

Sophia Stid

Relevant Courses:

CRW 204: Research for Creative Writers

CRW 303: Poetry: Reading for Craft

CRW 308: Poetry Writing II

In-Class Exercise & Take-Home Writing

Assignment Title:

Knowing and Unknowing Our Places: Research as Creative Practice

Frames:

Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, Searching as Strategic Exploration

Final Project:

A Documentary-Based Long Poem or Poetic Sequence

Part I

Opening In-Class Exercise

—*Make A List*: To begin, make a list of five to ten places that you know (or think you know) quite well, and ideally would be able to visit during the semester. We're thinking about place broadly here: it can be your hometown, a landmark, a body of water, a house, etc. These should be places that you both have intimacy with, and feel curious about—a place you think you can learn from.

—*Think-Pair-Share*: Next, in small groups of two or three, tell your partner(s) about your places. Take turns sharing and asking each other questions about your places. As you talk, note which place on your list you feel the most curiosity and excitement about sharing. Going forward, that place will be your subject in this assignment.

—*Write & Reflect*: This next part of the assignment comes from a pre-project essay prompt by Stacey Waite, in the chapter “Courting Failure” from *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* (69 – 70):

1. Holding that place in mind, write 20 sentences about your place; begin each sentence in this list with the phrase “I do not know...”
2. Next, write 20 sentences about your place that begin with the phrase “I cannot know...”

As Waite writes, “This assignment calls you to begin with what you do not and cannot know about this subject. It asks you to begin by recording the limits of your own knowledge and experience....It asks you to acknowledge that all knowledge is partial knowledge, and to begin your project with a full examination of what you have failed to know, uncover, or see about this subject” (69 – 70).

—*Think-Pair-Share*: Trade your lists with your partner. Each of you will read over each other’s “I do not know” and “I cannot know” lists, and then write down five questions you have about that place for your partner.

—*Write & Reflect*: Read over your partner’s questions, and then write another list of 20 sentences about your place. This time, each sentence should begin with the phrase “I know...”

Part II

Take-Home Writing

—*Reflect & Return*: Over the next week, carry these three lists around with you in a notebook for a week, adding at least 5 sentences to each list as new ways of knowing and not-knowing occur to you in the course of your lived experience.

Part III

In-Class Research

—*Library Visit*: After a librarian class visit, we will spend at least one week—or two class periods—in the library, individually researching your chosen place. Use items on your “I do not know...” and “I cannot know...” lists as a starting point for your research. What can you look up? What can you learn? Think: historical records, governmental archives, ecological data, architectural histories, musical or literary works. If your place is a family home, how can you research the history of domestic spaces? If your place is a town or state, are there other artists from that place—what have they said about it? Make a list of what you learn, organized by the source. Make another list of research questions that emerge from what you are learning.

Part IV

At-Home Research

—*A Conversation with an Expert*: Reflect and decide on a person who could help you learn more about this place. This could be someone in your family, if you are writing about a family home or property; a scientist, if you are writing about a body of water; a local historian, if you are writing about a town, etc. Looking over your three lists and your research so far, make a list of thoughtful, open-ended questions to ask them and reach out to schedule a conversation, either in person, by Zoom, or by phone.

Record the conversation (if they are comfortable with that), and pay attention to your physical experience during it. What information excites you, energizes you, makes you lean forward? Are there parts that feel boring, or sad, or make you feel angry or scared? After the conversation, note down those reactions, along with anything new that you learned.

**Part V:
Site-Specific Research**

—*A Research Trip*: If possible, plan ahead to spend some time in your place during the semester. Take your notebook, and plan to spend at least an hour noticing the world around you. What plants, animals, people, buildings do you see? What memories do you have here, and what reminds you of them? What do your senses experience?

**Part VI:
In-Class & Take-Home Writing**

—*Crafting a Poetic Sequence*: Finally, we'll spend three weeks working on braiding together your research into a documentary long poem or poetic sequence. Outside of class, you'll develop a first draft, drawing from your initial lists, your research and your research questions, your conversation and your site visit. In class, we'll discuss possibilities of form and structure, and go through extended revision and ordering exercises as your poem finds its shape. We'll close-read other examples of documentary poetics, including Layli Longsoldier and Muriel Rukeyser, and engage in peer workshopping.