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ESSAY

Spring Break in Chernobyl: Urbex, Apocalypse, and Materiality in Writing Classrooms

K. Shannon Howard

Abstract: *The practice of urban exploration, or urbex—an activity in which we confront and document landscapes of ruin and make meaning from them—acts as a focal point through which students may investigate and write about the world surrounding them by gaining new perspectives of physical spaces and objects that often go ignored in daily living. More importantly, urbex inspires writing that responds to existing problems in our world (resource scarcity, lack of sustainability, and environmental trauma) while also helping students to conceptualize a better one.*

Introduction: Lingering as Awareness

Many in the field of writing studies share a perspective that “economic disruption, endless violence, and, perhaps most important, environmental collapse should force us to reexamine what it means to work in the field” of composition (Lynch 458). This reexamination leads us to wonder how writing tasks in a composition classroom might become more reflective of and responsive to negative trends without pressing the doom button, so to speak, in our pedagogy. To that end, I argue that the practice of urban exploration, or urbex—an activity in which we confront and document landscapes of ruin and make meaning from them—may inspire writing that both responds to existing problems in our world and helps us conceptualize a better one. In doing so, students find new ways to “be” in the world, where, as Robert Yagelski says, we “begin to erase the boundary between writer as subject and world as object” (65).

Urbex, when approached with humility and awareness of privilege, encourages us to slow down and to linger in places where we once passed quickly—“to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger” (Bogost 34). Although Ian Bogost was not speaking about urbex when he encouraged this practice, the work of lingering leads us to more thoughtful reactions to the world’s ruin and abandonment, which seem to encroach upon all public spaces now due to the earlier Great Recession and the current Covid-19 pandemic, both of which forced many businesses to close and homes to be foreclosed. Engaging in urbex, or urban exploration, both inside and outside the classroom makes our student writers and ourselves better stewards of the environment, and I believe, like Paul Lynch, that such stewardship is, most certainly, part of the writer’s work at this particular time.



Fig 1: Author photograph of an abandoned motel in Eufaula, Alabama

Urban Exploration and Narratives of Ruin

James Nestor explained years ago that urban explorers are known for “closely examining and understanding the inner workings of our constructed world, of seeing civic society in its real, raw, unpainted, unplastered and unpretentious state. It’s internal city touring, but without guides, double-decker buses, maps or directions.” Jeff Chapman, a zine writer who published about urbex and referred to himself as Ninjalicious in the underground exploring community, explains that those who engage in urbex avoid “passively consuming entertainment” because they “participate in the secret workings of cities and structures” and “appreciate fantastic, obscure spaces that might otherwise go completely neglected” (3). More specifically, participation in and appreciation for urban exploration cannot help but address what photographer Matthew Christopher calls “an age of consequences.” By this phrase, Christopher explains how his work as a photographer of abandoned places has revealed that such places are not “anomalies” but ubiquitous reminders of “our current culture and the losses and failures that we are now sustaining” (4). In a nutshell, the work of exploring underground or abandoned places suggests what dystopia might bring and how it is already a part of many cities and towns in the developed world. Consequently, writing classrooms can incorporate this exploration to respond to

and immerse participants in physical surroundings that might otherwise go unstudied by students regularly tied to screened worlds and digital platforms.

Pop culture narratives also point toward a new preoccupation with decay and ruin. Structures like former indoor malls, vacant downtown shops, and foreclosed homes form a new landscape that reveals the nature of a precarious and uncertain time; moreover, such settings are located not too far from college campuses and town squares, making debris and rubble common to those living and navigating even the most affluent sections of town. These texts in all media forms—novels, films, photography, streaming tv, and video games—inspire and inform a pedagogy based in the material world. Depictions of ruined landscapes and rubble did not begin in the 2010s; such images have always been present on screen, particularly during the twentieth century Cold War with Russia (think abandoned bomb shelters and hidden spy camps) and the horror genre post-Columbine in the early 2000s (abandoned schools and backpacks left behind). Ellen Jones, who has referred to the 2010s trend of urbex as “ruin porn,” notes that cinema in particular has always believed that abandoned buildings “look great on film.” However, these depictions are particularly common in our students’ lifetimes—the late 2000s, 2010s, and today.

To begin, it may be no surprise that HBO’s series *Chernobyl* (2019), the recent dramatization of the 1986 nuclear accident in Russia, garnered nineteen Emmy nominations. Although scenes from *Chernobyl* appear in other popular culture artifacts like the horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012), which features young adults becoming prey to radioactive zombies, the HBO series treats the nuclear accident with a gravitas that belies our insecurities about current national governments and their failures to accept responsibility for planetary destruction. Referencing the proliferation of nuclear plants, authoritarian governments, and environmental problems the world has experienced recently, reviewer David Fear at *Rolling Stone* quips, “It doesn’t take a nuclear physicist to see why it makes a lot of sense to look back on this moment right now.” Urban explorer and photographer Rebecca Litchfield, in her collection *Soviet Ghosts*, describes how visiting the Chernobyl disaster site “opened [her] mind to the fragility of humanity and how what humans create can cause so much damage to the world” (1).

Video games commonly reveal landscapes where practicing urbex is common. A student alerted me years ago that characters must escape a landscape of rubble and destruction in the first-person shooter game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (2007-2009). Additionally, the more recent *Chernobylite* (2021), also features “a lowly stalker trying to survive in a radioactive hell.” The game’s company, Farm 51, even creates an authentic landscape out of scanned images of 1986 Pripjat. HBO is also adapting the post-apocalyptic video game *The Last of Us* (2013-present) for the television screen due to the game’s popularity and its compelling narrative. Like *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), which is based on a series of graphic novels, *The Last of Us* is an example of how apocalyptic narrative will soon be adapted for more than one medium, even if its characters fight to live in an abandoned American setting rather than in the midst of Chernobyl disaster imagery.



Fig 2: Author photo of an abandoned structure in rural Georgia that was repurposed for filming *The Walking Dead*. The words “away with you” and this wall were featured in the opening credits during the early years of the show’s run.

Still, 3-D models of Chernobyl are not needed to imagine such a world among us today. A scene of a search through what appears to be apocalyptic rubble occurs inside a best-selling novel and film of the early 2010s, which could easily be imagined as a video game where a man must hunt for his missing wife. An abandoned indoor mall in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012) includes the narrator Nick’s description of a once bustling shopping center turned wasteland in small town Missouri, a common site after businesses and malls closed due to the Great Recession. This description from the novel, strangely enough, sounds more like an account from Chernobyl or a horror film than from America itself:

I’d expected the mall smell as we entered: that temperature controlled hollowness. Instead, I smelled old grass and dirt, the scent of the outdoors inside, where it had no place being. The building was heavy-hot, almost fuzzy, like the inside of a mattress.... It was suburbia, post-comet, post-zombie, post-humanity. A set of muddy shopping-cart tracks looped crazily along the white flooring. A raccoon chewed on a dog treat in the entry to a women’s bathroom, his eyes flashing like dimes. (154)

More focus on ruins and less on apocalyptic hellscapes occur in blockbuster movie franchises like *Jurassic World* (2015), where the characters of this dinosaur sequel find refuge in the 1990s abandoned park. The old visitor's center, now in ruins, becomes a temporary haven where children engage in a form of urban exploration as they locate an old Jeep and repair it (a scene that also appeals to multiple generations in families watching this new trilogy of films). Adhering to genre expectations and debuting the same year as *World*, the opening scene from the spinoff series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–present) features the protagonist running, in order to escape a zombie, through an abandoned church covered in graffiti. In this series Los Angeles becomes a ruined landscape that contrasts sharply with the original show *The Walking Dead*, which is filmed in rural Georgia. As noted earlier, urbex as a term extends from the words “urban” and “exploration,” where ruined buildings and deserted cities are common.¹

In contrast to *Jurassic* blockbusters, Sean Baker's acclaimed independent film *The Florida Project* (2017) features an urban Orlando beyond Disney World's gates, the one that includes strip malls and defunct motels. A turning point in its narrative occurs when a group of abandoned buildings, affectionately labeled “the Abandids” by its six-year-old protagonist Moonie, become a playground for children who eventually destroy the place by lighting an old pillow on fire. The children's actions in the Abandids set off a chain of events that lead to Moonie's separation from her mother by Child Protective Services; nevertheless, the residents of the nearby hotels cheer on the destruction of these derelict buildings, gossiping that they were just a haven for drug users and prostitution. In most of these narratives, abandoned structures often symbolize and reinforce economic precarity and societal unrest, which speak to a twenty-first century fixation with apocalyptic scenarios and environmental dangers.

New Materialism: “Is” not “About”

The examples mentioned above often point toward some anxiety about entropy and destruction on a more global scale, not just in fiction but in our actual surroundings. Environmental philosopher Timothy Morton, in his description of ecological thought, explains that changing perspective through attention to the physical world is vital to understanding how to live responsibly: “It isn't *like* thinking about where your toilet waste goes. It *is* thinking about where your toilet waste goes” (127). Scholars focusing on materiality, or materialism, see the things of our world and the humans in it as participants in the same ontological space. This kind of perspective then prevents writers from writing *about* something as if it were separate or sublimated to human experience. Such divisions between the subject and object, as Yagelski suggested earlier, are counterproductive. He advocates for moving beyond the dualism of Cartesian knowledge—a philosophy where our senses and physical experiences are largely divorced from our minds at work. Instead, the world that contains issues and controversies *is* the world of

1. Rural exploration (or rurex, to some), while not discussed here, offers a similar canvas for thinking and writing. In truth, some of my students living in the country are more likely to pass abandoned farm equipment in a field rather than a deserted building downtown.

the writer, as both are caught up in what Morton describes throughout his work as a “mesh” of existence. (51). In her award-winning text *Still Life with Rhetoric*, Laurie Gries also explains that those who study writing are called to think about their physical existence, digital encounters, and their composing as intertwined, circulatory, and hard to separate. She, among others, has been a leader in addressing the use of what she refers to as “new” materialism to transform the fields of writing studies and rhetoric. Jane Bennett, although not a writing scholar, also prompts us to see the physical matter around us as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (23). Once we do so, she argues, cause and effect no longer matter; instead, we all, humans and nonhumans alike, “rebound” on one another (33).

Still, scholarship addressing the material world has a reputation for being obtuse and jargon heavy. Most humanists and posthumanists dealing in arguments of object-oriented ontology and materialism find refuge in a dense prose that alienates most instructors who might learn from it. Therefore, it is helpful to pause and reflect on scholarship older than the texts mentioned above. Derek Owens’s 2001 text *Composition and Sustainability* actually calls for a check on inaccessible and specialized theory in favor of having “generalists and experts” work together to solve problems related to the physical world, particularly a world in jeopardy (133). Over twenty years ago Owens imagined a pedagogy where students “think critically about past, present, and future of their communities,” and where teachers introduce new ways of thinking about a troubled environment close to home (76). Likewise, Charles Bergman, a Renaissance literature scholar in the Pacific Northwest, explains that studying the way his university manages water as a resource opened his eyes to how much the academy might offer us as a “silent syllabus” in teaching us the “meaning of place” and the value of sustainability (66). Richard Miller’s *Writing at the End of the World* also provides essential questions and personal testimonials for framing an apocalyptic pedagogy in the face of disaster. Miller argues, with a photograph of Chernobyl on his book cover, that “hope can only be generated by confronting our desolate world and its urgent, threatening realities. The only way out is through” (27). Written for a more public audience, Andrew Blackwell’s *Visit Sunny Chernobyl* also details the writer’s own adventures through the world’s most polluted locales with a bit more levity and accessible language, although its ethical center remains focused on the societal ills that create dispossessed peoples across the globe. Although such texts are illuminating, the use of urbex in a writing classroom need not include championing one specific cause or grounding a student in a specific political view. Instead, a focus on urbex often leads to a more organic change in the explorer/writer’s treatment of a threatened environment. Such a change in perspective results from witnessing the aging and neglected places of the world that no one pauses to consider. Confronting abandoned structures naturally reminds us of our “human frailty” (Gates 104) and leads us to reconsider our place in the ruins.

My approach to English Composition II, a second semester writing course required of all freshmen, was the idea of “Apocalypse.” When students arrive, I explain that this writing class is, in short, a new perspective on how places and objects make arguments in our daily lives and how such objects and places may determine their ability to survive in an apocalyptic scenario. Throughout the semester, I use activities to teach students how “joining the conversation” of academic research is based on images and ideas asso-

ciated with abandonment and urban decay. Their ultimate goal, by the semester's end, is to create a research document in which they propose the recycling or upcycling of a specific tool or building to help people survive a large-scale disaster in our city. In doing so, they imagine what a thing or building might *be* or *become* when humans in their local area cope with disaster.

During the brainstorming and inquiry phase of their research, I start by challenging students to find rhetorical meaning in the structures around them. On Day One, much like Marilyn Cooper who prompts her students to address "a startlingly general topic" like the water supply (237), I challenge students to find an answer to the question, "Where does our water come from?" Cooper's pedagogy, grounded in ideas of what she refers to as "enchantment ontology," focuses on having students "engag[e] with others to make changes in the world and, in turn, themselves" (8). To accomplish a similar goal, I balance local and more global examples of the physical world in action and how students might become enmeshed in it more fully. After viewing a slide show about Disney World's physical layout and learning how Walt Disney himself chose to locate trash bins every thirty feet (he observed that guests tend to toss their candy wrappers at that distance), I ask students to walk outside the classroom and document how frequently trash cans and recycle bins are located around the building. Days later, I also request that they find a professor door that intrigues them and analyze the door's decorations and flyers in order to speculate what kind of person works inside the office. These early writing prompts help ease students into a different way of viewing their environment. In a sense, they teach them to "linger" (Bogost) rather than pass by the mundane structures that surround them. Once their perspective begins to shift and their comfort level with the theme is established, I offer a scholarly model to showcase ways that the material world may be more formally studied.

One model I offer in the early weeks is Thomas Rickert's study of Windows startup noises in *Ambient Rhetoric*, where "thinking about something as transparently given as an operating system's startup music, then, opens us to deeper reflections on the stretched and stretching nature of rhetoric.... More pointedly, it concretely demonstrates the limitations we set for ourselves in focusing on the salient, the visual, the semiotic, and the utilitarian. The world of our involvements is much richer than this" (133). The sentiment here prompts a reconsideration of sound, while most of the course I teach is dedicated toward a reconsideration of the ruin we see. Nevertheless, the challenge to focus and reflect on previously ignored parts of our daily lives is the same: the world of physical and sensory data is rich, persuasive, and underappreciated, but we may improve our ability to become attuned to it.

Examples like Rickert's research work because they call attention to the mundane and prompt a reconsideration of its importance. I also incorporate sections of Bergman's piece on the campus plumber to illustrate how a close study of our campus's hidden rooms and spaces reveals the university's priorities and goals in ways that most casual walks through a grassy quad might ignore. At this time, I explain that an underground tunnel exists on campus for maintenance purposes and that a cabin in the woods behind our classroom includes the ruins of an abandoned home from the 1960s. After a short walk to this location, I ask students to think of ways to repurpose this cabin so that future generations at the university might benefit from it. Urbex, therefore, is closer to

home than students might initially surmise. In order to find these locations, however, campus residents have to go out of their way to study the world around them. No pictures or GPS can reveal what these places look like.

Finally, during the inquiry phase of this research, I ask students to recall memories in order to link prior student knowledge and personal narrative to larger issues of materiality during an apocalyptic event. One writing prompt that has gone viral is the task of writing about objects and places from one's childhood home, a writing assignment called "Where I'm From" that is used on both the high school and college level. In the "Where I'm From" poem by Kentucky poet George Ella Lyon, the poet describes her childhood not in terms of her fears or dreams but in terms of concrete objects surrounding her. The poem begins, "I am from clothespins, / from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride. / I am from the dirt under the back porch. /(Black, glistening, / it tasted like beets.)." After listening to Lyon's impressions of childhood, made powerful by sharp sensory impressions of the physical world, students then write their own "Where I'm From" poem, describing the past in terms of their physical surroundings. These activities provide opportunities for students to look outward rather than inward, yet such writings often frame and illustrate more of a student's world view as well as a literacy narrative would. In other words, the students who often feel awkward describing a past experience with writing or reading are often more willing to describe physical settings that allow the "I" to act as an observer of reality rather than a champion of inner reality.² A description of a town or house often allows students to maintain some distance from self-obsessed thinking that may result from well-meaning questions such as "explain one interesting thing about yourself that we do not know." The defeatist response—"There is nothing interesting about me"—is harder to maintain when describing a place rather than one's own personality. The focus on physical reality also bridges the differences among student majors. Sherry Turkle explains that objects "bring philosophy down to earth. When we focus on objects, physicians and philosophers, psychologists and designers, artists and engineers are able to find common ground in everyday experience" (7-8). The embodied work of field observation on one's own campus, whether it leads to counting trash cans or describing doors, makes the work of learning and writing a visceral task rather than an abstract one. When students complete these activities, they must photograph and document where they have been and upload the results to their class blogs on Weebly or Wordpress. The inquiry phase of research ideally ends in a collection of notes and pictures from both class activities and homework assignments, all hosted digitally so that other students and I may explore alongside them.

Potential in Apocalypse

To visit abandoned places means confronting apocalypse now but also seeing potential for the future. As we move closer to the final research project due date, students are given

2. For example, past experience with more general writing prompts that ask students to talk about a memory that shaped their early life often led me to confront two problems: either I learned too much too soon about a student's traumatic history, or I learned nothing at all due to the personal nature of the questions.

time in class to investigate artists and urban planners who renovate spaces and find new uses for them. One is Anna Schuleit Haber, who created an installation called “Bloom” in the Massachusetts Mental Health Center that featured the planting of 28,000 flowers in a once deserted asylum (Vonnegut). Another repurposing movement has grown up around empty phone booths. Lara Georgieff explains how these “depressing husks” become free wifi kiosks for people in all five boroughs in New York. Margaret Ronda characterizes such objects as things that “have become unfastened from the productive circuits of capitalism, while remaining irreducible to the cyclical temporalities of biotic life” (83). In other words, many inventions and devices become outmoded quickly and then cannot decompose, even with some attempt to salvage or recycle parts. To upcycle or repurpose a thing is an attempt to stop the process of what is often planned obsolescence, which is characterized by Ronda as a “strategic evacuation of value” (78, 84). While obsolescing can hardly be stopped with one or two restructured phone booths, the option to redesign and fashion something new out of the old is evidence of problem solving abilities and creative visions needed to make the future sustainable. This is why students must find a solution to an apocalyptic scenario by refashioning or inventing something that will help others survive after the destruction.

The discovery of artists and planners who repurpose abandoned structures means finding potential in the midst of decay and ruin. Making something from nothing, or rather, from abandoned structures, involves thinking that is typical of what Claude Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*. Lévi-Strauss explains that the *bricoleur*’s approach centers on using existing resources rather than planning beyond them:

Further, the “*bricoleur*” also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he “speaks” not only *with* things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between his limited possibilities. (21)

Studying the repurposing efforts of artists and city planners brings students back to the realm of possibility. While the work of the *bricoleur* does help the individual find power in a place where they formerly felt none, it does not detract from the power of things or structures to humble us, as some critics of composition’s new materialism fear. This idea of *bricolage* seems most closely related to the recent trend of the “maker movement” in education. Kristin Arola has explained in multiple presentations and talks why the maker movement sometimes reveals troubling assumptions about a human’s relationship to materiality. Arola stresses the need to cultivate “slow composition”—one that requires more “mindfulness” and “consideration” when dealing with materials that become our partners in creation. The idea of a “maker” controlling her surroundings is ultimately counterproductive if it doesn’t aid us in respecting the physical world around us. In other words, through *bricolage* and attention to the physical we see that things operate partially due to human intervention but also partially through combinations and juxtapositions of moving parts outside our own control, parts that transform the “mesh” inside which we exist. The work of *bricolage* need not detract from a thing’s power; rather, it amplifies it and makes it more agentive.



Fig. 3: Author photograph of an abandoned structure located behind campus. Alongside the anthropology department, students visit this location during a class meeting and take notes.

As students narrow their focus and begin to advance their own arguments, they submit written drafts in which they propose new use for abandoned malls in our current city (similar to the one featured in *Gone Girl*) or abandoned fertilizer plants that left many unemployed in their childhood towns during the recession. Students also focus on ways in which abandoned cars on private property affect neighborhoods and how such vehicles can be used in an emergency. Most interestingly, a few students, moving just a few meters beyond the property line of their own family residences, discovered old structures or corner stores in ruin and then considered how to transform them. Such work led them to interview and engage with neighbors in ways they had not done previously. Through peer review and workshoping these drafts, students told animated stories of how they explored various places and learned unexpected things about their communities.



Fig. 4: Author photograph of a drainage tunnel beneath a neighborhood road.

(Re)discovery: Knowledge Hidden

In Moses Gates's memoir *Hidden Cities*, the author explains that by taking part in urban exploration, we gain a needed perspective on the cities we travel through day by day (25). After a trip down into the Paris catacombs, Gates also describes walking the Parisian streets and not needing a map; his sense of direction had been honed. Time underground gave him "an almost instinctual sense of navigation and understanding" (72). Steven Johnson's concluding pages of *The Ghost Map* also productively hint at the invisible wonders that determine our health and quality of life: "The construction of the new sewers [after a cholera outbreak in London] was every bit as epic and enduring as the building of the Brooklyn Bridge or the Eiffel Tower. Its grandeur lies belowground, out of sight, and so it is not invoked as regularly as other, more iconic, achievements

of the age.” He goes on to say, “Tourists may marvel at Big Ben or the London Tower, but beneath their feet lies the most impressive engineering wonder of all” (207-08). The same may be said about confronting urbex in the writing class: new relationships to the physical world where material hierarchies are reevaluated and dismantled make for more observant, concerned, and flexible citizen-writers whose studies have immediate impact on how they view their own campus and city. Likewise, exploration of infrastructure in cities leads to curiosity about the history of hidden systems beneath our feet. Such knowledge prepares future citizens to imagine how abandoned and hidden structures might be protected, updated, or repurposed.

In the course I approach these topics without continually invoking the term apocalypse, even as students look at the recent movement of extreme tourism that brings people to visit the still radioactive site of Chernobyl. As a practice project leading up to the final one, students must write an argumentative letter to a future first-year student who, when planning their Spring Break vacation, is considering engaging in extreme tourism, a trend in traveling to some of the most deserted and dangerous places on the planet. In this situation the hypothetical student has been given an opportunity to travel to Pripyat, where the 1986 nuclear disaster occurred. The letter incorporates research from credible sources that support or disagree with the choice to travel there. Surprisingly, some composition students do agree that the trip is worth it, citing the need to accept such waste and destruction as part of our history that bears no repeating. For those arguing otherwise, their opposition is often a matter of expense: trips to Russia include flight costs, hotels, and arrangement of tours with companies that might take advantage of naïve Americans interested in exploring. They also mention that confronting a place like Chernobyl causes stress rather than relaxation and, consequently, would make a terrible vacation for any student overwhelmed by classes, jobs, and family. Yet it is always surprising how many people see the importance of such a journey. During this process, students also begin to recognize why Chernobyl’s abandoned site might provoke strong feelings about environmental stewardship and the need to protect future generations from devastation.

Explorer and writer Robert MacFarlane explains that Stephen Graham, who wrote the *Gentle Art of Tramping*, was “one of a line of pedestrians who saw that wandering and wondering had long gone together.” In the act of tramping, Graham was able, MacFarlane notes, to “make a stale world seem fresh, surprising and wondrous again, to discover astonishment on the terrain of the familiar” (230). This same experience is what urban exploration brings to the classroom: the opportunity to “resee” the ordinary and consider how things and places persuade us without using language. It also involves the entire body, since walking is a requirement for the exploration that occurs. Rather than educate the head in isolation, this form of study involves physical and tactile encounters, the kind that aid us in shaping knowledge and memory. Such physical and mental activity demonstrate how, as J. Michael Rifenburg has argued, “the body and the mind are inextricably linked during the composing process, how our skin and bones impact our writing, how our breathing and heartbeat impact how and what we write.” Yagelski’s desire to break the Cartesian habit of dividing body and mind seems fulfilled here in the work of urban exploration and the kinesthetic opportunities it offers.

Nevertheless, the romantic idea of the solo traveler traipsing across the countryside also raises an important concern. To return to an example mentioned earlier, the horror film *Chernobyl Diaries* follows genre expectations by featuring naïve young travelers who unwittingly become trapped in a deadly place due to a lack of humility. In this film two college students, romantically involved, kiss and pose for a selfie in front of a view of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor that caused so much damage in the 80s. The group of students takes photographs everywhere at the abandoned site, but the one they stage together in this scene occurs in someone's former apartment. Inside this same room are abandoned family photos, books, and furniture. One of the students even starts to pick something up when Uri, their guide, stops him and warns him of the radiation. This clip, along with giving students a sense of what the nuclear accident did to the Russian landscape, raises important questions for them and me about the colonizing nature of urbex. Although practitioners of urbex are typically not known for stealing from the places they visit (Jeff Chapman cautions people not even to leave traces of footprints in construction sand) (26-27), collections of lost items and personal photographs remind us how quickly exploration becomes colonial and exploitive in nature.

When students do consider exploring as part of their projects, I urge them to stay far away from the former private residences of others and to focus on the city's infrastructure and design as it has aged over time in order to avoid appropriative voyeurism. In looking more at the city's physicality and avoiding abandoned homes, students are led to find solutions to local problems rather than being led to gawk at someone else's foreclosed property. Likewise, I urge students to remember how race and class play a role in how someone might navigate off the beaten path in such a city. As a white woman, I have often peeked inside old buildings or climbed old fences without suffering any consequences. The most disturbing moment I encountered was not that threatening at all: my cousin and I sought a view of the riverfront from the vantage point of a dirt road and what I had assumed was an abandoned property at the end of it. The owner approached our vehicle angrily, asking what our business was in coming so far off the main road. Once he saw two white women inside the vehicle and understood we were trying to catch a glimpse of the river, he relented and even pointed out the best locations to capture photos. My whiteness allows me to explore such areas in ways that my Black students may never feel comfortable doing due to possible confrontations with law enforcement or other individuals who use firearms to protect their residences. Learning respect for the physical world does not mean we depoliticize it for our own purposes and ignore the privilege inherent in straying from the pavement.

The respect my freshmen have shown both the environment and the research tasks during the course is refreshing. Students have been overwhelmingly positive about the experience of focusing on the material world and learning about a place on the opposite side of the world that confronted this destruction. Throughout the various classes I have taught, class members have stressed the value of learning to see the world differently and being prompted to change their perspectives about the environment. The experience of moving, at least moderately, from a solely anthropocentric view of the world to a view that takes "things" into account is evident in their attitudes about the curriculum. Such a change in perspective occurs through researching, thinking, and even moving differently in our surroundings as well as writing about them. Rather than lead us away from

human concerns, the material investigations we conduct as part of urbex often lead us back to essential questions about what kinds of humans we are now and hope to be in the future.

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