Reflections on NonfictionNOW

by Robin Hemley

Ten years ago, I founded the NonfictionNOW Conference, bringing together writers to discuss the myriad forms, origins, and future of the genre. From October 28 to November 1st, 2015, the fourth NonfictionNOW was held in Flagstaff, Arizona, attracting over five hundred attendees.

Co-sponsors the Writers’ Centre and Yale-NUS sent students Zula Badral, Tara Dear, Sherlyn Goh, Zach Mahon, and Adlin Zainal, plus me and Associate Director of the Writing Program, Heidi Stalla, with the support of Dean of Faculty, Charles Bailyn.

The seven of us dashed between the dozens of panels, readings, and keynotes. I saw Heidi Stalla’s panel, “The Lyric Essays of Virginia Woolf” and sat next to one of the Aussie writers in attendance, Catherine Therese.

When the panel concluded, Catherine was wide-eyed. “I have to go to my room to write now,” she said.

Actually, so did I.

continued on page 2

The Art of Looking, By Chance

by Lawrence Ypil

More often than not, the art of writing is seen as the art of pursuing: an idea, a hunch. Sometimes though, the writer isn’t the one doing the pursuing, but is the one pursued, stalked, haunted even.

Or at least, that’s exactly how I felt when I stepped into the Saga office last semester to find Rector Sarah Weiss standing in front of the painting that had just like the rest of us, moved in.

The painting by Jerry Morada depicted women from the turn of the 20th-century Philippines gathered around for what seemed to be a group portrait. The women sit on chairs, lean against them. One of the women look askance, her hair flying into the air.

Sarah knew that I had been writing essays about Philippine history. What I had yet to tell her however, was that I had been writing for a continued on page 2

Writers in the World - Ashraf Fayadh

by Heidi Stalla

On 14 January, the Yale-NUS Writers’ Centre, along with Yale-NUS professor of modern Arabic literature Gretchen Head, Singaporean poet Alvin Pang, and the NUS Middle East Institute, joined an international protest against Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh’s death sentence.

The event was part of a world-wide reading of his work - 122 events in 44 countries - featuring excerpts of his poems in Arabic followed by English translations. Fayadh was sentenced to death on 17 November 2015 for the alleged crime of apostasy, specifically blaspheming and promoting atheism through his poetry collection, Instructions Within, published in 2008.

Language has power to heal, connect, and promote security, peace, and trust in areas of fear and conflict. As writers, artists, and public intellectuals, we need to be able to speak and create freely, as through our work we represent the common language of private individuals - in other words, the thoughts, emotions, and experiences that cross national, and religious boundaries. At present, the outcome of Fayadh’s appeal is unknown.

Please keep Fayadh and others around the world facing similar injustice - we think of the recent mass execution of 47 people in Saudi Arabia on 2 January - in your consciousness.

5 Writers’ Centre Myths... - Debunked!

by Caroline Manela, Salma Dali, Tse Hao Guang and Aieshah Arif

The Writers’ Centre is, without a doubt, the hippest place on campus. We host some of the college’s coolest events, including Late Night Write and our Reading Series. Last semester, we saw 136 students come down for 372 appointments. Yet despite our undeniable popularity and allure, there are still a number of common misconceptions about what we do.

continued on page 3
The Writers’ Centre travels to SEAsia - Freshman RCX trips

by Caroline Manela & Laurel Fantauzzo

Over the summer, The Writers’ Centre, Dean’s Fellows, and Vice Rectors worked together on writing prompts for each RCX Itinerary. As their first collaboration with students, Writers-in-Residence led writing exercises for each college.

To Saga students on their way to Laos, Lawrence Ypil said: “I like to think of writing as a kind of inner photography of what cannot be seen. What can only be felt.”

In Cambodia, Laurel Fantauzzo gave Elm the prompt: “Imagine a stranger is entering your home for the first time. What would you be most proud to show them? What would you most want to hide?”

Lisa Wells instructed Cendana students on their way to Myanmar: “Close your eyes and remember ‘home’: the light, objects, sounds, and smells. Now, write for five minutes with this premise: whatever you don’t remember is lost.”

Writing prompts eased first-year students into college writing while demonstrating the importance of reflective writing. Travel is an inner and outer journey – and the Writers’ Centre was and will remain a ready and willing guide.

A Night with... Deeds of Light

by Aieshah Arif

On 12 November 2015, about 40 members of the Yale-NUS community came together to celebrate the success of our fellow writing tutor Tse Hao Guang’s recently-published anthology of poems, accompanied by a spread of wine and hors d’oeuvres.

Deeds of Light, Hao’s second collection published, was released at the Singapore Writers’ Festival, where it was a bestseller, just two weeks prior to the event.

The audience was treated to a peek down memory lane through the DF-slash-poet’s eyes as he read a collection of poems. The session ended with a Q&A session about his inspirations, his journey as a poet, and his favourite pieces.

“My favourite part of the book is probably seven thousand, because it was the first long poem I ever tried writing. It took me 2-3 months,” Hao shared. The complete collection took 2 years to curate.

This is Hao’s second book of poems, the first entitled “Hyperlinkage”, published in 2013.

Both copies of Hao’s books are available for loan in the Writers’ Centre, so come check them out!

Reflections on NonfictionNOW

I presented on Travel Writing with three of my former students from the Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program.

My panel “I Don’t Know,” was about the role of uncertainty in creativity. I launched an anthology co-edited by myself and Hope Edelman: I’ll Tell You Mine: Thirty Years of Essays from the Iowa Nonfiction Program.

NonfictionNOW is neither an academic conference nor a book festival, but a three-day conversation about the genre. Projects get off the ground. Collaborations flourish. Anthologies are born.

The conference concluded with the game show, Nonfiction Wow. A little silly? Undoubtedly. But wonderful, too.

Adlin Zainal posted, “[T]his past week…has stirred up in me a serious itch in me to continue writing…and steel[ed] my resolve to pursue my passion, regardless of the circumstances.”

For the first time in its history, NonfictionNOW has constituted a board, including myself, as President, two vice presidents, and members from around the world, including Heidi Stalla.

We hope to hold the next conference in another UNESCO City of Literature, Reykjavik, Iceland, in May 2017.

The Art of Looking, by Chance

continued from page 1

writing for a number of years now about old family photographs, mostly studio portraits of my grand uncle’s friends.

They very well could have been the women in Morada’s paintings. Their dresses were certainly similar to the ones my grandmother used to wear: the traje de mestiza, traditional Filipino formal wear consisting of the camisa, the panuelito, the tapis layered over the saya. I think about the ways in which fashion becomes its own kind of history. I rest my gaze on these women, while I stand in the middle of an office at the Yale-NUS campus miles away from home. And they look back at me.

Check out Morada’s painting in the Saga College Office!
Here are five prevalent Writers’ Centre myths:

1. I can go to the Writers’ Centre and ask a tutor to edit my paper.

Nope! The Writers’ Centre is not a copy-editing service. If you’re struggling with grammar, we are happy to help you figure out patterns to your mistakes and how to correct them. However, our main goal is always to guide you towards revisions and allow you to come to your own conclusions, rather than “fix” things for you.

2. Talking about my writing is embarrassing.

Maybe at first, but we assure you we’re a pretty chill bunch, and we love helping you with your writing. A Writers’ Centre with no scheduled consultations is a sad Writers’ Centre! We will do everything possible to make sure you feel both comfortable and challenged in your 45-minute consultation. Come for your first one…and you might realise you actually enjoy talking about your writing!

3. I need a draft of my essay to sign up for a consultation.

Absolutely not! Some of our favourite and most productive consultations are brainstorming sessions. So if you’ve been staring at your computer screen for hours and nothing is happening, come down with a blank page, and we’ll help you get those words to flow.

4. If the tutor gives me something to work on at the end of a consultation, I must be a terrible writer.

No! We strongly believe that writing can always be improved, and as such, it’s likely that we’ll give you something to think about at the end of the consultation. Let’s be real—if you came in and we told you everything was perfect, you wouldn’t be getting your money’s worth, would you?

5. It’s ok to bring my essay the day it’s due.

This one is tricky. On the one hand, sure, we’re happy to help you at any stage of your writing process. However, we need to be realistic of your time constraints when giving feedback. If we know you need to hand something in two hours after your consultation, we’ll adjust our feedback accordingly, and might not get that far.

We hope this knowledge will encourage you to come visit us in Elm College, Level 2. See you soon!  

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**Mira Seo says:**

I often use etymologies in the classroom to help my students understand and remember new terms: this is how I share Greek and Latin with live human beings. It’s exciting for me to bridge the gap between antiquity and today through classical roots, but I am aware that sometimes these words can seem intimidatingly obscure. For instance: an oculus (Lat. “eye”) is an architectural term that refers to a round roof opening, but an impluvium (Lat. “rain entrance”) refers to a square roof opening—unless your eyeballs are two cubes, I will meet you at the impluvium at the campus main entrance.

The perfect word communicates vital nuance and interpretation: Rama may appear “dishonest”, “shifty”, or merely “misguided” when he persuades Vali that being shot in the back is darmically cool, but which adjective accurately expresses your authorial stance on this puzzling episode? The writer has to choose, and here is the problem with the thesaurus (Gk. a “treasury” of words).

Students often think that their writing sounds more sophisticated with exotic vocabulary. Nope. Inaccurate usage impedes expression: you can introduce unnecessary misunderstandings, stiltedness, or grammatical error through thesaurus abuse. Use words you know, and keep increasing your own treasury of new words by learning Greek and Latin...or just using the dictionary!  

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**From the shelf of the Writers’ Centre**

by Lisa Wells

Big libraries overwhelm me and I tend to stick to my sections, but here at Yale-NUS one of the surprising gifts of having a library in development has been exploring new disciplines and texts I might not otherwise engage.

Here are three books from our shelves that have been informing my work in recent months.

1. **The Sick Rose** by Richard Barnett

   “O Rose thou art sick” wrote William Blake, and this book is here to fully elaborate “thy bed/Of crimson joy”. A gallery of ghastly, beautiful 19th century medical illustrations neatly divided by ailments, with riveting essay for context. In brospeak, The Sick Rose is sssiiiiicckkkk.

2. **Forests: a Very Short Introduction** by Jaboury Ghazoul

   The name says it all. Perhaps you are a person who already knows a lot about planet earth’s forests and ecotones. But if you’re like me and you enjoy being in the woods but don’t know much about them, this very short introduction is for you!  

3. **The Healing Hand: Man and Wound in the Ancient World** by Guido Manjo

   This “history of the wound” and of physicians in the ancient world is entertaining, strange, and packed with mystical remedies. Check out my favorite spell, “The Red Sieve,” should you need to eradicate pus and inflammation.
It is a Sunday evening on campus, and I drop in on a poetry reading by migrant workers. Stepping in, I wish there were more listeners around. But the reading is hard going, the translations clunky, and I know no Bengali. I stick it out, and leave with a few lines, among them, “They wipe my sweat off the walls.”

It’s been hardly a month since I first stepped onto this campus strange and new. I remember falling for those two big trees, and the little pond with stepping stones, the grass and bushes finely trimmed, on a slope perfect for sitting, lying, dreaming. And the quaint comfort I took in carpets and wood panelings set against white white walls, the slickness of large glass windows looking out on lush green. That same first evening I chanced upon William Deresiewicz’s talk with President Pericles on the liberal arts, its roots in the humanities, its commitment to a critical questioning, a sensitive remembering. And I left that night thinking what a place to start something afresh, different.

“They wipe my sweat off the walls.” I think of the men who cut the grass, leveled that slope, packed the cement, fixed the glass, painted the walls, polished the wood, and how they will likely never feel like they can step back in here.

But maybe it can be enough to choose not to forget. And I see that in the beautiful work of those behind Migrant Workers Awareness Week.

As I’m writing this, there’s a call. I let it ring. I’m a little stressed. A message flashes soon after, “How are you brother”.

His is the occasional happy story. A plugged hole in his heart.

Recovering well.