

*The Geography of the Other*  
Honors Seminar (ALHN 13950-06)  
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University of Notre Dame

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Things seen are things as seen.

Wallace Stevens

### Course Description and Narrative Overview

This is the first semester of the two-semester Honors Seminar in the Humanities for the College of Engineering and it will be our task to take an inventory of the method and madness of civilization. The current embodiment of the seminar is titled *The Geography of the Other*. "Geography" here is intended both literally and figuratively. In the first sense it refers to the inscription of the land, the contours of territory, in short, the ground on which we all stand: the earth. The second sense employs geography as a metaphor for the physical dimensions of the other, that which is different and yet that which by way of its juxtaposition with us accents our identity. It is the compression of our familiar selves with unfamiliar others brought on by the pace and technics of the modern experience of civilization that also joins the two senses of our geographic travels for this semester. Our modernity can best, or perhaps more easily, be observed through the critical moments of cultural encounter, where two peoples meet, each with a perception of the other, each attempting to reconcile their differences by an appeal to what they might have in common.

An inspiration for this course was drawn from the single line of poetry by Wallace Stevens cited above, one that, I suspect, beginning engineering students grasp instinctively. In the course of these two successive terms we will explore the significance of this comment on perception while conducting an interdisciplinary inquiry into culture, history, ideas, language, and society. We will have occasion to read a selection of significant anthropological, historical, literary, philosophical, and theological texts in order that we might increase our fund of cultural understanding and deepen our self-knowledge. The choice of these texts was governed by an abiding interest in the experience of difference or otherness and how this defines our twenty-first century identity. For the most part the books and articles we will read together are interpretive texts; they have a scholarly point of view on the world and on critical works that were formative of our modern temper. The first semester of our work amounts to a critical accounting of our commonplace conceptions, of ourselves and the larger world, which in a curious paradoxical manner appear to make less sense the more we know about it. But, this is how it is with a journey of self-discovery.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza once wrote that "every determination is a negation," and this simple truism echoed in the halls of European philosophy for several centuries only to be heard in the reasoning of latter day figures like G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx, not to mention, Sigmund Freud, who deserve credit for laying a critical intellectual foundation of the modern era. From them all we learn that one cannot have self without other, and so it is that our exploration of the geography of the other will entail an investigation of ourselves and of the presumptions of our age. What we learn in the course of this inquiry we will document in our writing in multiple manifestations (more on that below). Some questions underwriting our inquiry: who are we? how ought we to live? what obligations do we have to ourselves and to society? what is truth? These questions do not admit of definitive answers; every generation must wrestle with them, and our wrestling in the twenty-first century may be more fruitful to the extent that we can learn from the experience of our predecessors. The pursuit of answers will be the driving force of our community of learners, a community that will develop beyond the classroom in our discussions over lunches and exchanges over the Internet. We will

always be learning and working to share what we have learned with each other, such is the ethos of the seminar.

### **Materials and Mechanics**

The books for the course (presented in alphabetical order) are:

#### Required:

Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth*, Elizabeth Wentholt, trans. (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1988). This work may be obtained from the Internet; a few copies are available. Also, this book is being legally reproduced by Tichenor Publishing in Indianapolis for our use. It will be available for purchase in the first weeks of the semester.

Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca*, Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz, trans. (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and the Secret Sharer* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004).

Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, William Marsden, trans. (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

#### Recommended:

Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

We will meet twice per week for 75 minutes. Especially near the start of the course I may offer “mini lectures” on the week’s topic or on the interpretation advanced in a certain work; however, readings of our texts will emerge from vigorous and rigorous class discussion. Consequently, each of you *must read the assigned text and come to class ready to discuss it*. Students are expected to attend *all* classes: any excuse for absence must be presented *in writing* before the next meeting of the class. Students who miss more than two classes without supplying authoritative and compelling reasons for their absences are subject to the lowering of their final grades.

In addition to class discussion, writing constitutes an integral part of the course and we will be writing frequently in multiple contexts: abstracts of readings, interpretations of film, journals and/or blogs, and papers. To serve this purpose we will avail ourselves of the course’s official blogsite: <http://ethnogeography.blogspot.com/>. In addition to blog assignments, four papers will be required and the due dates and topics for these are noted on the syllabus: one 950 word paper, one 1500 word paper, one 2000 word paper, and one 2500 word paper to be submitted at the end of the term. All referencing should follow the rules set out in the Sixth Edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* or Kate L. Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Sixth Edition. Depending on the

course of class discussion, it may be necessary for me to require written responses to our readings before they are discussed in class. There will also be an oral final exam during the exam period.

### **Expectations**

The honors seminar in the humanities prizes a number of fundamental academic virtues: independence, creativity, insight, discipline, reflection, and active engagement. Equally important requirements are critical reading, avid discussion, and an impulse to question anything that is “accepted,” “authoritative,” and “obvious.” These virtues will be called on and the requisites met by the keeping of a class journal/blog; student presentations and class-led discussions, as well as class debate. In the end, the most consequential requirement of the class is thinking and a less consequential, but no less significant requisite is fun. It is necessary for us to discover the enjoyment of the work of reading, reflection and discussion in the course of our collective inquiry into the reach and repression of human moral striving. Work hard, but enjoy doing it!

### **Objectives**

This course has several different, though compatible, objectives: (1) to introduce a variety of works on a common theme, that of the journey of cultural encounter, thereby obtaining some grasp of the fundamentals of civilization; (2) to think about these themes and perspectives in an evaluative way; (3) to develop skills of critical reading, persuasive argument and clear writing; (4) to broaden and deepen our capacity for humane conversation both in and out of the classroom; (5) to be intellectually provocative.

### **Honor Code**

“As a member of the Notre Dame community, I will not participate in or tolerate academic dishonesty.” ([www.nd.edu/~hnr/code](http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code)); all of us must adhere to the University’s Honor Code. Throughout all academic production for this course: oral activities and written assignments, the Honor Code is in effect. In this very specific ethical context, the written work and the ideas presented must be your own; if they are not, you must indicate their sources fully and honestly. Collaboration, especially in the group projects is a necessity, but this must be distinguished from using other’s work as your own. You will always be urged to prepare for class discussion, for presentations, and for exams, by discussing films, lectures, paintings, and readings outside of class. During the times of the final oral exams, students are not permitted to discuss any aspect of the examinations with one another until all students have completed theirs.

Here are a few more specific guidelines for your written work: Whenever information or insights are obtained from secondary works, students should cite their sources. If secondary sources are used for any assignments, these sources should be listed in a bibliography at the assignment’s end, and any quoted material must be placed in quotation marks and clearly attributed in a footnote. Written assignments must be composed by the student and may not be turned over to another person for wholesale correction or revision. In order to re-familiarize yourself with the behavioral requisites of the Honor Code, please read the pertinent chapter in *Du Lac*, particularly the section entitled “Student Responsibilities under the Academic Code of Honor” ([http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code/IV-Student\\_Resp.htm](http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code/IV-Student_Resp.htm)). Plagiarism (i.e., any written work presented as your own and original to the particular assignment that is *not*, in fact, your own and/or original to the particular assignment) is a very serious matter. If you have questions about this policy and how it applies to your work for our course, and if you are in doubt about the legitimacy of your activities with respect to this course, please don’t hesitate to ask the instructor—before any problems can arise. You may also want to consult

<http://www.nd.edu/~writing/resources/AvoidingPlagiarism/html> or seek help directly from Notre Dame's Writing Center.

### **Requirements and Evaluation:**

Grades will be determined by your performance in class discussion, on your manifold writing assignments, and on the final exam. Determination of the final grade will be made according to the following allotments:

- 1) Attendance (10%): Daily attendance is compulsory and is one of the components in determining the final grade. While an excellent attendance record will be rewarded, any unexcused absences (without documentation from a legitimate authority) will affect your attendance/participation grade negatively. Valid reasons for absences include illness, hospitalization, emotional difficulties, family emergencies, participation in official University events, job and internship interviews, and religious holidays. This attendance policy includes days before and after holidays and vacations.
- 2) Oral participation (35%): As this is a discussion-oriented seminar, attendance and participation are crucial not only to your own learning, but to the success of the class as a whole. Students will be expected to contribute regularly to discussion and to adopt various facilitative roles during the semester. Especially valuable to class participation are contributions that note patterns and themes in the readings; compare and contrast readings with each other; point out strengths or weaknesses of other students' or authors' positions; help another student back up, extend, or question his/her idea; point out links between peoples' contributions; build explicitly on what another student has said; or relate the readings to your own lives and to contemporary issues. On a regular basis, assignments will be given in which students practice their capacity for oral expression, for example, by making a presentation of an abstract of one of the common readings and on the final oral examination.
- 3) Production for the blogosphere (20%): The keeping of an e-journal or weblog of your reflections and observations of the reading wherein you note patterns and themes in the readings; compare and contrast readings with each other; point out strengths or weaknesses of other students' or authors' positions; point out links between peoples' contributions; or relate the readings to your own lives and to contemporary issues constitutes the compositional framework for class reading and discussion. When not using your laptop or notebook computer to generate e-text, I strongly recommend the recording of thoughts in a Moleskine. Assigned work must be submitted punctually. The syllabus displays in bold on the right-hand-side of the page each week that an assignment, please be mindful of these notations.
- 4) Papers and Group Projects (35%): For the entire semester seminar members will be joined into teams for group projects: abstracts, debates, data gathering or mining, targeted Internet research inquiries, among others. These projects will be evaluated, along with the papers and this will constitute the more substantial portion of the grade for writing. Explicit criteria for the appraisal of written work may be found in "LMJ's Grading Criteria," which may be obtained from the instructor. Incomplete grades will not be given.

### **CRITICAL INFORMATIONAL CONDUITS:**

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