Virtual Travel in Second Life
Understanding Eighteenth-Century Travelogues through Experiential Learning

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After I described the course content on the first day of my fall 2010 class, Early-Modern Women’s Travelogues: Women’s Literature in a Global Context, one student asked, “Is this [travel literature] all we’re going to be reading all semester?” She seemed incredulous that an entire syllabus would be dedicated to a less canonical genre, and I wonder whether she would have asked the question if I had assigned only novels. I often encounter resistance from students when teaching noncanonical works. While some students struggle with the dense historical context of eighteenth-century British literature, even with familiar genres like poetry or the novel, less familiar genres like the travelogue often alienate them even further because they strain to understand the genre’s tropes and conventions in addition to historical context.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, travel narratives constituted one of the most widely read genres in literature, second only to theological texts. In fact, scholars such as Percy Adams (1983), Michael McKeon (1987), and Elizabeth Bohls (2005) have demonstrated the travelogue’s substantial role in the formation of the novel as genre. However, today students are rarely exposed to travelogues. Ulrike Brisson (2005: 13) argues that “travel writing has traditionally been considered as marginal, intellectually and/or aesthetically insufficient, and hence inappropriate for a literature course.” Travelogues have become subsumed under the novel, so students rarely read
the actual travel narratives that texts like *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* imitate, although they might be told how and why these early novels use travelogue conventions. As a result, the travelogue’s importance as a genre within history and culture remains absent from the contemporary classroom.

What’s more, while early women authors have been studied in university literature curricula and in scholarship since the 1980s thanks to the work of scholars like Paula Backscheider and Margaret Ezell, much still needs to be done to expose students to early writing by women, especially works of nonfiction like travelogues. Women travelers and writers contributed greatly to the vast body of travel writing. Including their narratives in the classroom complicates the historical perspective: students gain a more comprehensive picture of travel and travelers in the eighteenth century. As Kathryn Flannery (2005: 44) argues, “To bring women writers more fully into an undergraduate course is . . . to invite students to read intertextually and recursively in order to construct the cultural, material conversations out of which even familiar texts emerged, and thus to consider what difference different bodies have made in literary history.” By reading narratives by eighteenth-century women travel writers, students gain a broader picture of cultural and historical discourses within travel literature and how a variety of voices within the genre helped to construct the rest of the world for Europeans. Students learn more about the intersections of culture, history, and gender around the globe, since women writers’ gender meant that they could be given access to places in other countries, like bathhouses, while being denied entrance to other cultural locations, such as mosques.

Keeping in mind the layers of pedagogical challenges that come with teaching noncanonical eighteenth-century genres and authors, I designed an active learning assignment for my fall 2010 course in which students visited the online, three-dimensional world called Second Life. I asked students to write their own short travelogue about their virtual travel within that platform, which features sites that (re)create real-world places, such as Paris, as well as those imagined, such as Alice in Wonderland Island. The students were tasked with composing a reflection paper about the process in order to consider how the experience of writing a travelogue would impact how they see the genre and whether it would change how they read future travelogues in the course. As I will demonstrate, active learning assignments that allow for autonomy but are guided by instructors give students opportunities to experience course content in a more specific way and provide chances for reflection and, ultimately, deeper learning.
Designing an Active Learning Project in Second Life

Active learning is a process that allows students to construct and make meaning on their own, rather than “receiving” knowledge through what Paulo Freire (2000: 72) calls the “banking” model. James Bonwell and Charles Eison, in the influential report *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* (1991), define active learning as “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (2). L. Dee Fink, in his book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003), further clarifies the definition by identifying three main elements that must be present in order for active learning to take place: information and ideas, experiences, and reflection. Students start with the information and ideas they learn in the course, either from reading or from student-teacher interaction. They then need to either observe an experience or participate in one that connects to the information they are learning in the course. For example, Fink cites a professor taking students in a “Native American Music” class to observe an authentic powwow. The final step is for students to reflect upon these experiences. Reflection is an essential element for active learning, although the one that is most easily forgotten and most often dismissed as pedagogically unimportant. Fink stresses the importance of including time and space for reflection, as do Chet Meyers and Thomas Jones in their book *Promoting Active Learning: Strategies for the College Classroom* (1993), who note that through reflection, students are able to “sort things out as they restructure old ways of thinking and move on to new understandings” (29). Through the process of contemplation, students construct their own knowledge, making them active participants in the learning process.

Providing students with a space to travel to a new place and write a travelogue about the experience required some technological intervention. Educators have explored virtual three-dimensional worlds like Second Life for the past several years; in 2007 the New Media Consortium and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative’s “Horizon Report” identified such worlds as emerging technologies that would likely have an impact on teaching and learning (18). Because of the nature of the Second Life world, which focuses on community rather than a larger, “game”-type objective, the opportunities for use in the classroom are expansive. In his book on communication in virtual spaces, Paul Adams notes that technology “chang[es] the geography of human agency, altering the range of physical and virtual interactions into which people are able to enter” (2005: 7, emphasis in original). The online world of Second Life provides a space for new communities, with their own sets of cultures, to form; such spaces allow students the agency to participate.
in virtual interactions with people they do not know while maintaining their physical safety. Additionally, Leslie Jarmon and colleagues (2009: 162) argue for Second Life’s usefulness in enhancing the quality of students’ experiences in interdisciplinary experiential learning projects by providing a space in which to test and improve communication strategies across different audiences and to engage with real-world projects.

More specifically, in her study on the future of using Second Life in the classroom, Gilly Salmon (2009: 534) notes that “many of the hopes for and predictions of the future of 3-D MUVEs [three-dimensional multiuser virtual environments] centre on identity experimentation, self-revealion, and role play on the creative variation of social norms around gender, ethnicity, social class, and on group values and goals.” Second Life allows twenty-first-century users the freedom that eighteenth-century women found while traveling: both allow participants to be removed from their own culture and experience new customs and societies. Many women travelers, as Srinivus Aravamudan argues in *Tropicopolitans* (1999), positioned their sex “as an advantage for the understanding of cultural difference” (259). For example, only women travelers, like Lady Montagu and Lady Craven in the eighteenth century, were allowed into women’s spaces in Turkey such as the seraglio and bathhouse. While Montagu and Craven gave very different depictions of Turkish women and culture, they both concluded that Turkish women are allowed sexual freedom by the veils they wear, thus arriving at a very different understanding of the garment than the European males who observed it. As Felicity Nussbaum argues in *Torrid Zones* (1995), both women participate in reaffirming Orientalist depictions of sensual women through their discussion of the veil, although they each wear the veil as a “masquerade” of the Other, “impersonating that difference of a culture they envy and idealize, even evidencing its superiority to England” (137). Such experiences, as well as the opportunity that “self-narrative” provided women travelers as the “appropriate mediator between the inner self and external reality,” make the travelogue “an instrument particularly suited for studying both the self and the impact of external objects on its development” (Guerra 2004: 109–10). As such, it seems fitting to have students explore the communities of Second Life in order to have their own moments of self-revelation. Second Life has also been used to help students connect with cultures and societies from the past. Katherine Ellison and Carol Matthews’s 2010 article on the use of Second Life to help students connect with eighteenth-century literature and culture and become scholars and researchers in their own right demonstrates Second Life’s pedagogical use for helping bridge historical distances. Drawing on
this scholarship, I believed Second Life would allow the valuable addition of experiential learning in my course in order to enrich students’ understanding of historical, noncanonical texts.

The purpose of the Second Life project was to have students experience the act of writing and reflecting about traveling in an unfamiliar place. Gary Totten (2008: 53) argues that “travel writers’ decisions regarding place, route, and purpose, the preconceptions and literary-cultural repertoire that affect the travel experience, the reshaped sense of home and self that results from the journey make travel writing a significant act of life writing.” Students “traveled” in Second Life and wrote their own travelogues about their experiences. I chose to have students travel in Second Life because it is a foreign space to most of them but is safe to explore, since they do not physically travel there.1 The third component of active learning, reflection, was encompassed in the reflective essay that students wrote after composing their travelogues; the essay required them to analyze how they portrayed themselves as well as Second Life and its inhabitants. Students considered their rhetorical choices, including travelogue conventions they chose to use or ignore; explored the possible effects these choices might have on readers; and offered any insights the project may have given them into the mind of eighteenth-century travel writers. Reflecting on this experience, students could apply what they learned from the project to help them analyze and understand the texts they read for the second half of the semester.

By creating the opportunity for students to construct their own narrative and make textual decisions based on what they had learned about the genre and its conventions and purposes in the eighteenth century, the assignment allowed them to participate in a genre many had not even known existed before the semester began. To prepare for writing their own narratives, students traced eighteenth-century travelogue conventions in Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko (1688), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Turkish Embassy Letters (1763), and Lady Elizabeth Craven’s A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople (1789) early in the semester, discussing the customs of the genre and their evolution over the course of the century. My goal was to inspire students to delve deeper into the underlying ideologies of authors and how ideologies—including their own—appear in a text, much in the same way that David C. Judkins (2001: 47) frames his teaching of travel literature: “Why . . . do we perceive difference in terms that reflect not so much what we are seeing but rather the background from which we see this new culture?” Second Life provided the new, “strange” community for students to encounter and explore. The platform is one that they were unfamiliar with, enabling
them to think about the ways their feelings of discomfort and alterity were informed by their ideologies concerning virtual worlds and the subsequent ways those ideologies impacted their travelogues. In this way, having students make choices and reflect upon the impact of those choices on their narratives enabled them to better understand the rhetorical choices that travelogue authors had to make, something that could perhaps aid the students when analyzing future texts. I wanted them to consider how an author’s travel experiences, and the act of reflecting upon them, contribute to an understanding of the life and perspective of the author.

**Travel As Education in the Eighteenth Century**

The decision to have students travel via a virtual world as part of their educational experience echoes the eighteenth-century belief that travel was a critical part of education. The travelogue, already a popular genre by the late seventeenth century, gained even more currency in the early eighteenth century because of its role in education. After John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which argues that knowledge is gained through experience, travel became even more explicitly associated with education. Moreover, respected authors such as Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, James Boswell, and Samuel Johnson touted the usefulness and educational values of the genre, publishing their own travel experiences and helping cement travelogues’ status in the marketplace (Blanton 1997: 15). Travel writers, usually upper-class white males, would gather information about foreign lands and relay it to waiting readers back home.

One of the most common travel routes for young men was the grand tour. Joseph Addison’s *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705), written during his own grand tour, became a seminal text for many young travelers; the volume was so popular, nine more editions of it were published between 1718 and 1767, with it later being translated into French and Dutch (Howard 2000: 1). Not only an interesting read for audiences, Addison’s narrative inspired travelers to experience what he described, with James Boswell enthusiastically comparing his journey through Italy to Addison’s almost sixty years later (Batten 1978: 11). James Buzard (2002: 38–39) explains that the grand tour was adopted by the British upper class, those with the means and time to travel, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The standard itinerary grew to include European cultural centers such as Paris, Geneva, Milan, Florence, and Rome. The tour “was, from start to finish, an ideological exercise. Its leading purpose was to round out the education of young men of the ruling classes by exposing them to treasured artifacts and ennobling
society of the Continent” (38). While some, such as the writers of the popular periodical *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, argued that travel, specifically the grand tour, did not actually educate but rather exposed young men to vices and questionable influences, the practice of men finishing their education abroad remained strong. Others stressed that travel abroad should be just a part of young men’s larger educational experience. In his book *Instructions for Travellers* (1757), Josiah Tucker argues that those who are “Travelling into foreign Countries for the Sake of Improvement” must also know the “Religion, Constitution, and Nature” of their own country, and he encourages travelers to take a tour of their homeland before heading abroad (4). However, although firsthand experience through travel was the best means of acquiring knowledge and polish, few could afford to do so.

The publication of travel narratives allowed English readers to experience the world without leaving their homes. Publishing travel narratives was a lucrative venture, and many “travel liars” wrote travelogues without ever leaving home, using others’ narratives to craft fictional travel narratives (Adams 1980). One way that readers tried to filter out the “truthful” writers from the travel liars was to look for genre conventions as evidence of truth. Indeed, by the eighteenth century the travelogue genre was governed and steeped in textual conventions, as Michael McKeon notes in *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (1987). Looking to the early seventeenth-century publications of the Royal Society, the scientific organization founded by Charles II in 1662, and its instructions for travel writers as the formative source of guidelines that promote geographical and anthropological notes written in an objective style, McKeon argues that conventions helped inform the reader of the text’s veracity. Jean Viviès (2002: 33) agrees, explaining that the Royal Society influenced the travelogue genre’s “tacit if not written rules of conduct.” McKeon writes that by the eighteenth century, the truth-value of a travelogue was determined by its adherence to generic tropes, not its substance, so that “if a narrative observes the proper conventions, it demonstrates its own veracity” (1987: 110). As such, authors followed these conventions closely in order to avoid accusations of lying.

In *Pleasurable Instruction*, Charles Batten (1978) lays out the evolution of travel literature’s conventions throughout the eighteenth century. Travelers knew not to talk about themselves in order to avoid charges of egotism, to write in a plain style and avoid the ornaments of rhetoric, to make use of encyclopedic categorization for what they saw, and to write on the spot. Samuel Johnson reiterates the importance of recording information as it happened, writing in a 1778 letter to a friend whose daughter had recently
traveled: “If it were not now too late I would advise her to note the impression which the first sight of any thing new and wonderful made upon her mind,” for one’s memory “is soon confused by a quick succession of things; and she will grow every day less confident in the truth of her own narratives, unless she can recur to some written memorials” (Boswell 1823: 221–22). But truth, as McKeon (1987: 104) observes, was not conveyed just in the facts or how quickly observations were written down. The “antirhetorical style” of the travelogue was founded in the notion that a plain style of writing demonstrates an “artlessness” that conveys candor and transparency. Indeed, Zoë Kinsley (2008: 33) explains that by the late eighteenth century, in addition to being judged by its “factual accuracy,” a travelogue needed to visibly display the author’s process, which itself needed to be organized in order to produce a truthful account. As more and more travelers recorded and published chronicles of their journeys, Batten (1978: 7–8) notes that an element of novelty was needed to set the narratives apart. Thus, travel books “were not merely treatises, since they also provided an imaginative experience for the reader,” which allowed travelogues to join “pleasure with instruction.” Thus, much like using an avatar to explore Second Life, the reader took a virtual journey through the author’s narrative, traveling vicariously through the avatar of the author. Moreover, for both author and reader this educational experience of travel provided moments for reflection; learning about other cultures and people’s by reading traveler’s observations provided perspective and insights for the reader.

Reading Travel Narratives
Before students could begin the “experience” and “reflective” portions of the assignment, they needed to engage with actual travelogues and the genre’s eighteenth-century conventions in order to gain knowledge that would inform the Second Life project. To begin, students read excerpts from several travel-advice books that were published between 1633 and 1789: Robert Devereux’s Profitable Instructions (1633), Josiah Tucker’s Instructions for Travellers (1757), and Leopold Graf von Berchtold’s An Essay to Direct and Extend the Inquiries of Patriotic Travellers (1789). Through substantial in-class close reading, students analyzed what each text could tell them about travel writing during the time it was published, such as the ideological forces driving the narratives and the types of information about which travelers should write. This exercise allowed them to see that motivations and expectations of travel writing change over time, as well as to identify some conventions of the genre on their own through the stated expectations of these travel-advice books.
Subsequently, they read *Oroonoko* (1688), *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), and *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople* (1789). Spanning one hundred years, these three narratives exemplify the variety of texts found within the genre. A travel narrative might mix fact and fiction, including autobiographical elements; be “part of a larger attempt to explain oneself to the world or at least to the reading public”; or even forgo the focus on the personal to put the natural and ethnographic elements into the spotlight (Hamera and Bendixen 2009: 2–3). Interestingly, while the two main models of the narrative—the personal and the scientific—were popular in the eighteenth century, by the latter part of the period the traveler’s story took more of a central role than it had previously. Travelers’ thoughts, concerns, and experiences became a way to sentimentalize their experience, while the more scientific descriptions became details within the larger story (Blanton 1997: 13). While focused more on autobiographical details than on scientific exploration, the travelogues by Behn, Montagu, and Craven introduced students to a range of narratives that can fall under the genre of travel literature, offering them different ways of reflecting on the genre and its purposes.

However, genres like the travelogue that do not have traditional narratives can seem inaccessible to some students. One reason is that they “resist quick reading” because of their lack of a familiar structure or format (Christianson and Gergits 2001: 2). Additionally, the distance from their historical context can amplify the confusion. Certainly, the conventions of eighteenth-century travelogues require some coherent narrative structure, such as linearity; however, the narrative is often interrupted by descriptions of scenery, philosophical musings about a culture, or even historical background of the place being visited. Early in the semester, through class discussion, students revealed that reading travelogues was a slow process. Many students said that they had to read and reread sections because of the unfamiliar sentence structure and word choice, shifts from topic to topic, and unknown historical references. Several of the English majors in the class admitted that they found the texts resisted the “traditional” way of reading, which, by their own descriptions, consisted of tracking character development and plot progression and “uncovering” symbols.

Because there is no conventional plot (or at least one that follows the Aristotelian plot model) or character development within travelogues that one might find in a novel, many students were first drawn to the conventions of the genre as a source of discussion and analysis. As they began to study these unfamiliar texts, students felt most comfortable discussing conventions such as truth claims, novelty of places visited, and not talking about oneself.
Struggling with the actual narrative, students were mostly unconcerned with its historical context or the culture in which it was constructed. Instead, they focused on the form and structure of the narrative for meaning rather than taking into account the larger historical picture to help them understand why the authors wrote the way they did. However, after reading several travelogues and feeling more comfortable with the genre, students began to ask more questions about the historical context, considering the social, political, and economic issues surrounding each author and narrative. Toward the end of the semester, one student admitted, “I never expected to care so much about the historical side of things.”

Noncanonical authors of unfamiliar genres like the travelogue complicate how students see history because they provide them with a different way of organizing and understanding the world. Therefore, I set up the course to “interrupt” the traditional canon of Western literature that the students were expecting. In her essay “Interrupting Our Way to Agency: Feminist Cultural Studies and Composition” (1998), Nedra Reynolds describes the rhetorical act of interruption as a way to bring attention to marginalized voices and to “force more attention to the ideological workings of discursive exclusion” (60). Through their unfamiliarity and feelings of alterity, students can begin to investigate why they feel such distance from these narratives. This analysis requires them to ask why they have their beliefs about what constitutes a piece of “literature,” as well as to confront the ideological forces that have helped construct these beliefs. Interruption of a currently understood paradigm can bring discomfort. However, it is through analysis and discussions about that discomfort, of which we had several throughout the course, that students reflect upon how their understanding of literature has changed. During these moments of reflection, I believe students can begin to reconceptualize what “counts” as literature and to negotiate their expectations of how a text is constructed.

Moreover, one of the learning goals of the course was to help students understand the influence of women travelogue writers’ narratives within eighteenth-century culture. Mary Louise Pratt, in her examination of the creation of imperialistic ideology in travel writing and its connection to the reading public, describes the way travel writing “produced ‘the rest of the world’ for European readerships” (1992: 5; emphasis in original). However, Sidonie Smith argues in *Moving Lives* (2001) that travel “has functioned as a domain of constitutive masculinity” (x), meaning that, historically, travel literature was produced primarily by men, and the construction of the world reflected a primarily masculine perspective. For example, in the eighteenth
century fewer than twenty British women published their travel narratives (Turner 1999: 113). Women who did travel were also part of the upper class, many traveling with husbands or family members. Female travel writers in the eighteenth century also walked the line between the private and public spheres. As Brian Dolan (2001: 7) notes in his study of women and the grand tour, female travelers, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century, “angered many male critics” because they “violated the division of labour that governed Georgian society.” Women were to look after the house, while going abroad was a man’s duty. However, maintaining an illusion of a “private audience” allowed women to remain within the proper societal bounds while traveling and writing, meaning this blurring of spheres often manifested through narrative form. Many women travel writers (including Lady Montagu and Lady Craven, assigned for the class) used the genre of the private letter to write their travelogues (Pickford 2009: 65). The genre of the letter became an “emblem of the private” in the early part of the eighteenth century “while keeping its actual function as an agent of the public exchange of knowledge” (Cook 1996: 6). Thus, writing “private” letters allowed women travelers who published to remain within gendered cultural expectations while placing their narratives in the public sphere, contributing to the discourse about the world.

Because travel writing demanded embodiment and exposure in the public sphere, women travel writers were more corporeally vulnerable than were writers in other genres. Kristi Siegel (2004: 2–3) describes the “delicate course” women travel writers had to follow: in order to attract readership, “a woman needed to provide material that was reasonably exciting; to keep an audience, she needed to remain a lady.” A large part of the cultural fear of women traveling had as much to do with fears about morality (such as what “worldly” customs they might learn or what they might be tempted to do once outside the “civilized” world) as it did with concerns about safety. However, not all views on women’s traveling and publishing were negative. As Kinsley (2008: 45) explains, women’s travel narratives offered a new perspective on well-worn routes and were therefore welcomed by reviewers and the public. Although “the physical journeying which inspired those texts caused . . . disquiet” (46), the narratives that women wrote about their travels were generally considered useful and fresh additions to the ever-growing body of travel literature.

Thus, while early British travelogues are associated most with male explorers and imperialistic agendas (the main focus of Pratt’s [1992] study), female travel writers promoted their own way of seeing the world. Social
status, while giving them the monetary means to travel, also colored their view of other cultures and the social classes described in the texts. Indeed, the travelogue’s role in the formation of an English identity, or a sense of “Englishness,” is apparent in almost every text through each author’s creation of what Benedict Anderson (2006) would call an “imagined community.” Anderson argues that print capitalism allows imagined political communities to create a unified national identity. Meaning, print makes readers aware that there are others they had not met “to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (44). As Anderson notes, while individual members of a nation may never meet, “in the mind of each lives the image of their communion” (6), which allows them to imagine “a deep horizontal comradeship” (7). Additionally, according to Anderson, the scope of an imagined community is limited, meaning that beyond the boundaries of one nation exist other imagined communities. Travelogues helped to shape these ideals by disseminating information about peoples and cultures of other nations while reinforcing a collective British identity. When British travelers encountered alterity abroad, they defined themselves and England against the Other through language, custom, or dress, creating a set of cultural beliefs and ideologies that became ascribed to someone who is English and helping to form an identity for that imagined community.

From Reading to Writing: Constructing a Travel Narrative

Second Life is itself an “imagined community,” made up of bustling social networks, a distinct set of cultural expectations, and even its own currency, Linden dollars, which is exchanged for real-world money. Kevin Miguel Sherman’s (2011: 39–41) interrogation of the notion of Second Life as a nation, using Anderson’s theories of nationhood, argues that Second Life residents inhabit and interact with their virtual environment, actually helping build the world around them; address humanitarian, educational, and political issues within Second Life through civic groups; and receive information about Second Life through virtual world-specific mass media such as radio, films, magazines, and newspapers. He concludes that while further research is needed on users’ time in the world and their conception of it as a nation, “it seems to me that an individual could perceive [Second Life] to be a nation” (48). Linden Labs (2012), which launched Second Life in 2003, furthers this notion through its rhetoric, referring to users as “residents” and acknowledging them as a community with its own discourse, even encouraging Second Life users who wish to make their venues friendly to newcomers to “avoid
use of ‘insider’ language or instructions that may be confusing to someone accessing Second Life as a new Resident.\textsuperscript{3} The significance of Second Life as an imagined community, or possible nation, to the travelogue assignment is that students are doing more than simply entering a game or virtual space that they have never seen before. Much like the travelers in the travelogues they read, students are entering a community whose culture, language, customs, and environment, while somewhat familiar at a basic level, are much different from their own and those that they have to negotiate during their travels.

In order to enter into the Second Life world, each resident chooses an avatar that is used as a representation of the player and that can take many forms, including human, robot, or animal. Users may manipulate their avatar’s physical features, clothing, and mannerisms to fit how they want to portray themselves. As those new to Second Life are quick to find out, everything from an avatar’s dress to how they walk can signal to frequent users that they are “noobs” or “newbs.” Each term is distinct: A “newb” is a new, inexperienced resident who is respectful and wishes to learn more about the game. In contrast, a “noob” is a pejorative term for new, inexperienced players who annoy users and are not interested in learning about the game or becoming a part of the community. Residents may shed their “newb” look by changing almost any feature on their avatar. They can purchase (or find for free) hair, skins, clothing, and accessories. They can even purchase or create scripts that will allow their avatar to walk with a certain gait or produce motions such as laughing, waving, or dancing. There also exist social rules governing a wide variety of virtual-world-specific situations, such as when and where it is proper to change an avatar’s clothing and how to end a conversation.\textsuperscript{4} Students therefore spent a great deal of time in their travelogues discussing representations of themselves and others within Second Life and their feeling of disconnect from the Second Life community, from not understanding social conventions to feeling lonely when residents did not take the time to speak with them or called them a newb or, worse, noob. While some students wrote as their avatar character and others chose to write as themselves watching their avatars on-screen, all were eager to discuss their interactions in the virtual community and to describe its culture and its inhabitants.

Working within a new community meant learning a new set of behaviors, including the physical working of the program (such as controlling the avatar with keyboard commands). A number of students commented on their aggravation in trying to learn how to make their avatar sit, move, or fly. (Flying and teleporting to various sites within Second Life are the fastest modes of transportation within the world.) However, one situation that grew from
a technical mistake made for an embarrassing but teachable moment. Two female students, who in Second Life went by the names Elise Stormcrow and Em Ashland, were sitting together at their computers in real life, talking about how “creepy” they thought the people behind the avatars in Second Life were and making fun of them for taking the game so seriously. Unknown to them, their microphones were on and the Second Life users they were talking about heard them. The Second Life residents responded, calling them “immature middle school girls” and saying, “They don’t even know we’re talking about them because they’re morons.” Mortified, the two girls apologized and began to chat with one of the users. To their surprise, one of them was a middle school teacher in New York, not at all the sort of user they had imagined. During their next visit, the students made a concerted effort to talk with Second Life users and found several who wanted to help them not look like “lost noobs.” Later, Elise Stormcrow notes that she “wanted to avoid being called a ‘noob’ again” but did not quite know why she cared. She writes, “Maybe I felt that as much as I was analyzing the people/avatars that I was encountering, they were probably analyzing me.” Such interactions with Second Life residents made some students uncomfortable; others appreciated that residents wanted to take the time to help them shed their “newb” look and assimilate to the Second Life culture.

Interestingly, once they began successfully navigating the culture, a large number of students commented on how much they learned about the difficulty of constructing a travel text. Many admitted that because the genre was based in observation, they thought it would be an easy process of simply recording what they saw. However, the practice of deciding what to focus on revealed the rhetorical choices that travelogue authors needed to make for the sake of time and interest. One student noted, after describing her process of choosing which details to include, that “I never really gave the travelogue authors we have read too much credit. I kind of always thought of them as not caring that they were being blatantly offensive, but now that I have written a travelogue, I see it a different way.” Another reflection paper echoed this sentiment: “Prior to writing this I never realized the hard work, time, and attention that is necessary for writing a travelogue . . . in the future, I will not only respect them more, I will pay closer attention to the detail, to the experiences or people the author focuses on the most, the effect of that, as well as the way in which they describe places and customs they are viewing for the first time.” The perspective that constructing and analyzing their own narratives gave students allowed them to understand travel writing in a more complex way. What before had seemed a simple recitation of facts, without
regard for what my students believed should have been an understanding of the native peoples whom the authors encountered, became a much more complex process of negotiating details, accuracy, novelty, and personal opinions.

Subjectivity and the Gaze in Travel Literature

In order to complicate the relationship between the author and text, the students and I discussed in class the idea of subjective narration. While the travel narratives we studied often claim objectivity and a singular truth, the subjectivity of the author plays a powerful role in shaping the text. These elements contribute to the historical nature of the texts because they allow students to see parts of the world through the ideological framework of the author. This, in return, gives students a way to understand the culture of eighteenth-century England, as well as the fact that the author’s viewpoint has been shaped by the culture of her homeland. Of course, as Santiago Henríquez Jiménez (2001: 91) argues, travel literature allows students to “compare and investigate presuppositions with real parallel information: looking at how travel books are related to history and how they contextualize reality.” Early travel narratives are intersections for myriad issues, such as gender, race, class, culture, politics, religion, and literature, because of the curiosity of the travelers and the imperialistic culture in which they were writing; setting out to gather information about other lands, people, and cultures necessarily brings together these facets of humanity. Moreover, as students noted while discussing the travelogues, there was an emphasis on the visual—much of the text of a travel narrative was based on how the author interpreted what she saw.

Thus, understanding the lens through which people, places, and customs are presented becomes important to the discussion of the author’s gaze and ideologies and how they affect the text. I introduced students to the notion of the gaze by defining it as the way a particular person or group sees the world, which is constructed by their gender, class, social position, and national identification. My explanation of the concept is informed by Michel Foucault’s discussion in his book *The Order of Things* (1970: 3–16) of the usual binary of the gaze (the viewer and the viewed) through its disruption in the painting *Las Meninas*, as well as his observation that words and the visible cannot be “reduced to each others’ terms” (9). Furthermore, Mary Louise Pratt’s (1992) discussion of the discourse of “anticonquest” in travel narratives explains the notion of gaze as applied specifically to travel literature. At the center of anticonquest discourse, which asserts European innocence at the same point in which they assert their power, is the European male
subject, “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (7). For Pratt, the imperial gaze always maps a European presence onto the landscape, as the country “presents itself” to the European viewers (60; emphasis original). Additionally, E. Ann Kaplan’s (1997: 79) explanation of the imperial gaze was particularly pertinent to helping students understand the gaze within the travelogue genre: “The gaze of the colonialist . . . refuses to acknowledge its own power and privilege: it unconsciously represses knowledge of power hierarchies and its need to dominate, to control. Like the male gaze, it’s an objectifying gaze, one that refuses mutual gazing, mutual subject-to-subject recognition.” I introduced various types of gazes, including the male gaze, the imperial gaze, and the Western gaze, as a way of complicating notions of objectivity within travel writing. As we discussed how national and personal identities reveal themselves in the texts, students really began to consider motivations of author, historical context, cultural beliefs, and social class as ways to understand a particular author’s subjective “truth.” Students were very interested in exploring how a facet of an author’s identity, such as class, could affect the experiences she is able to have, as well as how she presented her observations; for example, Craven’s wealth and status meant that the majority of the people she interacted with on her travels were royalty or extremely affluent. Students argued that this would necessarily impact how she was treated and the parts of the culture to which she was privy. The particular question of whether an author could ever truly be objective seemed to strike a chord for many students, becoming a semester-long inquiry for them.

It is worth noting that before completing the Second Life project, many criticized how the authors’ gazes affected how the women travelers wrote about other cultures and places. Students were quick to point out Lady Montagu’s travelogue as written through “an elitist gaze” because of her lack of descriptions of the lower class and her lack of recognition that the generous way she is treated as an ambassador’s wife allows her more freedom and luxury than other travelers. Moreover, students noted the often nationalistic comparisons given in texts, such as Lady Craven’s repeated assertion of England’s superiority in every way, including dress, politics, and religion, over countries in Western and Eastern Europe and Asia. This particular underlying ideology became apparent to many after we noted that Craven’s text had been written several years after England lost the American colonies. Students felt that Craven was trying to build a sense of pride in England and help establish a strong English identity. In addition, they argued that Craven’s nationalism demonstrated her “imperialistic gaze” as she discussed the Turkish people and mentioned English colonization throughout her letters.
Several students made personal judgments about Craven based on her travel narrative and were vocal about disliking the text. At times, it appeared as though students wanted to replace the lack of a protagonist with the author; thus, for them, “relating to,” “liking,” or “sympathizing with” the author was a large part of their reception of the narrative.

In their reflection papers, a large number of students disclosed their preconceptions about the Second Life virtual community, citing popular culture references like the sitcom *The Office* and the reality show *MTV: Real Life* that portrayed Second Life in a negative manner and noting how these depictions impacted how they described the people and culture in their travel narratives. One student who went by Lenora in Second Life writes that going into the project, she expected to encounter “a bunch of weird, avatar-obsessed [users] who were unable to function and socialize with the real world.” Another student disclosed that her boyfriend had told her Second Life was boring, which, along with her preconceived ideas about online communities, “limited [her] experiences and subsequently what [she] was able to write about.” Interestingly, while the class had difficulty seeing the importance of the historical and cultural context of travel narratives at the beginning of the course, most of them contextually situated themselves while working on the Second Life project, taking into consideration how their negative attitude affected their ability to remain objective while observing Second Life’s foreign community.

One male student in particular, an avid gamer, detested Second Life. Used to playing video games with objectives, he found the Second Life world to be “boring.” While he said that he found the assignment beneficial and that he enjoyed writing his narrative, he had trouble moving beyond his dislike of Second Life into a deep analysis of his own writing. The introduction to his travelogue includes a kind of truth claim: “I will be attempting to view these people with as much objectivity as possible—being aware of my own preconceived notions, I plan to avoid the pitfalls of my predecessors.” However, in his reflection paper, he admits that “while I never made things up, I certainly left things out,” and “what is most certainly true is my opinions of the things I saw.” Unfortunately, his admission of his prejudices and awareness that his narrative was negative did not help him analyze or complicate the intersection between his opinions and his stated attempt to follow convention and remain objective. Interestingly, he likened his text to Lady Craven’s because they were both “cold and [whiny].” This comparison is striking, given how many other students said that they most disliked Craven’s text because of her seeming lack of self-awareness.
However, the subjective nature of the narrative and the impact that
the author’s ideology has upon the text became clear to many students after
writing their own travel narratives. As a result of interrogating the context in
which they wrote their travelogues, many students wrote that they “forgave”
some of the travelogue authors for their biases, now understanding more
concretely how personal and historical context affects one’s gaze. A student
who went by the name Lady Elizabeth was surprised to realize that while
writing her travel narrative, she was “especially critical of women. I only
criticized the women that were wearing the most ridiculous outfits or noth-
ing at all and not the ones that were dressed like me. . . . In class, I criticized
Lady Montagu and Lady Elizabeth Craven for doing this in their travelogues,
but I did the same thing in [mine].” Much like eighteenth-century women
travelers, Lady Elizabeth, when encountering alterity, found herself push-
ing against people who contradicted her personal set of norms. But in facing
that realization, she opened the door to being a better reader of travel texts,
better able to position herself with regard to the author’s personal subjectiv-
ity in the text and to understand the autobiographical nature of many of the
late eighteenth-century women’s travel narratives. Beyond just descriptions
of other people and places, travelogues could also encompass moments of
introspection through experiences with alterity.

Like Lady Elizabeth, several other students found that, in reflecting
upon their own gaze, they gained insights into their biases. One student,
Lenora, admits that “honestly, I am ashamed of the way I entered Second
Life. My feelings were in no way better than those of the women [travel writ-
ers] we deemed ‘racist’ and ‘mean’ after reading their travelogues.” Another
writes that she was surprised at her shyness in Second Life because she is
very social in person. She states, “It was so strange that I, a normally, if not
overly, social person, had such a fear of these simulations. As I have been
reflecting on this project and how it relates to the class content, if [sic] finally
dawned on me. I have Othered avatars. Whoa! This was, and still is, a scary
concept to me” (emphasis in original). Because of her reflection on her expe-
rience within the Second Life community, the student was beginning to ask
herself Judkins’s question: what is it about her own gaze, formed through
historical and personal context, that made her perceive other avatars in Sec-
ond Life in such a negative way? Her answer came as a startling revelation to
her, one that was deeply personal and, as she portrayed it, quite unsettling
to her sense of self. She writes, “I am scared of this unknown, new race of
people. . . . [T]he experience as a whole has taught me a few things about
myself that I need to look more deeply at and possibly rectify.” In addition to
reinforcing the extent to which the traveler’s specific culture and point in time affect how a travelogue is constructed, this experience vividly demonstrated to the student how travelers learned about themselves.

**Travelogues and Issues of Truth**

With discussions of subjectivity naturally come issues of truth, especially in eighteenth-century travel literature, which is dependent upon and rife with claims of truth. With authors like Montagu contradicting descriptions of cultures and people found in male travelers’ tales about Turkey, and Craven contesting the validity of Montagu’s narrative, students began to see the texts as what Isobel Grundy (2000: 184) describes as “a site of struggle and debate (rather than as a repository of enduring truths).” That is, because each travelogue’s preface promises that the truth is found within its text, these conflicting narratives of “truth” “sound in discord with the dominant ideology” (184). The dominant ideology concerning travel narratives in the eighteenth century is found in the way they depicted natural knowledge of other peoples, lands, and places; for example, male travelers’ lascivious descriptions of Turkish bathhouses, where no males were allowed to enter, were believed and then reified in each other’s texts until Montagu dared to write otherwise. However, issues of “truth value” in a narrative are much more complex than simply “truth” or “fiction.” As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010: 16–17) argue, life writing does not produce “a single, stable truth” but, rather, is “an intersubjective mode [that] resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood.” In life writing, the author creates the truth of her experiences based on her own understanding and subsequent relation of the events. The author is distanced from these experiences through the act of writing in that she is pressured to represent the events in a way that conforms to a variety of expectations, such as the conventions of the genre or the literacy of the audience.

The question of truthfulness and objectivity of travel narratives became a focal point for many students early in the semester upon reading a chapter from Percy Adams’s book *Travelers and Travel Liars* (1980), in which Adams discusses the long history of those who lied about traveling, as well as those who lied while traveling. This history, in addition to the truth claims that preceded each narrative the students read, made the “truth” and validity of a narrative a central debate in the classroom. One student in particular had been interested in the issue of the objective-subjective nature of narration and the degree of truth that could be found in travelogues. Thus, when he began the Second Life assignment, he set forth to write the most
objective travel narrative he could. However, he writes in his reflection that the draft “looked like it was written by a robot” and needed to be more exciting if it were to be commercially successful (as he argues was one goal of the travelogues). The convention of writing things down on the spot proved to be difficult for him since he quickly became overwhelmed with the prospect of recording everything he saw, a tactic he felt would help him remain objective and truthful. He admits that writing his narrative was more challenging than he had envisioned because “in a genre where . . . the whole world opens up before you, it is quite a task to even know where to point your gaze.” As a result, he had more respect for travel writers who could be both “factual and engaging,” and he no longer felt disdain for writers like Craven, who he had argued in class was not completely objective in her writing, especially in her descriptions of the Turkish people.

Assertions of truth, one of the central conventions of the travelogue genre, featured prominently within students’ narratives. The majority of students chose to display the “truth” of their narrative through the form of the personal letter or private journal. A student who went by the name Nadia Sondirra in Second Life found the journal form to be particularly freeing because she did not have to “hold anything in.” As several students noted, the “free” forms of the private letter and the journal also lend themselves more to the convention of writing down the details of experiences as they happen. Several students began their narratives with this assertion, although their reflections revealed that they did so not just to follow convention but also to ensure they would not forget detail, because ideas and thoughts could change over time. Students felt it was one of the more useful instructions that travelers received, often following the advice out of practicality instead of regard for travelogue convention. In terms of stated truth claims, students found themselves interrogating their usefulness. A student who went by the name Petunia Inkpen in Second Life notes that she believed truth claims effectively help to build the ethos of the author. However, Anna08 Adored argued that while she included an assertion of truth, it could make the reader question why it was necessary and read the text with a more critical eye. Similarly, another student, Judith Ohare, admitted in her reflection that although she claimed to be “brutally honest” in her travelogue, while writing it she felt as though she could embellish details to make the travelogue more interesting and more novel for her readers. Interestingly, students’ use of the convention made them question the veracity of others’ truth claims and truth’s purpose within the genre as a whole.

The idea of “truth” in relation to the interpretation and experience of the author became more realized as students analyzed their own interpreta-
tions and intentions of their travelogues. A student who went by the name Clovis Spanton in Second Life was struck by the realization that truth within a text is a complicated notion. He writes that the assignment made him more aware of the importance of creating “a proper image for oneself.” We had discussed this at length while reading Montagu, especially during a close reading of her famous bathhouse letter. Although Clovis worked hard to establish himself as credible in his narrative, much like Montagu, he stated that it was simply “[his] interpretation of the truth; it still does not stand alone.” This sentiment was echoed by one of his peers, who went by Serenity Bmovie. She notes that the Second Life project helped her understand other travelogues because “every activity, event, or occurrence has multiple sides to it. I write the angle I saw or enjoyed, but others could have seen something different. . . . Who is right? I do not think that is the question. If it is, the answer lies much deeper than a yes or no.” In working through their own writing, Clovis and Serenity were better able to conceptualize the way perception and subjectivity influence the “truth” of one’s experiences and what that meant for the genre at a time when truth was one of its most defining features.

Consequently, when working through readings later in the semester, the students were not searching for whether the narrative was “true” but were instead working to understand the author’s perception of the world around her. Most vividly, this came to fruition during our discussion of Mary Wollstonecraft’s Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (1796), when the students directed the conversation toward Wollstonecraft’s descriptions of the rocks on the beach and what they might symbolize for her at this point in her life. One student later wrote, “Our discussions have become much richer and more observant. Though it was a very difficult text to get through . . . we were looking at the importance of the rocks in Wollstonecraft’s work, something I do not believe we would have noticed, let alone have been prepared to discuss at the beginning of the semester.” Students began to see travelogues as more than a set of conventions or truth claims; as the semester progressed, they began to view the narratives as narratives, lived chronicles and accounts of women’s lives.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of the semester, upon examining the historical context and issues of authorship, subjective narration, truth, and travel, students began to understand the complex relationship between the author and the text in a different way than they had previously. As a result, students’ ability to read the travelogue genre grew stronger. One student writes in her reflection paper:
I had been in Second Life previously in another class, and this feeling of being a traveler was not so felt then. The set up in the classroom of in-depth analysis of actual travelogues created this mindset for me that surely affected how I internalized this virtual world, the people, and my reactions compared to how the actual 18th-century travelers reacted. Coming out of this experience and now moving back into the study of actual travelogues, I feel that I am more drawn to focusing even more on the writer as an individual and how this affects the details and observations being provided.

Being given the time to reflect upon the experience, including where she started and how she will continue, gave this student focus for reading for the rest of the semester. One of her peers commented on the usefulness of the reflection paper, writing, “As I complete my reflection for the travelogue, I realize I have never really had to analyze my own writing before. Sure, I’ve analyzed the writing of others, but no one has asked me to look back and figure out why I wrote the way I did.” Upon looking back, she notes that her views on Second Life changed through her experience, and writing her own travel narrative made her “more excited to read the rest of our class texts, and I feel I might be better able to understand the styles.” Writing within the genre gave her insight into travelogues that allowed her to better read and comprehend the genre. Another classmate agreed, feeling that contributing to class discussion became easier after writing and analyzing her own narrative:

Without any previous knowledge of travelogues, or much experience reading so many texts that needed to be analyzed and read in a different way, I did not have very valuable things to say about the texts. A big turning point for me was writing my own travelogue. Analyzing why I made the textual choices I did gave me a connection with the authors of travelogues we were reading for the class. When I read travelogues from then on, I suddenly could better understand where the author was coming from.

Interrogating her own writing process and the construction of her travelogue helped her approach the genre differently, allowing her to close some of the historical distance between herself and the eighteenth-century travel narrative.

Reading, learning, writing, and reflecting: through the process of authoring their own travel narratives and reflecting on their experiences, students were better able to analyze ideologies and cultural issues in eighteenth-century travelogues, taking into account historical and cultural contexts. Through a deeper appreciation of the influence of the author’s subjectiv-
ity, they more actively pursued the historically situated issues of race, gender, class, and nationality that influenced how the author described the world around her. As a result, the genre of the eighteenth-century travelogue seemed less foreign and more accessible to them as readers. As Anna08 Adored observed in her reflection, “Sometimes, to gain a full understanding of a task, one must experience it for oneself.”

Notes
1. Only three of my twenty-eight students had used Second Life previous to this experience, and all three did so for academic purposes.
2. Elizabeth Bohls (2005: 97) argues that even authors of early eighteenth-century novels, a genre “fighting disrepute,” needed to claim truth and, like the travelogue, “faced damaging accusations of lying” (99). She points to Behn’s *Oroonoko* as a generic hybrid that encompasses elements of the early novel and the travelogue as a way of asserting the veracity of the narrative. For a larger study of relationships among the novel, the travelogue, and truth claims, see Percy Adams’s *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (1983).
3. The cited online article credits “Jeremy Linden” and “Brett Linden” as the authors; however, these are their avatar names and not their real-world identities. Those with the last name of “Linden” within Second Life are employees of Linden Lab in real life. As such, I credit Linden Labs as the author of the article.
4. While it might seem obvious that one should not dress or undress his or her avatar in a public space, students do not always feel ownership of their avatar and thus see it like dressing a doll in public. However, since frequent Second Life users see their avatars as extensions of themselves, it is a social code to change an avatar’s appearance in a private space.
5. Montagu specifically mentions Jean Dumont’s *A New Voyage to the Levant* (1696) and Aaron Hill’s *A Full and Just Account of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1710) as texts with unreliable information about the Turkish people and their culture. On the other hand, Craven, in one of her letters from Germany, claims that “whoever wrote [Montagu’s] Letters (for she never wrote a line of them) misrepresents things most terribly” (105).

Works Cited


Jarmon, Leslie, Tomoko Traphagan, Michael Mayrath, and Avani Trevedi. 2009. “Virtual


Virtual Travel in Second Life: Understanding Eighteenth-Century Travelogues through Experiential Learning
Elizabeth Zold

This article argues for the use of experiential learning to teach eighteenth-century travel literature to undergraduates. Exploring the three-dimensional virtual world of Second Life, students wrote their own travelogues and reflected on the ways in which the experience affected how they analyzed travelogues for the rest of the semester.