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ABSTRACT

The process of travel can be combined with the parallel process of research by developing a writing project assignment that uses the "Travels of William Bartram," an eighteenth-century account of a naturalist's journey through the Carolinas. Students can be asked to select a point on Bartram's original itinerary and retrace his discovery in modern terms, as if he had come upon the same place, thing, or activity today. The success of the project involves being able to pick a Bartram frame of reference and then "travel" that same route in modern terms by using all available research tools. (Two references are appended.) (MS)

TEACHING RESEARCH
RETRACING THE TRAVELS OF WILLIAM BARTRAM

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In Blue Highways William Moon celebrates the "errors, wrong turns, and blind alleys...the doubling back and misdirection and fumbling and chance discoveries" (426) that he encountered on his journey across America. It seems to me that what Moon describes as the essence of traveling can just as well pertain to the challenge of research. Indeed, in recently reorganizing my freshman composition class to center around the reading of and reaction to the literature of travel, I developed a project assignment that combines the process of travel with the sometimes parallel process of research.

Especially for this project I assigned the Van Doren edition of Travels of William Bartram. This book has regional interest since it chronicles the discoveries of an eighteenth-century naturalist as he explored the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida. The book also has literary significance; published in 1791, Bartram's account inspired some of the New World imagery of Coleridge and Wordsworth (Bartram 5).

The class was given a week to familiarize themselves with the text, and then I asked them to select a point on Bartram's original itinerary and retrace his discovery in modern terms. In other words, what would William Bartram have found if he had come upon the same place or thing or activity today? I suggested to them as an example Bartram's trip from "Savanna" (50) to Augusta and told them how one could establish a primary focus on any of the naturalist-explorer's areas of interest; a student might concentrate on plant and animal

life or geology or topography or local humanity. For their twentieth-century references, my students were charged to seek out the following source materials: atlases; road maps; chamber of commerce pamphlets; books on travel, history, the sciences, anthropology; articles on the same subjects in periodicals with a travel emphasis (Travel Holiday, Travel & Leisure) or with a regional focus (South Carolina Magazine).

After spending a day or two on MLA documentation format, I set them loose in the library with a three-week deadline; however, halfway into that time period, I expected all of them to render personal progress reports indicating what topic each had selected and what research had been done on that topic to date.

The final projects covered a wide variety of subject areas. As might be expected at a college no more than fifteen miles from Augusta, I got six papers on various features of that city: its vegetation, trade, topography, riverfront, soil analysis and failure to live up to Bartram's prediction that it would become the "metropolis of Georgia" (260). Other places also received attention; some students reported on St. Catherines Island, Savannah harbor, St. Simons Island, the Isle of Palms, Sunbury and the gardens of Charleston. Those not enamored of place focused on some aspect of the natural sciences and researched hoot owl migration, the mating habits of the bobolink and the "war" (Bartram 61) between the goldfish and the crayfish of the Broad River.

The most interesting contrast between eighteenth-century and twentieth-century material came to light in one paper entitled "Two Cherokee Chiefs." This project profiled the "gracious and cheerful" (Bartram 295) Ata-cul-culla whom Bartram encountered on horseback outside of Charleston and his modern counterpart, Wilma Mankiller, first woman leader of the Cherokee.

Two other papers presented the most inventive research techniques. In responding to Bartram's account of a dairy farm on the banks of the Savannah, one student interviewed a dairyman outside Saluda and buttressed his first-hand depiction of life on a farm with government publications. Another student exploited the expertise of an officer of the Beech Island Historical Society to acquire a researcher's perspective on Fort Moore, a military installation Bartram visited in that area of the state.

The key to a successful project involved being able to pick a Bartram frame of reference and then "travel" that same route in modern terms by using all available research tools. During the course of the assignment, most students experienced the "wrong turns and blind alleys" (426) Moon talks about as essential to real travel; they often found out that what seemed at first a promising Bartram reference point did not in the end prove workable if they could not find the modern facts and figures to balance it out. Almost all, however, found those "chance discoveries" (Moon 426) that come from both travel and research; almost all of them happened upon some new knowledge about their time and place.

WORKS CITED

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