on place became increasingly urban as workplaces, ethnic neighborhoods, and urban architecture dominated the embodied experience of the majority of Americans. Finally, it is no accident that we use a physical word like “place” to describe social identities such as rank, tribe, or ethnicity: The social world has its own geography that both derives from and adumbrates physical spaces. Historically, society has been dominated by the tension between a sense of belonging and community implied in having a place and the oppression implied in being told to know one’s place.

Understanding the historical importance of place can be a powerful tool for interrogating our current technological assumption that identity and thought exists independent of physical bodies and physical spaces. In many ways cyberspace has come to operate in direct opposition to the older place-bound model of human identity. Not only is the digital world necessarily divorced from physical geography but it has been evangelized as a way of severing the ties between the
individual and the embodied identities of appearance, gender, class, and race, all of which are part not of cyberspace but of “meatspace.” Research archives like the Newberry Library have been deeply affected by this process. In the name of access, more and more collections have been digitized and presented online, in virtual form. Scholarship itself has changed and the meaning and value of physical collections is increasingly uncertain.

This course draws in part on the scholarly resources of the Newberry and in part on the city of Chicago itself with its neighborhoods, festivals, architecture, and rich place-specific history—the place that students will be living in during the semester. The course theme facilitates a variety of archival investigations that play to the strengths of the instructors in literature and early modern cultural studies (MacInnes) and American history (Sacks). The Newberry’s strong cartographic collections will serve as a resource throughout the semester since “place” is so often tied to geography. We anticipate exposing students to sources ranging from the imaginary islands of the Renaissance to maps of American westward expansion. Since the city of Chicago is one focus of the class, the Newberry’s strength in material related to Chicago, both historical and literary will back our discussions of local place. As we develop the symbolic and metaphorical associations of place, including constructions of race and class, the Newberry’s strength in Native American and American materials (notably the Ayers collections) will be valuable, as will its strength in 19th popular periodicals, and in early modern literature of exploration and travel. Three of the Newberry’s research centers are most relevant to the expertise of the instructors and the goals of the class: the Scholl Center for American History and Culture, The Center for Renaissance Studies, and the Smith Center for the History of Cartography.

In addition to serving as a tantalizing introduction to the variety of collections at the Newberry and to the rich conceptual possibilities inherent in “place,” the course material is also designed to develop students’ skills as scholars and writers, enabling them to turn ideas, interests, and curiosities into full-fledged scholarly projects. Our earliest assignments will involve both the practical skills of seeking out items in the collections and the intellectual skills involved in developing meaningful arguments from a primary text. As we move farther into the class, our assignments will focus on using arguments developed from primary sources (as well as those found in secondary sources) as guides to further research. Toward the end of the course, our assignments will help students to integrate ideas found in a variety of sources and to deal with contradictory information. Throughout the course, we will deal explicitly with challenges to scholarly arguments derived from archival work, whether ethical, logical, or practical. Writing will be a large part of our teaching strategy, including in-class “write-to-learn” moments and a required research blog in which students will constantly articulate their claims, their methods, and the challenges they encounter. Because the course material is a prelude or guide to the long projects students will embark upon, we will carefully articulate the larger intellectual goal of each writing, reading, and research assignment and the contribution these assignments are intended to make to their development as scholars.

**COURSE OBJECTIVE**
We have designed the seminar with the following goals in mind. By the end of the seminar, students will:
• Grasp the relationship between the natural and the built environment.
• Understand the metaphysical nature of place - as an idea, as a subjective determination of identity or social standing,
• Have had an opportunity to actively discuss the opportunities and challenges posed by recent technological advances with respect to scholarship in the humanities
• Be knowledgeable about an array of forms of digital presentation and publishing.

Furthermore, the seminar is designed to support the ACM program’s learning goals:
• To develop abilities as researchers—formulating interesting and researchable questions; successfully locating, understanding, critically evaluating, and synthesizing materials from the rich Newberry collections; and effectively creating a substantial, well-written and documented research paper.
• To develop skills as members of a research community, capable of discussing complex texts in an open-ended seminar setting; sharing the results of research and writing with peers; and offering and receiving suggestions for revisions.
• To develop an understanding of how a major research library operates through job placements and by participating in the community of scholars at the Newberry.

At the end of the program, students should have an appreciation for the value of research and critical use of primary sources and how a community of scholars maximizes the ability of a single scholar to produce high quality work in the humanities and social sciences. Students can expect to have the ability to formulate a proposal, to find and sift information, and to conduct research at a high level, leading to a substantive senior thesis project or graduate-level work. Students should be confident in their abilities to work with archival material, to synthesize a variety of sources, and to write effectively.

Our goal in guiding the students through the semester is not simply to help them complete a complex and sustained scholarly project but to develop the habits of mind and scholarly practices that characterize the work of the humanities, especially in an archival setting. We want our students to develop their understanding of scholarship from something they are asked to perform (as an “assignment”) to something self-directed. We want them to understand that writing is not something that happens “after” research in the humanities but is an inherent part of that scholarship.

REQUIRED TEXTS
See course content below.

COURSE CONTENT
Section I: Weeks 1-3
Finding sources, Developing arguments from primary texts
Milestones: Students should have found a collection or collections (or at least a group of sources) that will be a primary focus of their initial scholarship.
Topics for unique assignments: in class analysis of a primary text; primary vs. secondary sources; fact vs. idea, finding a source. Each student will present a collection and describe it to the class.

**Week 1:** The physical setting - Chicago  
*Theme:* This seminar begins with an exploration of how a physical place shapes its development. Chicago’s situation on the shore of Lake Michigan along with the powerful influence of human decisions helped to transform it from a fur-trading outpost into a major commercial hub and metropolis.  
*Readings and Activities:*  
William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*; Midwest manuscript collection, especially Midwestern families (Newberry)  
*Poetry Tour of Chicago (Poetry Foundation)*  
Introduction to the Newberry Library collections

**Week 2:** Symbolic Places “Wild West” and “Forest Sauvage”  
*Theme:* Our theme this week focuses on place as the mingling of idea and physical reality. Specifically, we explore the imagined place as a site of contestation that needs to be conquered or dominated.  
*Readings:* R. White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of American History* 65.2 (1998); Mary Sackett Papers (Newberry); American West Collection (Newberry); Ayer Collection (Newberry); Selections from Thomas Malory’s *Morte Arthure*  
Illustrations from Medieval Romance (Newberry pre-1500 Manuscript collection)

**Week 3:** A Place Without Geography - The Internet and the Disembodied Self  
*Theme:* What is “place” when there is nothing physical to undergird the idea? What does it mean to operate in a virtual place, and how does that affect identity and perception of the self and others?  
*Screening:* HER (Spike Jonze, 2013)

**Section II: Weeks 4-6**  
**Developing research questions**  
*Milestones:* Students should now be able to identify further research goals based on arguments they developed from primary and secondary sources in the first weeks. They will have begun crafting written arguments based on emerging research questions. They will devise a working title and a working thesis/central claim by the end of Week 5.  
*Topics for unique assignments:* crafting a complex thesis; titles; what’s missing (what don’t you know that you need to know)?

**Week 4:** Invented, Apocryphal, and Imaginary Places  
*Theme:* Here we examine place as an ideal or aspiration even as it functions as a specific locus.  
*Readings:* Travel accounts to Africa (Newberry); *Texas in 1840 or, The emigrant's guide to the new republic*” (selections); G. Hutner, ed. *Immigrant Voices: Twenty-four Narratives on Becoming an American* (selections); L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*; Thomas More, *Utopia*; Early Modern Maps
Week 5: Place as Construction of Identity and Subjectivity - The Cultural Geography of Race
Theme: In the final weeks, we move to the social and cultural geography of place. How do we know our “place” in society? How is “place” or status subjectively constructed to define an ordered society? How do Chicago’s many distinctive ethnic neighborhoods and enclaves represent this construction of identity?

Week 6: Place as a System of Social Reproduction - Class
Theme: Continuing the theme from last week, this week we extend the conversation to consider class and economic hierarchies.
Readings: Railroad archives, especially on labor relations and strikes (Newberry)
Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie
Visit to Hull House, Old Marshall Fields, Carson Pirie Scott stories

Section III: Weeks 7-9
Putting sources in dialogue
Milestones: Students will begin to integrate ideas found in a variety of sources, dealing with contradictory information, and developing longer written arguments that engage multiple viewpoints and conditions of rebuttal. They will revise their working central claim and create an outline of the final product.
Topics for unique assignments: scholarship as conversation; acknowledging conditions of rebuttal; outlining; starting a draft

Week 7: Geographies of Belonging - Nation, Nationalism, and Identity
Theme: In this final week, we return to Chicago and focus on the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. In creating the World Fair, the city sought to present itself as a world-class metropolis. To do so, organizers confronted challenging questions of identity: how different nations and peoples would be presented and how they would experience the spectacle.

Section IV: Weeks 10-11
Milestones: Students will begin the full draft of the project, including a written reflection analyzing the extent to which it follows or departs from the initial outline and identifying missing pieces or places which need more development.
Topics for unique assignments: attribution; reflection as a guide to writing; complete first draft

Section V: Weeks 12-14
Milestones: Students should thoroughly revise their completed draft, working especially carefully on bibliographic issues, and develop digital and verbal strategies for presenting their project in a variety of settings (conference style, etc.)

Topics for unique assignments: create a précis; presentation of research to Newberry staff and scholars

Our approach to writing and research involves both ongoing and unique projects. **Ongoing requirements** help students to understand how independent work in the humanities involves a constant cycle of reading, reflection, and writing at every stage in a large project. They encourage students to develop an incremental approach to their long project and to understand the value of peer comments and attention at multiple stages. **Unique assignments** help students move their longer project forward through a series of milestones. They are designed to address the questions and challenges that arise in different stages of a project, from finding a topic, developing research questions and goals, finding source material (primary and secondary), refining questions and goals, incorporating sources in written work, and of course revising strategies appropriate to each stage of the project.

Our ongoing requirements will be roughly as follows:

**Research Blog**
Students will post regularly (ideally, daily) on a research-related blog (we will use an easy open source engine such as Blogger or WordPress). Their blog is a place where they can articulate their discoveries, their challenges, their claims, and their methods. Posts can be directly related to their project, such as recording their discovery of a particularly promising source, but they can also be a place to connect extracurricular experiences to their broad intellectual growth. For example, they might reflect on how a weekend visit to a Chicago neighborhood leads them to a new understanding about people or place. Blogs will be public, at least within the seminar, and students will be required to make brief comments on a certain number of their peers’ entries. The goal of such peer comments is primarily to let students know they have an audience. They may also be asked to cross-post at least one entry per week on their personal social media to encourage them to think about a wider audience. Students can expect feedback from their instructors first on a daily basis and then, as the semester advances, on a more intermittent basis. We can also award weekly prizes for entries that meet certain criteria as a way of encouraging students to develop their thinking in new ways.

**Zotero Library**
From the first week, students will use the open-source Zotero bibliographic system to develop and share their growing library of sources. Zotero is free, integrates into all platforms, and is well-adapted to collaborative work and shared libraries. Beginning in the second week, students will not only be required to add items to their library but to begin annotating the items they have. As their writing project nears completion, we will use Zotero as our main tool for developing students’ habits of careful citation. Students can expect weekly feedback on their Zotero library.

**Peer working groups**
From the very first class assignment, students will be assigned a peer working group that will support and challenge them throughout the semester (we will need to flexible about altering groups based on personalities, emerging research projects, etc.). This group will initially focus its attention on the specific assignments for each week, and the early work will help students develop their skills as peer editors. As the semester advances, such groups will begin to function more broadly, first in moving students from thinking about editing to thinking about revising and eventually in asking them to begin setting goals for each other and challenging each other to achieve particular milestones. Effective peer mentoring is itself one of the most challenging aspects of work in the humanities, and developing those skills is one of our semester goals.

**Individual and group meetings**

Regular one-on-one meetings with students will be a part of our process from the very beginning, although in the first half of the semester the focus of these meetings may be as much on specific upcoming assignments as on the first stages of the long project. During the second half of the semester we will roughly double the number of required one-on-one sessions, and the focus will be on solving challenges in the students’ long projects. As for group meetings, during the first half of the semester, we can rely on the regular seminar meetings, but during the second half of the semester we do plan on several meetings of the whole group. These are a good place to work on student’s presentation skills as well as to share their love for and growing intellectual ownership of the Newberry’s collections.

This seminar draws heavily on both the collections of the Newberry Library and the physical location in the city of Chicago. We will utilize the Chicago Architecture Foundation walking tours throughout the semester to become more familiar with the city’s unique architecture and history.

**ACM POLICY ON ACADEMICS**

A complete listing of ACM policies can be found in your student handbook.

Class attendance and participation: You are expected to attend and participate fully in all classroom sessions, site visits, and field trips.

Academic honesty: Actions of dishonesty are destructive to the well-being of the academic community, and ACM staff respond to them vigorously. Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic theft will result in a failing grade for that assignment and may result in failure for the course.

**ACM POLICY ON NON-DISCRIMINATION**

The Associated Colleges of the Midwest does not discriminate in the operation of its educational programs, activities, or employment on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, color, religion, national origin, age, veteran status, marital status, or disability.

**CLASSROOM CONDUCT**

Expectations will be discussed at the first class session.