Summer Travels into the Past  
by Jennifer Swerida

Life in Core prepares you for any number of future experiences, both the foreseen and the wholly unexpected. As a newly declared archaeology major, I entered my freshman year of Core last September not quite knowing what to expect. To my great surprise and delight, I discovered that not only was my Core Humanities professor an archaeologist (the wonderful Professor Roosevelt) but our first literary assignment was the ancient Assyrian epic of Gilgamesh! Those first days, as we explored the engrossing prose of Gilgamesh, I could never have guessed that my plans for this past summer would include an archaeological excavation in Syria…

In the epic’s opening lines, Gilgamesh tells us to “Study the brickwork, study the fortification; / climb the great ancient staircase to the terrace; / study how it was made; from the terrace see / the planted and fallow fields, the ponds and orchards.” In many ways Gilgamesh’s instructions, originally intended to highlight his own extensive accomplishments, proved to be a sound outline of what life would be like excavating a site such as his own city of Uruk. Only instead of inspecting a city at the height its glory, we were trying to piece together the framework of an ancient culture through interpretation of all those bricks, fortifications, stairwells, and fields. What Gilgamesh failed to mention, however, were the bugs, the heat, the complete absence of anything even resembling plumbing, and the many Arabic workers who really wanted to talk to you but couldn’t seem to understand why you don’t speak their language. But then again, I guess Gilgamesh never really had to worry about culture shock.

Even in the unfamiliar Syrian environment, with its many foreign, and occasionally (to me) gross, oddities, I felt an unexpected familiarity with the historical traditions contained in the structures and artifacts emerging from the stony group; my memory would frequently flash-back to Prof. Roosevelt’s slideshows of Mesopotamian architecture and landscapes during our Gilgamesh discussions. The task of understanding the culture of the early Bronze Age city we were excavating in modern day Syria became much less daunting once I made the connection between it and the value system so beautifully described in the epic of Gilgamesh.

What Made You Choose to Take the Core?

One man…Brian Jorgensen. I remember I was at a freshman orientation over the summer and he spoke to us about the Core Curriculum. I still remember to this day, he talked about Gilgamesh, and the city walls. I was intrigued. I wanted to know the rest of the story. So, I ended up taking Core, and along the way read many more amazing stories, philosophies, and ideas that I probably would not have been exposed to had I chosen divisional studies.

What Was Your Program of Study?

For the first three years of my undergraduate career, I was an astronomy and physics major. However, in my last year, I switched over to History, and with the help of my Core classes, ended up finishing my History degree in one year. It turns out that several counted as History courses, so I was able to graduate with my classmates.
Reflecting on the Core
by Professor Christopher Martin

When I first arrived at BU back in the late 1980s, I was assigned courses that obliged me to read substantial chunks of medieval and early modern English poetry aloud to the students. I was uncertain how they'd react to this unfamiliar material, flattened by a native Philadelphian accent. When the classes not only tolerated but actually encouraged my performance, I was of course relieved and grateful; but I soon came to recognize this brand of generosity as typical of our undergraduates. Nowhere have I found students so routinely open to such a broad variety of disciplines, subject matter, and professors—however mainstream or eccentric. At a time when many leading universities are compelled to reduce their offerings in “pre-modern” topics, BU fields multiple sections of such courses, always to healthy enrollments. It’s this student responsiveness that constitutes our best strength.

My experience with Core, which goes back to the program’s planning stages, has only reconfirmed this broader appeal. Though many are unaware of it, Core was initiated in response to student demand. Rather than attempt to coordinate a course of divisional studies that often required some sense of a larger picture not yet defined, they commissioned us to devise a regimen to serve this purpose, predicated on the trust that we’d assemble something worthy of them. Core’s success has always struck me as less of a tribute to the commitment of faculty and administration—though I’ve witnessed plenty of this—than to student confidence that we’ll remain flexible enough to continue modifying the syllabus to keep it fresh, and that they’ll be able to manage whatever we send their way. It’s inspiring to see this kind of curiosity, initiative and good faith.

The best way to acknowledge this energy is to build ever more varied components into the program, something I hope my new post will better enable. From the start, I’ve regarded Core as a sampler: not a place for mastery, but for experimenting and gaining exposure. If education is ultimately what remains after you’ve forgotten everything you learned in school, it’s our purpose to illustrate broadly the different ways of thinking that come to bear long after you’ve left the program and the university. I’ve been teaching long enough to have seen long-term results of this, and the experience reaffirms my commitment to a job that’s given me a great deal of pleasure all these years.

The Costume Curriculum
compiled by Claudia Huang

Occasionally, the faculty discovers the work of practical jokers among legitimate student papers and exams. The following are some favorites; the originals are available for review in the Core office.

Q: Of what is Gulliver’s sail made, when he leaves the Houyhnhnms?
A: Gulliver made his sail out of a broken portapotty that had washed ashore – without the sail, he would have remained a cast-away for the rest of his life.

Q: Who, according to Kant, woke him from his dogmatic slumbers?
A: It was that guy. The one who did the stuff, with the thing that had the junk on it that made a lot of noise.

Q: Upon what aspect of religious belief do Hume and Gibbon converge in substantial agreement?
A: Hume and Gibbon can both agree to disagree that the use of incense at religious events is both tacky and fragrant. This concept is known as the duality of incense.

-Passage identification from a midterm attributed to “Hans Skitzfelver”

“Since maybe like the Middle Ages, there have been many differing opinions about hustle and bustle. This cannot be denied. It is my intention to sit down and play video games for several hours.”


PASSAGE: “I am not in the least provoked at the sight of a Lawyer, a Pick-pocket, a Colonel, a Fool, a Lord, a Politician, a Whore-master, a Doctor, or a Physician, an Evidence, a Suboner, an Attorney, a Traitor, or the like: This is all according to the due Course of Things: But when I behold a Lump of Deformity, and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with Pride, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience.”

RESPONSE: I believe that there is another more important question here. What do Moses, Superman, and the Cabbage Patch Kids have in common? Take some time and think about it. It’s a toughie. I did find the answer, however. That is because I am Hans Skitzfelver, Trainer of Dolphin. Besides training dolphins, I am also a master of trivia. For instance, do you know the name of the Duke’s dog in the Duke’s of Hazard? No? The dog’s name was Flask. I could go on and tell you how many dimples are on a golf ball, but I shall end here. And for the second, Moses, Superman, and the Cabbage Patch Kids are all adopted.

The Costume Curriculum
Rheanne Wirikala and Amanda Cardenas (both CAS ’08), taking a page out of Kent’s playbook in King Lear, are in “concealment wrapped up awhile.”

“Transpierc’d his thigh, and spent its dying force. / The gaping wound gush’d out a crimson flood.” Evan Babcock and Stephanie Alves (both CAS ’09), presumably “glad with sight of hostile blood,” pose for neighborhood trick-or-treaters during the Core Floor Haunted House. The Core common room won the dorm competition in the “Scariest” category.

Grinning feline fakers Courtney Futryk (CAS ’08) and Shawna Driscoll (CAS ’08) on their way to a Halloween party, at which no doubt the primary topic of conversation was whether Plato would have allowed whiskers in the Republic.
POSMOGA cont. from p.1

You graduated from Core in 2001, and from BU in 2003. What happened then?
I came back to BU to continue my education. I’m currently working at the International Programs office while I study toward a master’s degree in International Relations. But I don’t feel that removed from the Core discussions; in one of my current classes, we’re talking about Reinhold Niebuhr and social contracts. Authors that I read in Core—Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith—come up during class and I feel that I have an edge in the discussion.

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT ‘CORE’ WAY BACK WHEN’?
Core gave me a sense of belonging to a small community within a large university. That helped me tremendously with adjusting to life in a big city and in a big college. Even today, I meet undergraduates in the Core Curriculum, or fellow graduates who have taken it, and we can reminisce about our classes and, of course, about the professors. It’s also interesting to see how Core has changed over the years and what books the students read now. The curriculum seems to be fluid to some degree. I like that because it gives me the sense that my particular Core experience is unique and a little different than the program the students are going through today.

To be honest, I don’t know if being a ‘Core student’ meant as much to me then as it does now. You know, when you’re a ‘Core student’ meant as much to me then as it does now. You know, when you’re a ‘Core student’ meant as much to me then as it does now. You know, when you’re a ‘Core student’ meant as much to me then as it does now. You know, when you’re a ‘Core student’ meant as much to me then as it does now. You know, when you’re a ‘Core student’ meant as much to me then as it does now.

I think my studies in Core were exactly what the Core professors were looking to achieve. They wanted to us to be, academically, a jack of all trades, and a master of none. Core taught me a little about many things and it was up to me to learn more about the subjects that piqued my interest. I’ve done this, and today, apply many things I’ve learned in Core to how I approach life in general, my current academics, and particularly, my relationships with the people around me. I remember my first Core lecture. In it, Dean Jorgensen ingrained six words into us. “Read the books; come to class.” A simple idea that has served me well, even in my current academic program.

Did you actually read all those books?
For the most part, yes. I remember there were a few I might have skimmed.

Do you have advice for Core students?
To get to know the professors. They’re really interesting people who have very colorful lives outside of academia.

Also, make caffeine your friend.

Core in the City (of Waltham)
by Amanda Cardenas
On Saturday, November 5, eight Core Curriculum students took one lovely afternoon to visit Waltham Mill’s Open Studios art show. They met at Boston’s North Station with their guide, Prof. Laura Yim and caught the commuter rail out to the Boston suburb. One student admitted to attending the outing simply to experience the foliage. The show featured one white Art Dog (or was it Art, the dog?), and three floors of local artists’ work in various media, mostly paintings. The students then enjoyed a refreshing walk through Davis Square and a delicious dinner at Christopher’s in Cambridge. An enriching experience? We’d like to think so. Christie Taylor (Core ’06) had an enthusiastic response: “The excursion to Waltham Mills Open Studios was terrific; it helped open my eyes to more of the unique forms art can take. I loved it!”

Core in the City is a student group which sponsors excursions in and around Boston, where students and faculty can come together to experience the cultural richness of the city. E-mail core@bu.edu if you would like to participate in the planning of their next event.

NEWS FROM THE FRONT

Updates on Core students, alumni, staff, and faculty.

Jen Swerida (Core ’06, CAS ’08), as part of the research team led by Professor Michael Danti, attended the annual conference of American Society of Oriental Research in Philadelphia in November. In late October, Prof. James Johnson lectured in London as part of the series “Listening in Paris,” inspired by his 1996 book of the same name and presented by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. He has recently appeared on BBC Radio 3’s “Music Matters” and his research was the subject of an article in the London Times. ● Brill Publishers recently issued the second edition of Prof. Thomas Glick’s book, Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages. ● Emily Hill (Core ’05, CAS ’07) accepted a position as gallery guide at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, educating visitors on the history of the famous Blaschka Glass Flowers. She was also selected to be a curatorial intern at Boston’s Museum of Science, where she is developing a new display for the Natural Mysteries exhibit. ● Former Core instructor Marcia Karp will be giving a poetry reading at Balliol College in Oxford, England in late November. She has poetry and translations forthcoming in Petrarch in English, Ploughshares, and the TLS. ● DEPARTURES: Professor Bernard Prusak bade farewell to the Core when he accepted the chairmanship of the department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. In Fall 2005 former Core instructor T. Andrew Kingston began teaching at St. John’s College in Sante Fe, New Mexico. Former instructor Michèle Mendelsohn has been hired as a Lecturer in the School of Francophone Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh. Professor Richard Oxenberg did not travel quite as far; he is now an Assistant Professor of Humanities at BU’s College of General Studies. Please contact the editors to be included in the next issue.
Lear On Stage and Screen  
by Jen Becker & Danielle Nadeau

Second-year Core students studying the Renaissance were asked to read King Lear. Shakespeare’s deep and complex tragedies can be difficult to understand when read on the page, where characters can appear flat via the two-dimensional text. The emotion of the lines is expressed best when the plays are performed. The Core offered two chances to see the play, by subsidizing tickets to the Actors’ Shakespeare Project perform the play at the College of Fine Arts, and by screening Akira Kurosawa’s film Ran.

The dramatic performance incorporated several unique interpretations of the play. Kent’s disguise was that of a Frenchman (Blimey!). Edmund the scheming son of the Earl of Gloucester was incredibly likeable and comedic, and a musical accompaniment echoed Lear’s decaying sanity and descent into madness.

Kurosawa’s interpretation of King Lear differs in that the king, Lord Hidetora, cedes his kingdom to his three sons. The significance of dividing the kingdom among sons instead of daughters lies in the expression of greed; because everything goes to the first born son, the other two sons desire what their brother possesses much more so than daughters whose husbands will control the land. While the language of the play alone is steeped in meaning, productions of it can add yet another level to its symbolism. Akira Kurosawa’s film brilliantly showcases this idea, using colors and scenery to demonstrate externally what is occurring internally in the plot.

Each brother was represented by a primary color, pure in its individuality: red, the color of the oldest son, usually associated with anger; yellow, the middle child, signifying jealousy; and blue, the color of devotion, for the youngest son, the only one who truly loves his father. When the sons had to share their father’s power and the colors blended, there was destruction of the empire. The Duke of Burgundy and the King of France were represented as impartial parties by the colors black and white, banishing negativity and meditation, respectively.

Weather figures prominently in Shakespeare’s representation of Lear as his madness grows with the tempest raging outside the kingdom. Kurosawa’s use of the weather in the movie helps Core students fully grasp the severity of Lear’s situation. When the movie begins, the sun shines brightly and the atmosphere is warm and relatively peaceful. As Lord Hidetora’s empire collapses and he begins to realize the folly of his decisions, the weather reflects his growing distress, changing from light and calm to dark and un ease, eventually progressing to a storm of unrelenting winds and pounding rain.

“It’s important to get a visual experience of King Lear. The stage and the screen adaptations of the play help bring the text to life,” offered Prof. Sassan Tabatabai during his comments preceding the screening of Ran. We agree; by exposing its students to theatrical and film retellings, the Core supplements and enriches the students’ readings of the course texts.

A Little On Letterpress  
by Rebecca Bella Wangh, Core Writing Tutor

Recently I attended a seminar on letterpress printing at the Center for Book Arts in New York City. In comparison to the speed and literal weightlessness of digital media, this form of printing has in its obsolescence become an art. Unlike digital fonts, letterpress type is weighty, made of lead “slugs” that wait for the typesetter in wooden cases: the “upper case” for capital letters, “lower case” for small. One problem to be overcome by typesetters of today is the incompleteness of the cases of type. Most are salvaged sets of fonts, often assembled from different sources and sometimes worn with age. The lead foundries (of which there were once ten in NYC) stopped producing type by the 1950’s when other means of printing became more efficient. Thus, the poet-printer should check that there are enough “e’s” for the poem before he begins to set the type upside-down and backwards in the composing stick.

The printing process, once an entire page of text is set, requires the use of a printing press with metal and rubber rollers that spin, sometimes noisily, to ink the letters. Then a piece of paper is inserted and the press is manually rolled with a rhythmic crunch. The printer plucks out the page, finished with such quickness after the tedium of typesetting, and checks the text in the process called “make-ready work” for problems with the pressure of the rollers, the distribution of ink, or the actual position of letters. The printed letters are slightly embossed in the thick paper, and the page—the whole room—has the warm smell of oil paint. What was once the conventional method of mechanically reproducing a text, we now call art.

How much more sensual the experience of reading must have been when letterpress was a standard technique: the subtle relief of the impressions of the type, the aroma of the binding and of the ink, and the durable craftsmanship of the book. It’s difficult to think that readers took their books more seriously before the age of digital printing and desktop publishing, before books became disposable.
The Core Critic on
"A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE"
by Avery Ana LuBell and Amanda Cardenas

Viggo Mortensen, the scrupulous king of Middle Earth, returned to the screen this fall in A History of Violence, directed by David Cronenberg. The movie, which appears at first to be a blood-spilling thriller with Mortensen as a deranged, pitiless, “there’s Johnny” axe-murderer, actually gives a closer portrayal of Machiavelli’s ideal ruler.

History seems to be operating from the same cynicism Machiavelli employed in “The Prince”: realistic, but with a narrow focus on the worst-case scenario. In the film, the photography, the pacing and the awkward silence between dialogues are all credible but all contribute to a (manufactured) brooding suspense as the director conducts the audience into that calm just before something apocalyptic happens. The film is set in a small country suburb where Mortensen is Tom Stall, loving and humble husband, father, and diner-owner. However, the Stall persona is a fabrication that has powered his original identity: Joey Cusack—the brother of a mobster in Philadelphia who fled that life after betraying his fellow criminals. Now he’s been tracked down by his former associates and has to finish the fight he started.

Stall isn’t the only character who plays a double role. Much of the movie centers on the notion of upholding lies to attain what someone really wants. If the moment calls for a peaceful mother and a pacific son to pick up shotguns and kill revengeful mob assassins, their violence is justified by their efforts to defend themselves with lies and manipulations before their resort to last defenses. Like an ideal Machiavellian monarch, Cusack feigns innocence and good-nature for the sake of his small-town reputation. Under the cover of darkness he returns to Philadelphia to confront his brother, played by William Hurt. Joey deploys his strategies in order of increasing intensity: he enters his brother’s Philadelphia mansion weaponless, tries to banter his way out of the situation, and only when that fails does he fall back to violence, undermining four armed bodyguards and his brother.

His combination of deception and violence allows Mortensen’s character to maintain control in his life, but in order to maintain that control he had to win the loyalty of his family and his town. Almost as though taking another page out of The Prince, he forces loyalty with fear. Because the town fears the return of any mob employees, the sheriff steps aside to let Stall quietly handle the matter. The sheriff, fearing that Stall’s family would be disrupted and Stall be displaced by the criminal Cusack, drops his investigation into Stall’s background. His family helps him hide his past; fearful are they both of losing Stall and releasing the ruthless Joey Cusack into their lives. This was not an irrational fear, for Joey/Tom kept the family wary with warnings of mob attacks and the threat of domestic violence.

While Mortensen’s character fits the Machiavellian mold, the movie as a whole falls slightly short of Horrific. Anyone who enjoys assassin-squad action will be disappointed that Mortensen fails to pull a single Black Mamba move. The absence of eyeball-plucking is part of the mock-realism that allows this disturbing story to slip past the audience’s ‘outrageous detector’. The killings are quick and practical, followed by prolonged shots of the aftermath that place the audience at the scene of the crime to experience a twitching, dying human at their feet.

Stall then returns from Philadelphia to stare forlornly at his family before they sit and eat dinner as if nothing unusual had taken place. His wife, however, remains unreachable; she cries during the meal, but whether she’s fearful or hopeful is uncertain. Ever the Machiavellian follower, she is controlled by both a balance of Hope and Fear. Mortensen returns her stare with another. Whether his sadness is sincere or a lie, is left for the audience to decide; the film closes with the image of his impassive face. Cronenberg seems eager to hop on the Hollywood bandwagon of open-endings, rather like backing away from the argument just presented: “don’t shoot me, I’m just the messenger.” That recoil from closure simultaneously enhances and mocks the questions of identity and justice overshadowing History. Though this film is a good showcase of character dynamics and an excellent cautionary tale against the application in real life of Machiavellian principles, it falls short of being memorably moving. DI

When Bears Attack:
The 2005 Banquet

At the year-end Core Banquet on May 4, over 200 Core students and faculty came together celebrate the sophomores’ completion of the program. Dean Henderson opened the banquet with welcoming remarks, Dean Johnson spoke, Core Journals and t-shirts were distributed, and students were once again merciless in their annual faculty roast. Ten Polytropos Awards, given to Core alumni for academic excellence and distinction, were given to the following graduating seniors: Seth Allen, pictured above with Nashila Somani (Core ’05, CAS ’07), left, and Jehae Kim, also the recipient of a Polytropos; Julia Bainbridge; Raja Bhattar; Amy Chmielewski; Kimberly Christensen; Andrew David; Emma Hawes; Matthew Merendo, pictured above right with Rebecca Bourke (Core ’03, CAS ’05); and Stephen Miran. In the photo at left of the sophomore skit, Professor Herling—having just re-entered Plato’s Cave to rescue his Core colleagues—is menaced by Plato’s Cave Bear, Matthew Kelsey (Core ’05, CAS ’07). DI
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We are currently accepting articles and artwork for Vol. IV Issue 2: Spring 2006, the next edition of De Ideis. E-mail deideis@bu.edu for information on contributing as a writer or staff member, or if you would like to make a submission to News from the Front.

Letter to the Editor

I am writing in response to Alexa Dooseman’s article, “The Core Continued in Europe” [V. III, Issue 2, Spring 2005]. Alexa claims to have wandered through Madrid and wondered, “Why aren’t there statues of Don Quixote?” To set the record straight, I would like to say that there is a statue of Don Quixote, as well as of Sancho Panza and Miguel de Cervantes. The monument to Cervantes resides near the Plaza de España, just minutes from El Palacio del Oriente and from La Gran Vía; closer to the heart of Madrid it simply could not be. The monument, flanked by a reflecting pool and stone pathways, is colossal in size: The mounted Quixote and Sancho are over 15 feet high and Cervantes towers at least 30 feet above the ground. The dark metal Don extends his hand before the pond, perhaps gesturing to the Basque or halting a train of prisoners. Cervantes, carved from white stone, sits stoically behind his protagonists, as if calmly watching his novel come to life. It is too bad that Alexa Dooseman was unable to find the monument; even the little bird seated atop Cervantes’ bald head came to pay homage to Spain’s first great novelist. Perhaps now the Plaza de España can become an essential stop for all dutiful Core students visiting Madrid. Saludos,

Martha Muñoz
Core ‘05, CAS ‘07 Biology

Martha is studying in Madrid (where she took this photo) during Fall 2005.