

Among Strangers:
Taking Theories About the "Other" to Real Cultural Differences

How do we, and how should we, make sense of people who live in radically different cultures from our own? A number of courses across our curriculum consider this question on a theoretical level. It is central to reading Salman Rushdie, Edward Said, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, or Donald Davidson ... All of these thinkers have theories – very elaborate theories, and theories that conflict with one another – designed to answer this question. How do these theories measure up in practice? Are any of them useful when one actually finds oneself in an alien cultural environment? That is the question this Winter Study is intended to explore.

The course will be open only to students who have taken one of the courses listed in the pre-requisites, below. Students who have taken such a course may then apply for admission to the Winter Study, with a proposal describing a) a course of immersion-oriented travel (low budget, focused on one or two places, and preferably making use of homestays), with **one** other Williams student or other companion, in a developing Asian or African country that they have not hitherto visited, and b) how they plan to make use of one of the theorists they have already studied to examine their own experience in understanding the people they meet when they travel. A student might propose, for example, a critical reading of Clifford Geertz while visiting pilgrimage sites in Morocco, or a consideration of whether Peter Winch's emphasis on *Verstehen* helped her achieve a helpful level of patience and respect while dealing with Nigerian bureaucrats. Two students traveling together need not, and probably should not, propose the same topic. And whatever topic students propose to work on, they must demonstrate that they have already engaged in some depth with the writer or writers they choose – a 5 page paper on that writer should be submitted as part of the application. That paper then gets expanded, over the course of the WSP, to include a focused examination of how their study of the theory did or did not help them in their actual travels. Finally, the papers are shared, upon return to Williamstown, in an oral presentation to the other students in the class, together with the professors of the classes that were taken as pre-requisites.

Those admitted will receive substantial help from the Instructor in planning their trip, but no-one will be accompanied on their travels by a faculty member, nor indeed by anyone other than their chosen companion. Traveling in a group, and with a faculty member, tends to lessen one's sense of responsibility for one's travel decisions, limit one-on-one conversations with members of the other culture, and provide intra-group social experiences that fill in time one might otherwise spend reflecting on questions like, "what ever led me to think I should come here?" The idea of this course is to promote the kind of travel that requires courage and fosters intense reflection on the nature of culture shock, while at the same time setting this experience in the context of theoretical frameworks that allow the reflections to be self-critical and deep.

Pre-requisites: A willingness to take some risks and endure some discomfort, plus at least one of the following courses: ANTH 101, 331, or 312T; ANSO 205 or 305; ENGL 342 or 373; LING 202; LIT 111; PHIL 204, 215T; REL 256, 281, 283, or 304. *Enrollment limited to 10 (five pairs).*

Cost to student: Will range (depending on country chosen), but generally will run around \$2300.