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Truthful Inadequacies: Teaching the Rhetorical Spark of Bashō's Travel Sketches

At key moments in his travel sketches, Matsuo Bashō, the renowned seventeenth-century Japanese poet, acknowledges defeat. For instance, in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, his most famous travel sketch, upon attempting to describe the islands of Matsushima, Bashō writes, "My pen strove in vain to equal this superb creation" (116). These moments, counterintuitively, seem to sustain his efforts to render his travels in *haibun*, a distinctive blend of prose and *haiku*. As with so much travel writing, the aim of Bashō's sketches is less about charting unfamiliar terrain and more about charting a process of self-discovery that spurs something similar in readers. At the same time, as with so much travel writing, the veracity of his sketches has been scrutinized, leading some to argue that the sketches are best understood as "discursive creations rather than simply transcriptions of experience" (Carter 195). Still, while stretching the truth in some areas, Bashō strives to be steadfastly truthful about his inadequacies. When writing in a genre that permits selective departures from the truth, why acknowledge your inadequacies at all?

More than just a motif signaling his humility, Bashō's inadequate pen is a rhetorical spark that confronts readers with the highly subjective and carefully constructed nature of his sketches, and reminds us that travel writing is at its most powerful when it forgoes the pretense of objectivity and embraces the beautiful imperfections of human experience. This is the provocation I presented to students in my spring 2019 travel writing course. As I designed the course with the intent of developing students' critical and practical capacities, I assigned Bashō's sketches alongside other narratives by Anthony Bourdain and

Eleanor Davis to highlight what students can gain as readers and as writers by grappling with truthful inadequacies in travel writing specifically and in creative nonfiction more broadly.

To begin, I assigned travel writing scholarship that helped my class to define the genre and understand its key features. We quickly realized that travel writing's ambiguous relationship with truth was crucial to cultivating our critical capacities. In the opening chapter of *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, Tim Youngs outlines that, "[w]hile some travel writers insist on absolute verisimilitude, others readily admit to the manipulation and invention of detail" (4). Whereas Youngs characterizes it as a clear dualistic choice for writers, others frame the issue as more intrinsic to the genre. Casey Blanton puts the relationship with truth at the forefront of *Travel Writing: The Self and The World*, her historical and theoretical study of the genre. When composing a travel narrative, Blanton explains, a writer must make some fundamental decisions: "By what process, using what models, does the traveler presume to describe, to interpret, to represent people and places who are other to him? What encounter is included, what person omitted? What vistas extolled, what river left behind?" (1). A piece of travel writing, then, is not a straightforward account of movement through the world, if such an account is actually possible; rather, it is an inherently selective rendering.

Blanton's insight assisted my students in appreciating that, as much as any other feature of the genre, skirting the line between fact and fiction is what permits travel writers to develop idiosyncratic voices and perspectives. The rhetorical spark for travel writing—what makes a particular narrative work and what makes it appealing or persuasive for readers—is closely associated with how creatively a writer skirts this line. With this in mind, we turned to examples of the genre. For me, selecting these texts was the most challenging aspect of designing the course. I wanted students to read a range of authors writing about a range of destinations in a range of forms. Initially, I offered articles from Jada Yuan, a writer selected by *The New York Times* to visit all the places listed on the newspaper's "52 Places to Go in 2018" list. Yuan's dispatches from destinations as diverse São Tomé, Switzerland, and Seattle were short,

accessible entry points into the genre. For a less journalistic and more literary approach, I assigned an excerpt from Pico Iyer's *Global Soul*, explaining to my students that, along with Paul Theroux and Rebecca Solnit, Iyer tops the list of most widely recognized contemporary travel writers. From this popular example, I turned to examples from writers who are not primarily known for their travel narratives, assigning excerpts from Langston Hughes and Mary Shelley. For some of my students, reading these authors they recognized from high school or college literature courses further validated travel writing as a genre worthy of thoughtful study.

We did not really begin to broach the subject of truth, however, until a few weeks into the semester when we got to our three core texts: Anthony Bourdain's *A Cook's Tour: Global Adventures in Extreme Cuisines*, Eleanor Davis' *You & a Bike & a Road*, and Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*. Moving from relatively brief articles and excerpts to entire texts allowed for sustained engagement with a single travel writer over a number of class meetings. And, by design, these texts presented my students with three different manifestations of the genre.

The Bourdain text was, admittedly, a sentimental selection. Bourdain, the chef-turned-author-turned-television host, had died the summer before I taught the course, and, as a fan saddened by his death, I was grateful for the chance to share his work with students. Published in 2001, *A Cook's Tour* is what one might expect of contemporary travel writing: a connected series of first-person, prose vignettes documenting the author's travels to places around the world. I selected the Davis text, a 2017 graphic novel about the cartoonist's bicycle journey through southern portions of the United States, because it breaks with the prose-heavy tradition of travel writing, while also emphasizing the gendered dynamics of travel and how the chosen means of transportation (e.g., by bike) can influence how writers depict their travels. Lastly, the Bashō text was intended to stretch students' thinking both historically and stylistically. Based on the author's treks through central and northern Japan in the late 1600s, the sketches are composed in *haibun*, a style that, for me and my students, proved equal parts novel and challenging. In

what follows, I focus on Bashō because, while Bourdain and Davis are worthy of attention in their own right, it was traveling along the *Narrow Road* that prompted the greatest opportunities for my class to appreciate travel writing as distinct from travel itself and to appreciate, as consumers and producers of the genre, the benefits derived from making the most of this distinction.

Travel vs. Travel Writing

As readers of Bashō, we found that, while we could read superficially at a quick pace, we were rewarded by slowing down and allowing the blend of prose and *haiku* to promote introspection. This imperative is best captured in the following *haiku*: "The chestnut by the eaves / In magnificent bloom / Passes unnoticed / By men of this world" (108). Not wanting to let anything pass by unnoticed, my students and I had to be more attentive readers. Instead of marching efficiently through to the end, we had to wander widely and deliberately. Just as in his sketches Bashō benefits from pausing along the way to remark upon a tree or a waterfall, we benefited from pausing along the way to contemplate a *kigo* or a *kireji*, two important structural components of *haiku*.

For help teaching my students about these components, I relied on the Penguin Classics edition translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa. Originally published in 1966, this edition contains *Narrow Road* and four less well-known sketches. Yuasa's authoritative introduction is a tremendous resource, especially with regards to *haiku*. For instance, he offers an interpretation of a famous poem by Bashō that depicts a frog jumping into a pond. "On the surface," Yuasa writes, "the poem describes an action of the frog and its after-effects—a perfect example of objectivity. But if you meditate long enough upon the poem, you will discover that the action thus described is not merely an external one, that it also exists internally, that the pond is, indeed, a mirror held up to reflect the author's mind" (33). Accompanying this contemplative mode of *haiku* is a series of structural components, namely *kigo* and *kireji*. The former, according to Yuasa, indicates the word or phrase in a *haiku* that is "a reference to the season in which [the poem] is written,"

while the latter indicates "a short emotionally charged word which, by arresting the flow of poetic statement for a moment, gives extra strength and dignity" (14). Yuasa introduces other terms, like *sabi* or "loneliness" (42) and *karumi* or "lightness" (45), that can define the mood of the *haiku* in Bashō's travel sketches.

Though initially hesitant to use this technical language, my students grew more comfortable with it when analyzing, discussing, and eventually imitating Bashō. Furthermore, Yuasa's translation unsettled the perception that *haiku* amounts to an inflexible set of rules for producing pithy observations of the mundane. Evident in the chestnut *haiku* cited above, the translation is notable for Yuasa's decision to render Bashō's verse in four-line stanzas instead of the more common three-line stanzas. He offers the following rationale: "the language of *haiku* […] is based on colloquialism, and in my opinion, the closest approximation of natural conversational rhythm can be achieved in English by a four-line stanza rather than a constrained three-line stanza" (48). I found this to be an incredible relief, as it permitted me to take a less rigid approach to *haiku* that, in moving away from the three-line stanza, also deemphasizes strict adherence to a 5-7-5 syllable count. By downplaying these strictures, my students and I could focus more on how components like the *kigo* and *kireji* contribute to the philosophical underpinnings of why Bashō turns to *haibun* to compose narratives about his travels.

To aid our analysis of Bashō, I assigned "Bashō and the Mastery of Poetic Space in *Oku no hosomichi*" by Steven D. Carter that tackles directly the veracity of *Narrow Road*. Because of how much the sketch varies from an ostensibly more accurate account by Kawai Sora, who accompanied Bashō on the journey, Carter designates *Narrow Road* as "a notoriously problematic text" and explains that, in addition to the omission of key details, "a careful check against Sora's account" reveals that Bashō "strayed from the truth in the ordering of events and in representations of various minor details, particularly the weather" (191). At once, changing details about the weather might seem insignificant. But, given that

features of the natural world factor so heavily in Bashō's travel writing, these alterations are far from minor. Carter recognizes that some might be tempted to interact with *Narrow Road* as a fictional text. But he cautions that, given the central role of travel in Bashō's life as a professional poet, this would be "a mistake" (191), and, instead, he proposes that readers take up a more audacious proposition, namely that, for Bashō, "travel and travel writing were perhaps not the same thing" (195). In other words, where travel is raw experience, travel writing is always a composed version of that experience.

Following Carter, my students and I considered how Bashō's deviations from the objective itinerary of his journeys are essential to his purpose, not merely flights of fancy but astute rhetorical moves by a writer intent on fashioning "discursive creations rather than simply transcriptions of experience" (Carter 195). The implications of Carter's proposition proved significant for my students on two fronts. First, it enabled their critical capacities by offering a way to analyze Bashō and, indeed, the other travel writers we read during the semester. Second, it enabled their practical capacities—that is, their abilities to produce their own "discursive creations"—by encouraging them to see how travel and travel writing could be closely related and yet also wholly distinct.

The Imitation

In the hopes of spurring the development of students' practical capacities, I assigned imitations for each of our three core texts. As I explained to students, Bourdain, Davis, and Bashō presented different versions of travel writing and, also, different ways of seeing and sensing the world, of taking the raw experience of travel and turning it into composed experience. The point of imitating each writer was not to mimic them; rather, the point was for my students to draw inspiration for crafting narratives about their own travels, whether those travels entailed an excursion around the world or a trip across town. Getting my students to imitate Bourdain in a roughly 1000-word piece of travel writing required little in the way of scaffolding, but I did need to remind those students hesitant to break with the norms of academic writing

that they were not composing thesis-driven essays about their travels. The Davis imitation necessitated some discussion of sequential art, and I turned to excerpts from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* for assistance. I advised students that, over and above artistic talent per se, their final products, which had to amount to at least six pages of sequential art, would be evaluated on how thoughtfully they deployed the features of graphic storytelling.

With regards to Bashō's *haibun*, I relied on the technical language of Yuasa's introduction to establish parameters for my students' imitations. In total, students were asked to compose a narrative that blended at least 500 words of prose and at least four *haiku*. The *haiku* needed to demonstrate the thoughtful deployment of the structural components discussed by Yuasa. I was more interested in students experimenting with these components than in students sticking to a strict syllable count, so I recommended that they take guidance from the four-line *haiku* on display throughout the Yuasa translation. As for syllables, I advised them only to use their words shrewdly and in the service of whatever purpose Bashō's sketches inspired them pursue with their own travel writing.

A hurdle for students was deciding what moments in their narratives were worthy of the *haiku* treatment. Bashō himself offers the following advice: "It is easy enough to say, for example, that such and such a day was rainy in the morning and fine in the afternoon […], for these things are what everybody says in their diaries, although in fact they are not even worth mentioning unless there are fresh and arresting elements in them" (73). Thus, I encouraged students to use *haiku* to emphasize those moments that were "fresh and arresting" or, more daringly, to transform a moment from one "not even worth mentioning" to one that demanded attention from readers. In this way, imitating Bashō could reinvigorate a travel narrative, sharpening the sense of why and for whom the narrative was being composed. Does shining a spotlight on a heretofore unremarkable moment entail skirting the line between fact and fiction? Perhaps. But overcoming this hurdle made evident for my students the extent to which travel writing requires a rhetorical spark that makes a narrative appealing or persuasive for readers.

Another hurdle for students, which was also present in the Bourdain and Davis imitations, was figuring out and/or coming up with a compelling purpose. The purpose, we realized, could not be limited to reporting our raw experience. This purpose, which clings to the pretense of objectivity, could not sustain the various imitations because, in telling a travel narrative via *haibun*, for instance, students were composing their experience in a style that emphasizes how a writer shares their journey with readers more so than the journey itself. This is what I mean when I say that our three core texts offered different ways of seeing and sensing the world. Students noted that, as when reading Bashō, writing in *haibun* prompted them to slow down and be more introspective. Retracing their steps and reflecting on their travels enabled my students to enact one of Bashō's crucial maxims about travel: "Every turn of the road brought me new thoughts and every sunrise gave me fresh emotions" (85). Does retracing the steps of a journey through writing and rearranging details in the hopes of seeing and sensing those steps anew entail skirting the line between fact and fiction? Perhaps. But, in confronting this hurdle, my students were again faced with the need to devise a rhetorical spark for telling a story about a chosen journey. Alongside this, as students took the journey all over again, only this time with Bashō as a writerly companion, they discovered travel writing's reflective spark. That is, they discovered travel writing's innate potential to stimulate self-discovery in writers and readers alike.

Returning to the Blooming Chestnut

As both a rhetorical and reflective practice, travel writing can be intensely engaging for readers and intensely personal for writers. Interestingly, when overtly addressing his audience, Bashō is often at his most self-deprecating. While notably admitting to his inadequacies when overawed by the scenery, he seems even more bewildered by the thought that somebody might actually read what he has written. In one passage, after castigating his pen for "being weak in wisdom and unfavoured [sic] by divine gift" (73), Bashō pronounces that "my records are little more than the babble of the intoxicated and the rambling

talk of the dreaming, and therefore my readers are kindly requested to take them as such" (74). This line, though, is a trick, and with it, Bashō is challenging readers to evaluate their engagement with his sketches that, as he pointedly reminds us, are highly subjective and carefully constructed. We get to choose.

Do we linger awhile over the blend of prose and *haiku*, embracing the poet's inadequacies, up to and including his ambiguous truths? Or, in search of more objective truths, do we pass by Bashō's *haibun* like the unnoticing men ignoring the blooming chestnut?

I believe that my students, by lingering with many of the writers we read but most particularly with Bashō, learned for themselves how and why to distinguish travel from travel writing. They learned that, while travel is often touted as a chance to discover truths about ourselves and our world, travel writing is a chance to discover the extent to which our earthly meanderings can generate truths worthy of sharing with others. They learned that travel writing need not be subordinate to travel, and that, no matter the inadequacies of our compositions, we can always strive to make something more or something different out of where we have been and where we are going.

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