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Plebeian Adventures: Documenting Travel via Blogging and Memory Collage

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Plebeian Adventures: Documenting Travel via Blogging and Memory Collage

An Honors Senior Capstone Project by Sara Johnson
Fall 2017

Important links:

Plebeian Adventures Tumblr URL: <http://www.plebeianadventures.tumblr.com/>

Please contact plebe.adventures@gmail.com with comments/concerns/corrections about the blog.

Symposium Presentation Script:

Intro



CIEE Global Scholar: 18 weeks. 6 countries. 16 places.

Berlin, Germany--Prague, Czech Republic--Dresden, Germany--Meißen, Germany--Bremen, Germany--London, England--Dublin, Ireland--RAF Base, England--Oxford, England--Edinburgh, Scotland--Paris, France--Marseilles, France--Disneyland Paris, France--Caen, France--Bayeux, France--Strasbourg, France

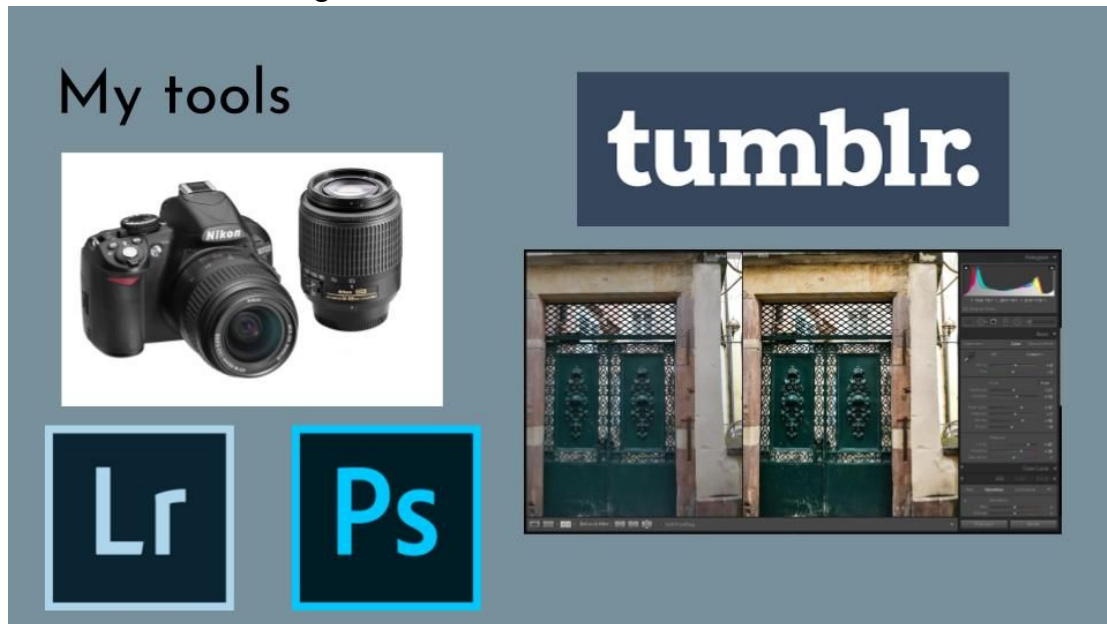
- What should I do for my Honors Capstone?
- What do I do with the thousands of photos I took abroad?
- How do I share my study abroad memories?

"Confused Man on His Way to Hampstead Heath"



The idea for this project came about before, during, and after my study abroad semester. I wanted some way to document (for myself and “posterity”) everything I had seen and experienced while in Europe. I had been dreaming of going there since I knew it existed, so it was my goal to record *everything* that I did. I started Plebeian Adventures on tumblr months before I left to go abroad. The first blog posts I did were about the experiences I had planning and fundraising for the trip.

When I got back in January (2017), I knew it was time to also start thinking of ideas for an Honors Capstone project. Since I already planned on devoting hours and hours of my free time to getting the blog up and running (and editing photos for days), I started looking for ways I could combine these two things.



I took literally thousands of photos while I was over there, but I didn't want to do what most people seem to do: make a gigantic album of photos on facebook and then have to sift through them later if I wanted to share a specific memory. I know that anytime I have a friend who posts vacation photos, I scroll through about 20 or so before I get bored. I was (and am) so passionate about the photos that I took that I didn't want them to all get lost. I'm also a stickler for organization, so since blogs utilize tags (think: keywords), using a blog to share my memories seemed like the best option.

My main goal was to create some sort of portal where friends, family, and strangers could go and see a compendium or collage of my photos, musings, stories, poems, drawings, videos, tourist information, and even a bit of history about the locations I visited. By visiting my blog, I wanted people who may not ever go to Europe to feel like they were there with me.

To put it quantitatively, I spent roughly 62 hours editing photos (~35 photos/hour), around 26 hours writing and preparing blog posts, 22 hours reading and researching, 1h30min sketching, roughly 8 hours organizing and preparing this presentation, and around 5 hours in the past 9 months meeting with my advisor (and Dr. Linneman). That's around 5 solid days of work on this project.



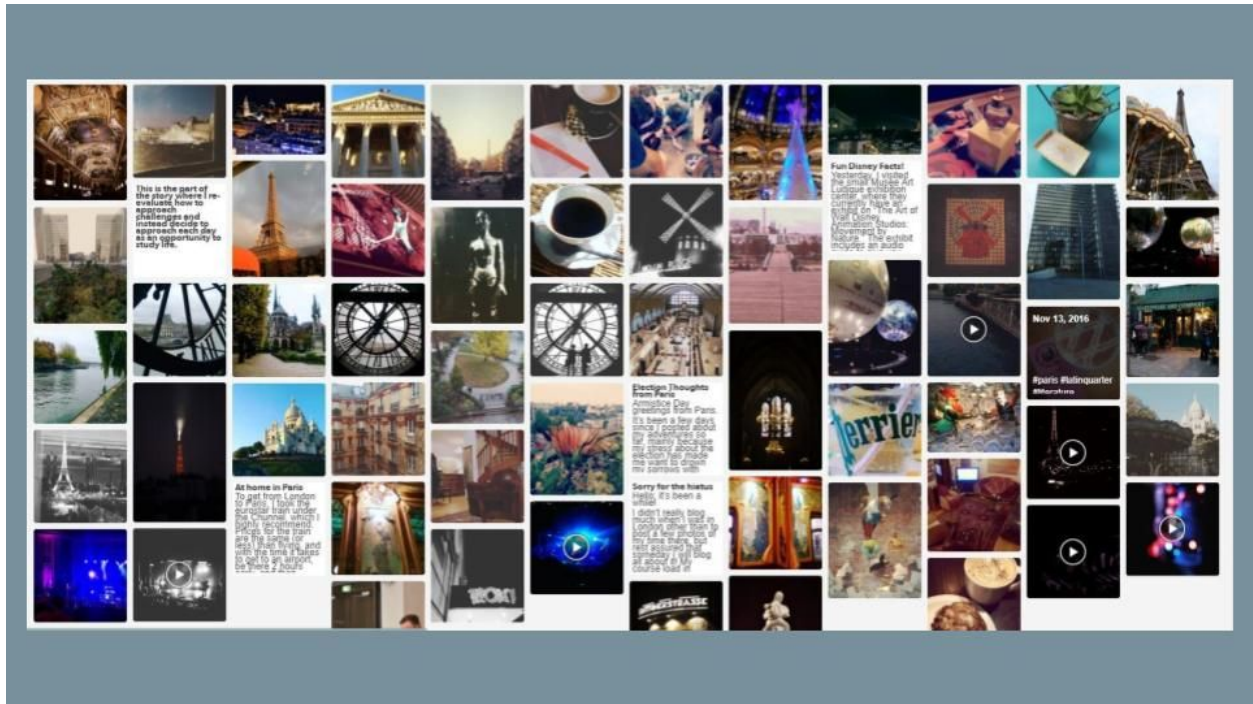
THE PROCESS

How do I tell this story?

Do I want to post some photos?
Do I want to write out an anecdote?
Do I need to sketch a scene?
What do I want to feature next?

306 posts

and counting!

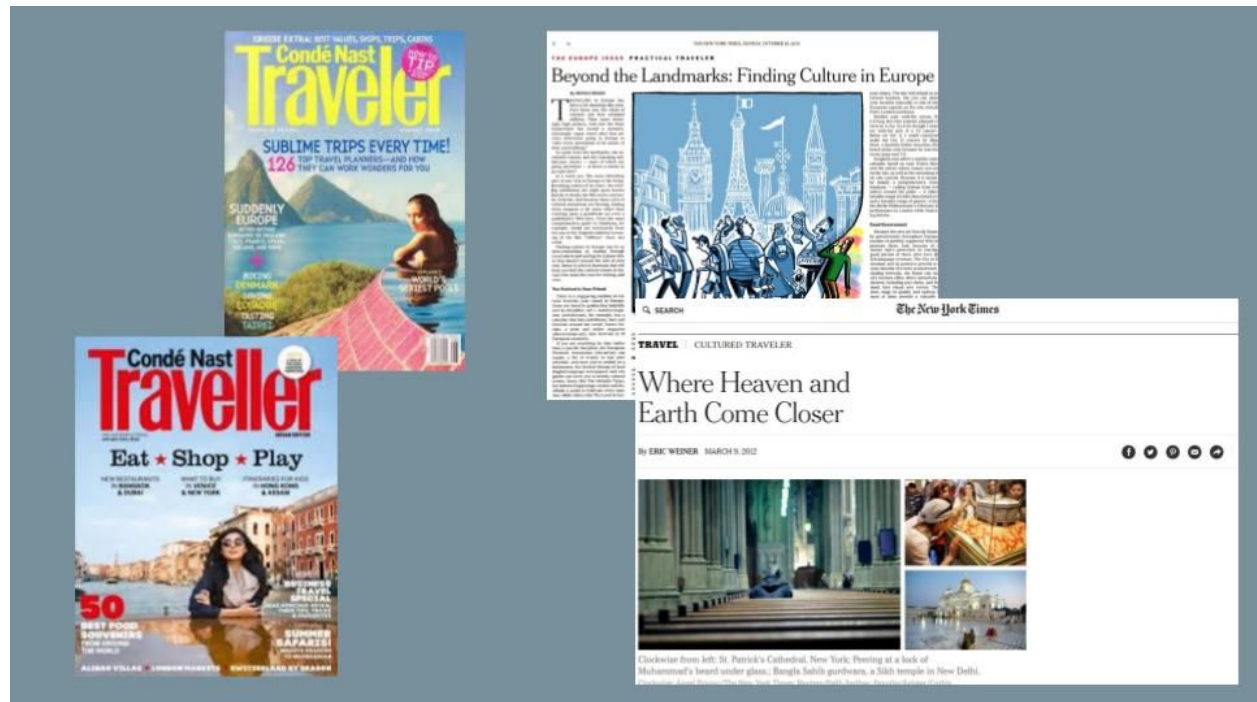


There's no plethora of Cultural Studies essays having to do with blogging, but what does exist is interested with how "consumers (or 'users'), particularly of technology, are considered to possess and exercise more creativity and agency than before, combined with a surge in both the participation in and power of voluntary work and 'productive' leisure."¹

Originally, the Honors part of the project was more about travel writing and less about new media and blogging, as it ended up being later. I spent the first few months researching the history of travel writing as a genre study and reading examples of travel writing from anthologies and newsprint.

But I soon started to realize that my blog didn't really match everything I was reading about the genre of travel writing and the examples I found. A large amount of travel writing is written for monetary gain-- or, at least, with the possibility of financial gain in mind.

¹ Burgess, Jean. "Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity And Digital Storytelling." Continuum 20.2 (2006): 201-214. Web. 7 Dec. 2017.



We see this all the time in the travel sections of the New York Times and in Condé Nast. An intrepid writer travels to *exotic* places (at least the non-English speaking kind), wanders around, maybe talks to some locals, and then reports back to the readership of the publication about both the wonders and places to avoid of this foreign location.

As a result of this popular attitude toward travel writing, “The travel writer must be clearly distinguished from everything else -- he/she must be fashioned over and against a series of others who are denied the power of representing themselves” (Lisle 69). The *others* who appear as characters in travel writing cannot represent themselves; the writer has all the power to portray or represent them however he/she wishes inasmuch as the travel narrative is whatever the writer wants it to be. They will not argue with the writer; the writer can make any claims or judgements he/she wants without consequence.

“ There, seated and lounging on the well-worn sofas, are two gorgeous middle-aged Brazilian women chattering away with each other in zippy Portuguese. I stand before them with a sort of pleasant dumbfoundedness, thinking that somehow I must have missed an email or Whatsapp message from my host family to tell me we have guests.

Both women rise in unison, floating toward me with luscious, thick curly hair. They both exude colorful elegance with bright red lips and dangly earrings. They chirp at me in French and I stutter out an introduction. They ask me about myself, if I speak French or not that much, and if I prefer English. I squeak out that I should be practicing my French and that I'm not very good yet.

One of them is shorter, with bigger hair and a bigger smile. She talks with her hands and has a smaller personal space bubble than I do. I unconsciously back up with tiny steps as she tries to know me better, see me better, to close the gap between

strangers.”

-from “Ways of Smiling,” November 22, 2017

An example of this is my short essay, “Ways of Smiling,” in which I talk about a strange and wonderful encounter I had with two Brazilian women who appeared in my Parisian living room one evening. Although these descriptions of the women I met add quirkiness and set the tone of the essay, they are still represented in a way that reflects back on myself, both as a writer and as the subject of the story. In this example, the portrayals are good natured (in my opinion), but the consequences are mild. The probability of either of these women ever reading this essay on a tiny blog in the vastness of the internet is very low, but perhaps they would resent (for whatever reason) something I've written about them.

Some tips:

1. Trust in your ability to see the small things that others miss.
2. Be wary of “gee-whiz” observations
3. It's not just the extraordinary that is worthy of writing about; the job of a good personal essayist (or travel writer) is to make the ordinary extraordinary
4. Readers care that the time and effort they spent reading your piece will bear fruit.
5. A blog is a chance for readers to come and poke around your mind for a while.
6. Some staged photos are fine (and fun), but the candid shots add more authenticity to your blog, which brings in readers/other bloggers

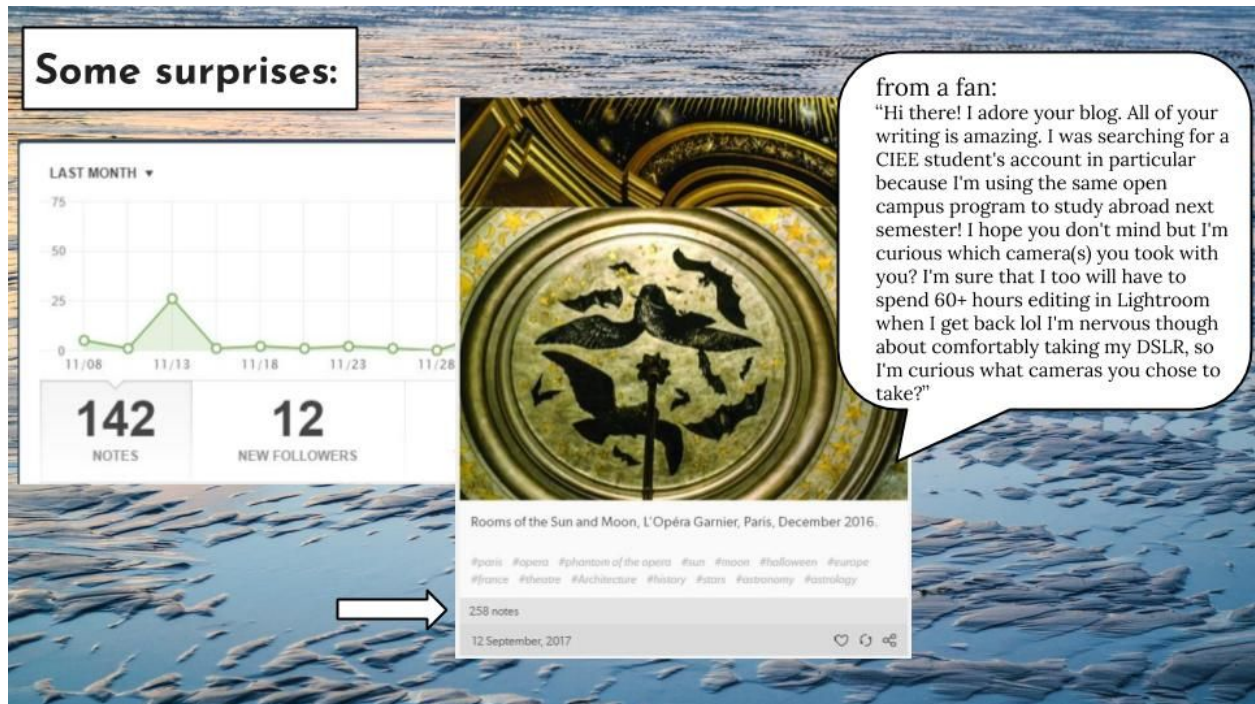


Everyone's travel blogs will be different. Some will be more writing focused, some will be more photography, art, or video focused. But here are some tips that I have learned over this process that I can share with you.

1. Trust in your ability to see the small things that others miss. Using these details in your essay will make the difference between being interesting and effective or cliched/boring.
2. Be wary of "gee-whiz" observations
3. It's not just the extraordinary that is worthy of writing about; the job of a good personal essayist (or travel writer) is to make the ordinary extraordinary
4. Readers care that the time and effort they spent reading your piece will bear fruit. i.e. they want to learn something about themselves or about the world as a whole.
5. A blog is a chance for readers to come and poke around your mind for a while.
6. Some staged photos are fine (and fun), but the candid shots add more authenticity to your blog, which brings in readers/other bloggers

**The goal of
blogging is not to
be consistently
brilliant, just
consistent.**

- Rebecca Blood, *Blogging for Creatives* (2012)



How I really knew that I was doing something right was when one of my photo posts gained over 250 “likes” from absolute strangers on the internet. My most recent accomplishment as of about 3 days ago was a message from a follower and fan who was also participating in CIEE’s program. This accomplishment is probably the most important one for me, because I had always hoped it would garner attention from prospective CIEE students (and potentially CIEE itself)

Without the deadline of this Honors Capstone ever looming at the end of the year, I don’t think I would have done much with the blog. The motivation I had right after I got back from Europe was quashed by my reverse-culture shock and the stress of finishing up my last three quarters of my college career. Maybe after graduation I would have picked it up again, but I definitely wouldn’t have put as much thought into the research or media-studies aspects.

This project has given me more confidence about my own abilities to be creative on a long-term basis. For a long time, I thought I didn’t have enough self-discipline to be a writer, but maybe the problem was that I hadn’t found the right form for my writing. I’ve done a lot of soul-searching during this project to try and convince myself that what I was doing was worth doing--that my work wasn’t mediocre.

“I felt like my life had pivoted. I felt a little more hopeful and a little less worried about the future... the things that I wanted to get done; I could do them on my own.”

- Megan Tan, *Millennial*

One of the things that helped me was listening to the first season of Megan Tan's podcast, *Millennial*. This first season chronicles the actual making of the podcast and Tan's journey to tackle a huge creative project that she loved. “Something had changed. and that thing is hard to describe because nothing had physically changed. I was still living in the same place. I was still going to the same job, yet I felt like my life had pivoted. I felt a little more hopeful and a little less worried about the future. . . the things that I wanted to get done; I could do them on my own.”²

Obligatory food slide



² Tan, Megan. "Nothing To Lose." *Millennial*. N.p., 2016. Web. 7 Dec. 2017.