



The Pulitzer Center/Out of Eden Walk University Educators Workshop

May 14, 2015
Washington, D.C.



OUT OF EDEN WALK

SLOW JOURNALISM IN A FAST WORLD

CURRICULUM

Description

This semester-long course was designed as an intensive, senior or graduate-level Journalism seminar in which students develop their multimedia narrative skills by studying, and applying, the lessons in “slow journalism” offered by Paul Salopek’s Out of Eden Walk project (www.outofedenwalk.com).

Philosophy

The course, first offered by VCU’s Robertson School of Media and Culture in the spring of 2014, is the first university-level course I know of that was built around the Out of Eden Walk. The curriculum, like the Walk, is designed to explore the creative frontiers of Slow Journalism, a movement away from the super-fast, superficial coverage that dominates modern news media and towards a more in-depth, deliberate, mindful approach to narrative journalism using the latest tools of digital technology.

Paul and his Walk partners (including the Knight Foundation, National Geographic, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, the Nieman Foundation, Project Zero/Harvard Graduate School of Education, MIT MediaLab, and Harvard’s Center for Geographical Analysis) have set out to change the way digital journalists cover the world—and we invite students to become pioneers in that effort, applying the lessons of Slow Journalism to their work, their lives, and their personal journeys, Out of Eden, to the larger world beyond.

Overview

Over the course of a 15-week semester, students read and analyze the literature of the Walk, including the more than 150,000 words of text Salopek has published to date, along with a large and growing body of multimedia reporting. Students are also required to develop and execute a Walk of their own, either individually or in small teams, and publish their work online, both incrementally (via social media) and as a

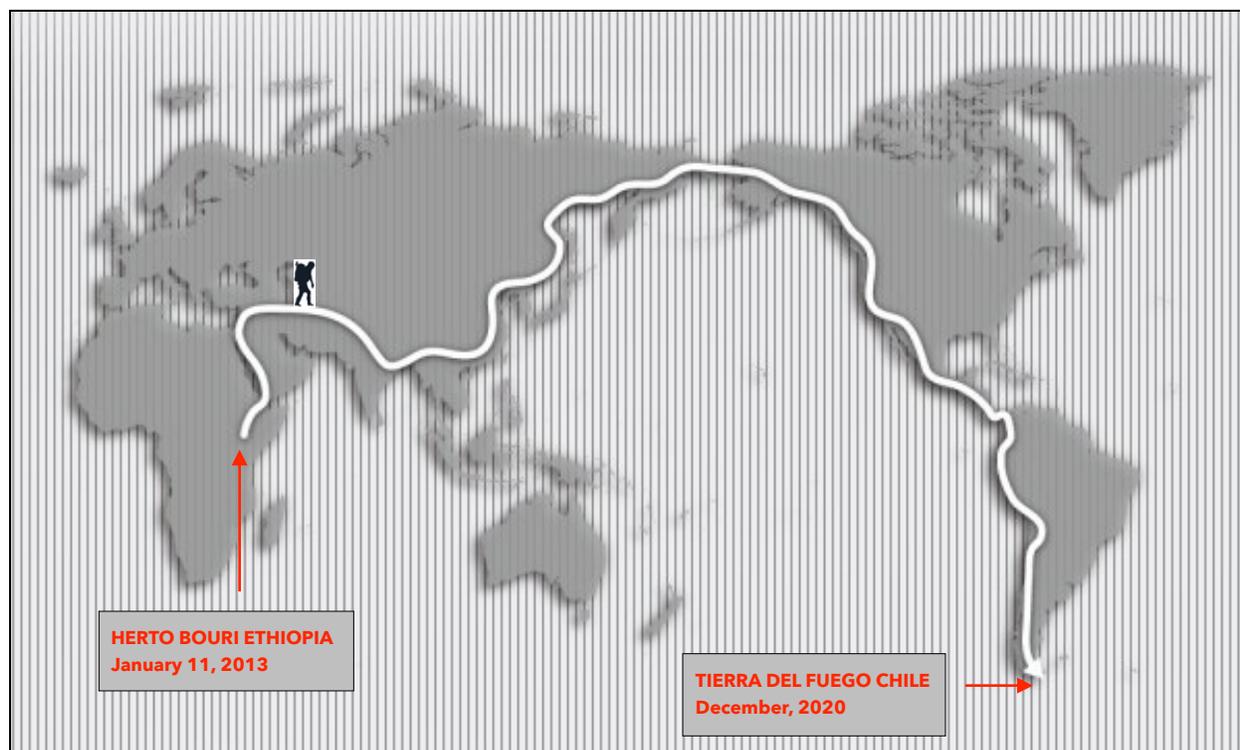
finished, multimedia narrative project published on the class website.

Interviewing Paul and key members of his creative team via Skype, students learn to build compelling, in-depth narratives and practice a range of reportorial skills: story development, pitching, researching, field reporting, writing, photography, videography, mapping, social media, web design, marketing, and platform building—all while learning from the work of a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who is using those very same skills to produce perhaps the most ambitious reportage in history.



Course Objectives

1. To build global cultural literacy through engagement with the themes, literary style, and factual content (culture, history, geography, anthropology, geopolitics) of the Out of Eden Walk, based on the materials generated during the projects's first two years;
2. To explore the horizons of "slow" journalism in a workshop and field setting, as students conceive, design, and implement a multimedia narrative project of their own design, based on the concepts and example of the Out of Eden Walk.



Texts

The main text for the course is the extensive body of written and multimedia work (totaling some 150,000 words) posted by Paul Salopek during the first two years of this seven-year project, all of which is available on-line. Students also read selected chapters from *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, by Jonathan Gottschall (2012. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt & Co.); *On Looking: A Walker's Guide to the Art of Observation* (paperback edition), by Alexandra Horowitz (2014. New York Scribner). Other readings may be required.

Equipment

Although students are doing their field work at the pace of our early human forebears (three miles an hour), they use the technology and tools of a working journalist: notebooks, pens, camera/video recorder/audio recorder (or smartphone equivalent), computer, sneakers or walking shoes, granola bars, pepper spray.

Online accounts

To participate, students at VCU were required to use their Facebook and/or Twitter account (Instagram optional), along with the class WordPress account or other blogging platform. If not comfortable using their personal accounts to participate, students needed to create a second one for the class.

Key links and Follows

The primary class bookmark is the Out of Eden Walk [site](#) designed and maintained, till now, by Patrick Wellever at the MIT Science Journalism program. I assign students to explore the site fully and to sign up for project email alerts. To expedite communications, I create a closed [Facebook Group](#) for the class to post announcements, assignments, and special readings. I also have students visit and Like the project's [Facebook page](#) and Follow the two Twitter feeds: [@paulsalopek](#) and [@outofedenwalk](#). They also follow the Walk's [Instagram](#) account, which now has about 18,000 Followers.



Online

www.outofedenwalk.com Project website
<http://outofedenwalk.nationalgeographic.com/> National Geographic Dispatches
<https://twitter.com/PaulSalopek> Paul Twitter
<https://twitter.com/outofedenwalk> Out of Eden Walk Twitter
<http://instagram.com/outofedenwalk> Instagram
<https://www.facebook.com/OutOfEdenWalk> Facebook

IN THE CLASSROOM

Module 1: Themes and Interactions

Weeks 1-5: Introduction, Orientation, Reading in Depth

Theme: What is Slow Journalism? The Out of Eden Walk as modern digital manifestation of an ancient narrative tradition that has long been a foundational skill for an exceptional reporter, who deals not just in information, but in meaning.

We discuss the difficulty of slowing down, taking time, and engaging in close, focused observation in contrast to the frenetic, the superficial, the “fast.”

We also look at Paul’s original project memo to learn how his conceptual framework was established, and consider the practicalities of such an ambitious undertaking to help students get their heads around even its most basic equivalent: goals, funding, logistics, obstacles, opportunities. Read from an email Paul sent to me shortly after setting out:

“This isn’t just a walk about the past—the world as we first discovered it in the Pleistocene. It is a walk through what we’ve made of that world, a walk into the Anthropocene. I’m hoping to highlight that contrast as I move, noting the changes at ground level. But hopefully, by using the hi-tech tools of communication available today, the satphone, a small laptop, I can connect thinkers who see these changes from orbit, as it were—the big picture—with the lives of ordinary people grappling with the new uncertainties and challenges of surviving in a human-made world—whether beleaguered farmers, swelling ranks of urbanites, or innovators at the local level.”

Assignment: Capture the essence of an ordinary object by slowing down, focusing, and composing a short, descriptive essay or free association of less than a page. I used Paul’s description of Ethiopian sandals in “Sole Brothers” as an example:

Available in a limited palette of chemical hues—black, red, brown, green, blue, purple—the humble, rubbery shoes are a triumph of local inventiveness. They cost a pittance to manufacture. Any pair can be had for the equivalent of day’s field labor. (Perhaps two dollars.) They are cool—permitting the air to circulate about the feet on the Afar Triangle’s blistering desert surface. And home repair is universal: Owners melt and mend the molded-plastic straps over wood fires. The ubiquitous sandals of rural Ethiopia weigh nothing. They are recyclable. Finally, modest as they are—the footwear of Africa’s poorest—few other shoes can claim their own war monument: Soldiers on both sides of long and tragic conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea wore them to their deaths in battle.

Student “essences” are read and discussed in class. An example:

The Candle

This little life-giver brings light to the darkest of places. On its own with no flame, it is a small, seemingly worthless wax tower. Though it carries a scent and color, it is useless without a flame. It is one of the few objects that receive life, rather than lose it, from fire. Despite technology that brings light to us in other ways, the candle has not lost its value or significance in the modern world. Its fragrance can transform the ambiance of an entire room, but its flame, its essence, can turn our darkness into light.

Theme: Origins of human communication, storytelling, the walk out of Africa

“The oldest, most widespread stories in the world are adventure stories, about human heroes who venture into the myth-countries at the risk of their lives, and bring back tales of the world beyond men. It could be argued that the narrative art itself arose from the need to tell an adventure; that man risking his life in perilous encounters constitutes the original definition of what is worth talking about.”

–Paul Zweig, *The Adventurer*

Assignment: Read “To Walk the World” (*National Geographic* cover story) and all of Paul’s work from Ethiopia, with classroom quiz on the assignment.



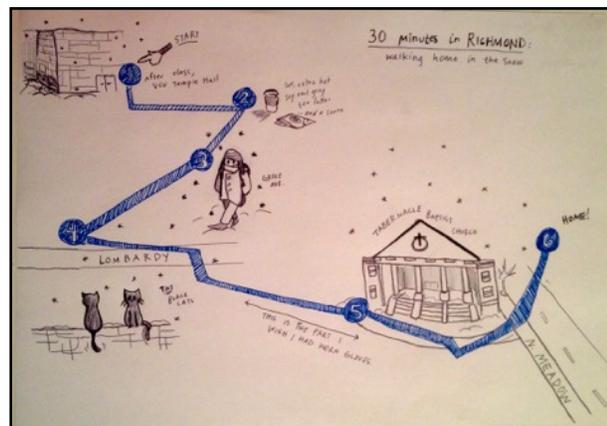
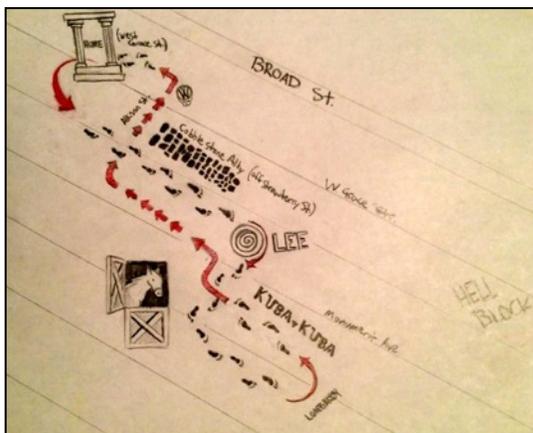
Sample Quiz

1. Where did the Walk begin? What is the significance of the starting point with respect to Paul's project? ("Let's Walk"; "Starting Line")
2. Where is the planned end point of the Walk? ("Let's Walk")
3. Who is Dr. Tim White? ("Starting Line").
4. Name one of the nomadic Ethiopian tribes Paul met. ("Bones Atop Bones")
5. Scientists believe human beings walked out of Africa and began exploring the world between 60 and 90,000 years ago. Why leave? Summarize one theory. ("Starting Line")
6. How do people in rural Ethiopia charge their cell phones? ("Electronic Oasis")
7. Why was learning to cook so important our species' survival? ("First Kitchen")
8. Who is Ahmed Alema Hessian? ("Goodbye to Alema")
9. What does the term Anthropocene mean? The geological era we live in
now: the Epoch of Human Beings ("New World")
10. What's the name of the British explorer who walked through the highlands of Ethiopia in the 1930's? Hint: his book about the experience is called *The Danakil Diary*. ("Thesiger's Trail")

Assignment: Essay (three week deadline): Choose a recurring theme or subject in Paul's Walk reportage and trace its appearance in the Dispatches from Ethiopia through Saudi Arabia.

Assignment: Talk a Walk, Make a Map

Students are assigned to take a Slow walk around their block, or through their neighborhood, and make a detailed map of what they observe. Results were mixed; it was a good exercise, though, and is worth exploring as a class (i.e., short field trip) to demonstrate the potential of mapping “ground truth” to understand a community.



Dispatch

“The Glorious Boneyard: A Report from our Starting Line”

Teaching Points:

- Building Depth and Context
- Setting a Theme in Motion: Ancient Migration
- Cross-ref science: Geography, geology, paleoanthropology
- Urgency: East Africa will drown: priceless genealogy becomes a coral reef
- Report on White and colleagues: Herto man 160-200,000
- Contrast climate then and now
- Humans programmed for restlessness
- *Homo sapiens* near-extinction event 100,000+ years ago
- “Neural lightning”: the secret of our survival
- Ends on literary / evolutionary note, with an excerpt of “A Message from the Wanderer,” by William Stafford:

Tell everyone just to remember
 their names, and remind others, later, when we
 find each other. Tell the little ones
 to cry and then go to sleep, curled up
 where they can. And if any of us get lost,
 if any of us cannot come all the way—
 remember: there will come a time when
 all we have said and all we have hoped
 will be all right.

There will be that form in the grass.

Theme: Migration out of Africa today

Assignment: Read all of Paul’s Djibouti dispatches and multimedia postings (quiz to follow)



Dispatch

“The Things They Leave Behind”

Teaching Points:

- Slow Down, settle in, observe
- Find the telling detail, use it in creative ways
- Connect to the larger story
- Careful, finely-tuned use of the first person
- Report motivation: why do they come?
- Add value through links, data, research
- Render the drama:

“Paul?” Alema hisses urgently in the dark. “Hey, Paul.”

But I have heard it already: a disturbance in the night air. A faint rumbling, growing almost imperceptibly louder, like the approach of herd of wild animals. But can there be animals in this place? The nearest blade of grass, the nearest well, is miles away. I sit up.

And then they come, in the pale beam of Alema’s flashlight, a column of figures.

They are men and women in a bas relief, as if carved in greys and blacks from the branches of the night. Five, six. A dozen. Then scores. They file past our camp in single file. I attempt to count them, but give up after reaching 90. Their shuffling feet raise a veil of dust. They don’t look up. They carry no lights. They leave little behind. We exchange not a single word. My tongue is immobilized.

Theme: Walking Arabia, Modernization, Islam

Assignment: Read all of Paul’s Dispatches, stories, and multimedia from Saudi Arabia (quiz). Take special care with “Walking Jeddah,” the interactive map feature.

Walking Jeddah



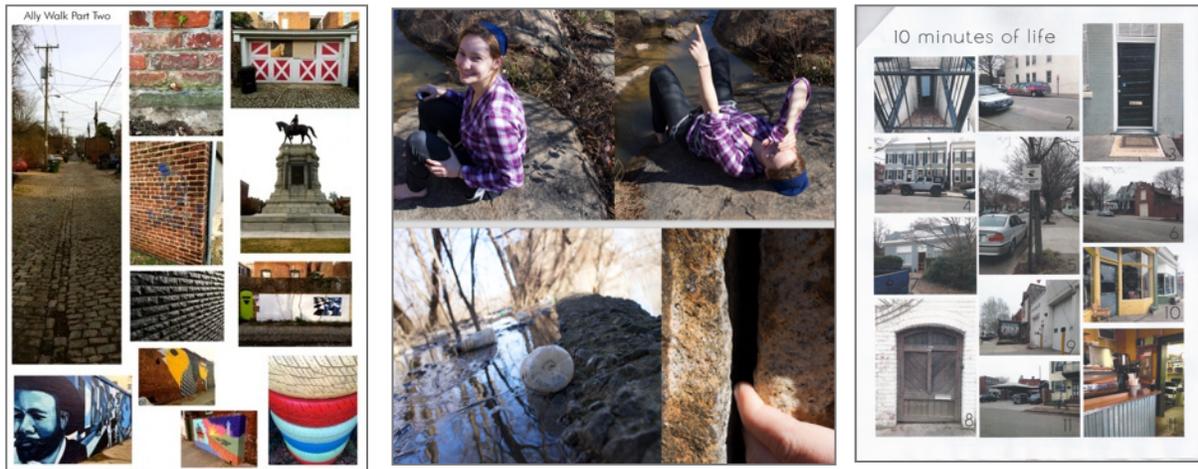
Date	May 21 - 24, 2013
Total distance	63 miles (101 km)
Total days	3
Elevation gain	0 ft
Maximum daily temperatures	100° - 102° F (38° - 39° C)

Disembarking at this ancient port city in Saudi Arabia, Paul sets off on foot for Jeddah's northern edge, trekking more than 60 miles through a teeming metropolis where the sidewalks are rendered inert by an addiction to the internal combustion engine — and aversion to summer heat. As he walks the vacant streets, Paul documents his urban journey in typical Out of Eden Walk fashion: with words, photographs and video. We invite you to tag along.

Share this: [Twitter](#) · [Facebook](#) · [Google+](#)



Assignment: Walk your map route again, look deeper: make photographs, and interview at least two people you meet along the way. Post-mortem in class.



Module 2: Applications, Planning, Reporting

Weeks 6-10: Students create a Walk of their own

While referencing Paul's work constantly for its application to the enterprise projects, this module is devoted to launching students on their own narrative Walk projects.

Because of the urban setting of the VCU campus and the time of year (winter and spring, much of it before daylight savings time), I assigned teams of two or three reporters to work together for security's sake, with some care given to assembling a diversity of viewpoints and professional strengths.

Assignment: Story ideas. Each reporting group was assigned to come up with at least three ideas for a Walk project, and to arrive at a consensus on the order of preference.

Assignment: Presentation. Students were then required to present their ideas as "elevator pitches" to the class at large, with the group of 15 students encouraged to give constructive feedback. I provided guidance to help each group decide on its ultimate direction, and gave feedback of my own on the pros and cons, storytelling challenges, etc.

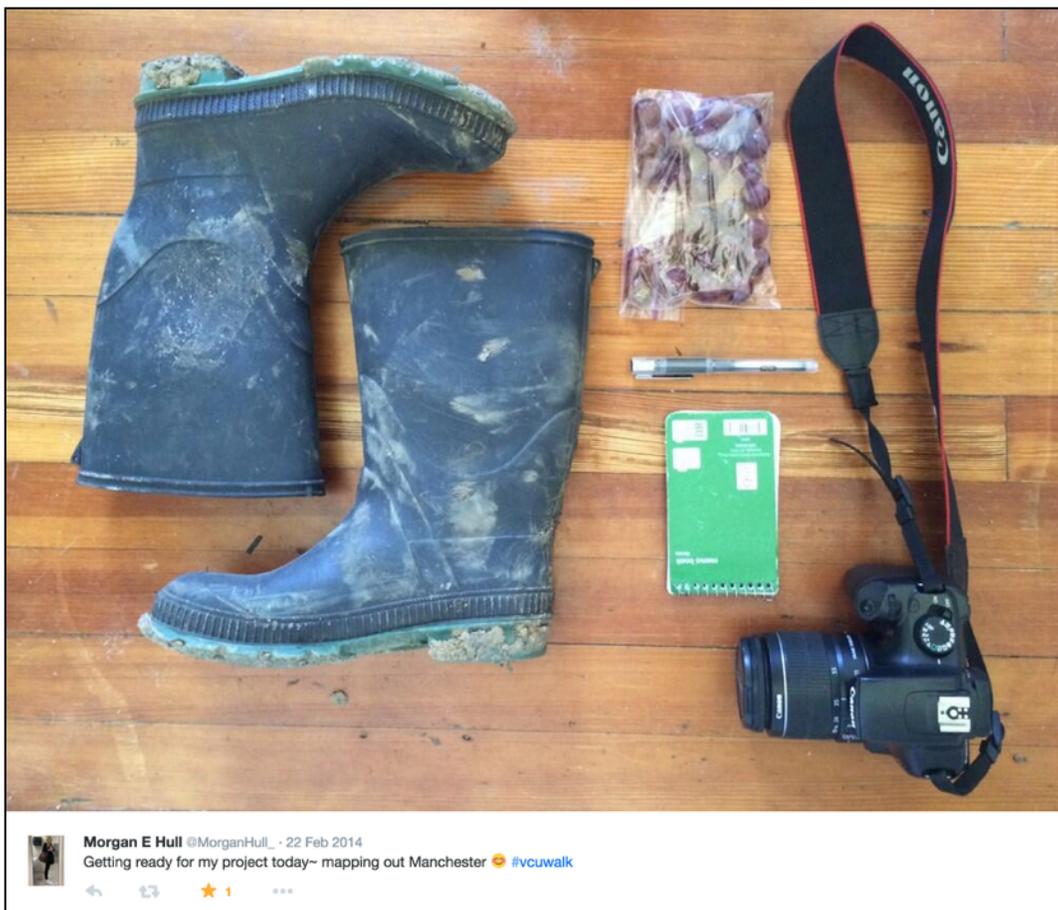
Assignment: Proposal and Pitch. The groups then developed their projects to a full proposal (1-2 pages) that included considerations both strategic and practical. Each included a narrative arc, coverage plan, reporting strategies, visual style, mapping, roles of the reporters, social and multimedia strategy,

research opportunities, choosing a route, and ways in which the principles of Slow journalism would be applied.

They were then required to present their story proposal to the class as a group, with each member of the team speaking in turn. I ran this session as a more formal story meeting, and encouraged critical comment from the other students before weighing in myself, as a kind of editor-in-chief.

Assignment: Essay. Write critical analysis on Paul's use of multimedia to amplify the Walk's storytelling, and the degree to which it succeeds, or fails, to create reader engagement and loyalty.

Assignment: Social Media. Post works-in-progress and other reportorial observations to #VCUwalk



Kirsten Jensen @KJensen18 · Apr 23
 Even the sidewalks of Church Hill have a unique story to tell... #shockoebefore #VCUwalk



Expand

caitpuff 9 months ago
 Art in action #vumurals #VCUwalk



donbelt hamglass ambermarkey5 and 3 others like this.

Leave a comment...

Kirsten Jensen @KJensen18 · May 4
 Old school Nabisco 🍪😋 #VCUwalk #shockoebefore



1 2

Expand

Morgan E Hull @MorganHull_ · Apr 21
 Putting my first interview into words, feel like I'm tasting icecream for the first time #shockoebefore #vcuwalk



1

Expand

Lyndsey Raynor @Lyndsey_Raynor · May 5
 #shockoebefore #vcuwalk one of my favorites from our walk! #photography



Expand

Morgan E Hull @MorganHull_ · Apr 26
 Best homework assignment. #vcuwalk #walkingbelleisle



RETWEET 1 FAVORITES 2

Assignment: website. Launch class-wide collaboration on Edenwalkers website (Wordpress)

Tina Mullen
 April 6, 2014

Hi everyone! I've been playing around with the wordpress page and figured out how we can organize all of our posts into categories to show up on individual pages. Make a category for your group by going to posts>category. Then add that category to the menu by going to appearance>menus Choose your category from under the category heading. Now, every time your group makes a post, you can just click the category you want it to appear under! Let me know if y'all need help.

Unlike · Comment

You and Caitlin Puffenberger like this. Seen by 15

Don Belt Thanks for doing this, Tina. Let's work this in class today and let the other teams build out their presence. I'll be anxious to hear progress reports from everyone on how projects are going.
 April 7, 2014 at 3:35pm · Like

VCU EdenWalkers
Home Richmond Murals Shockoe Before Belle Isle RVA Microwbrews Richmond Railways Search...



Richmond Street Art

Home
"Slow Journalism in a Fast World: The Out of Eden Experiment" is an intensive special topics undergraduate seminar inaugurated at Virginia Commonwealth University in the spring of 2014. Taught by Don Bell, students at the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture developed their multimedia storytelling skills by using Paul Salopek's *Out of Eden Walk* as a narrative model. Students were divided into reporting teams that developed narrative projects of their own in the city of Richmond, Virginia, which are presented here. Students also used the hashtag #vcuwalk on their social media feeds related to the course.

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Shockoe Before

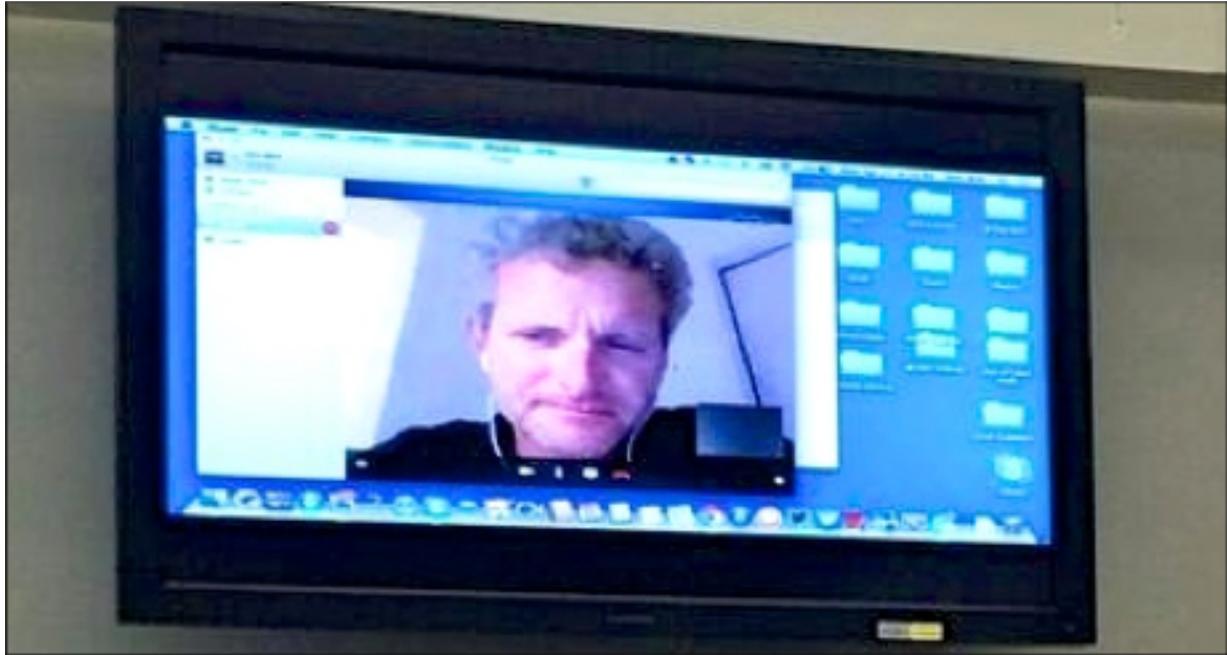
VCU EdenWalkers
Home Richmond Murals Shockoe Before Belle Isle RVA Microwbrews Richmond Railways Search...



Railwalkers

Home
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Special Guest lectures: Skype with Paul (from his location in the West Bank) and Patrick Weller of MIT, chief Out of Eden Walk web designer. Also a filmmaker/expert on crowdfunding platforms and making broadcast quality videos with smartphones.



Dispatch

“Goodbye to Banounah”

Teaching Points

- Use of the unexpected, memorable phrase: “boonie cap,” “rotting teeth”
“cannonball temper” *literary style*
- Writing about people: *How to dig in, earn trust, pay attention*
- Use of humor
- Sense of place (telling details: “burning hills, hot winds, dust devils, blistering plains, tombs, fire-red clouds” etc.)
- Add depth via self-awareness: “this trek, this strange journey, this forever walk... endless melancholy topography...basin and range of new friends made and left behind...” *how to use the first person without the pronoun*
- Importance of guides: *how to manage guide/interpreter relationship*
- Photography: photo of the desert melons *capturing the “moment” via photography*
- Comments and Paul’s responses: Creating reader engagement

Text highlights:

“Banounah walks no farther. He has laid aside his walking stick. He has hung up his boonie cap.

He will not walk with us to the Jordanian frontier. He will not follow the old Haj trail from Sham or see the ruined Ottoman forts that crumble like rotting brown teeth atop the burning hills—how they guard nothing now except for the passage of the hot winds. Winds that send out flying columns of dust devils that spin atop the blistering plains. Whirlwinds that some call *djinn*. He will not cross the wadis where the tombs of Nabateans are cut into stone cliffs that glow the hue of fire-red clouds at sunset. He will not walk where Moses walked, dry-shod, onto the beaches of Arabia after parting the Red Sea.

Banounah is an ex-soldier. He is trained to keep pain stoppered, this time to his detriment. (When is it not?) And this trek, this strange journey, this forever walk begins to circle a familiar, melancholy topography, the rolling basin and range of new friends made and left behind: beloved people waving, one hand up in a parting salute, on the horizons. “We were a great team,” Banounah, gripping my hand in his hospital bed, says hoarsely. “Weren’t we?”

What can be said about this man?

That his medical condition has been aggravated by too much jollity? (By way of a warning during his current recovery, the doctors say his previous operation’s incisions may have never mended because Banounah belly-laughs too uncontrollably, too hard.)

Or that he is a library of fading Bedouin lore? (A bitter desert melon call *hadaj*, when cut in half and placed on your cheeks, sucks the thirst right out of your body.)

Or that a lack of charity is the only spark that fires his cannonball temper? When a restaurateur, looking straight at me, blocked his eatery doorway to us—owing as much, I think, to our appalling stink as any anti-foreigner bigotry—Banounah invited the man, with a firm shoulder clasp, into a private sidewalk conference. The owner returned a fawning angel. What did you tell him? I asked Banounah. “I said to him, ‘You will give us water and rest, or I will bash your head into this wall,’” Banounah said evenly. As we left, he apologized to



the terrified man because “a good Muslim cannot go to bed angry at someone. You have to go fix it, or you cannot sleep in peace.”

And then there was the afternoon on the broiling salt flats of Masturah.

We were walking in a nimbus of light. The air was like steam—like breathing through wet cotton. Then, without warning, we walked through shocking waves of cold air, pulses that lasted perhaps a few seconds: icy, unnatural and beautiful, like the opening and closing of a gigantic refrigerator door. I thought I was hallucinating. I glanced over at my traveling companions. Awad Omran, our Sudanese camelman, merely nodded silently in acknowledgement. But Banounah was grinning hugely. I said something about microclimates, about convection, about freak air currents. Banounah, as usual, chuckled at my rationalism. “We are lucky guys!” he said. “God is with us!”

Comments section: Note Paul’s level of thoughtful interaction with readers.

Module 3: Out of Eden, Into Richmond

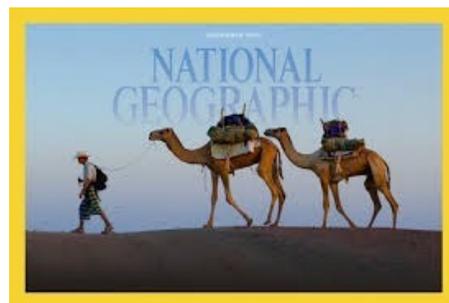
Weeks 10-15: Students finish their reporting projects. Every class is a combination reality check/progress report that includes tutorial on some aspect of the reporting and preparation of stories for publication.

Students post online, react to editing, collaborate on final design, photos, multimedia, text, and mapping, and work together with other class members to post online in the most compelling way. I introduce new storytelling tools such as Storymap JS (see tutorial under separate cover).

Assignment: Final paper. Original research and thinking on a topic or application related to the Walk that not yet been initiated or explored. Originality of idea, clarity of writing, depth of understanding.

Assignment: TED talks. Team TED-style talks on narrative projects including a review of the strategy, editorial purpose, and execution of the final story, with reference to what was learned from the Out of Eden Walk example. All aspects of the finished project are presented, with Q&A.

Final grades based on quiz performance, interim assignments, final paper, posted reportage, triangular peer review, participation in class, attitude, and leadership of the team and class.



“If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.” – African proverb