TRAVEL WRITING IN KERALA

by Heidi Stallia

“I came to Kerala in late February 2016. I saw light bulbs hanging from the trees. I heard the groan of generators mixed with the constant cry of crows. I heard the drummers on the boardwalk of Cochin, and the trinket vendors calling out their wares. I felt the anxiety of color, eased by grey-brown backwaters. I encountered a heated world. And then, not knowing that I had been looking, I found a way to use one of the thousand questions that are given to each of us at our beginnings, to be used or released one-by-one over the course of a lifetime.”

This was the beginning of my focused free-write on the last day of our Leadership LAB in Kerala.

I, along with Professor Rebecca Tannenbaum, Deans Fellow Lauren Seaman, and Professor Diana Chester from NYU Abu Dhabi, travelled there with fifteen students over mid-term break on a trip designed to get everyone thinking in new ways about the creative process.

Students and faculty together participated in a series of arts and writing workshops designed to help us draw on cultural and personal memories as well as detailed observations about selected sites and communities in Kerala in order to express a developing idea about heritage and identity.

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THE WRITERS’ CENTRE PROCESS

by Tse Hao Guang

Tutoring is itself a learning experience, and I appreciate the process that permeates our training, vision and execution. A consultation often begins with freewriting. This opens up possibilities students may not have fully realised, dislodging part of the subconscious that dislodges, in turn, writer’s blocks of all kinds. I then ask students what their top two or three essay issues are, setting the agenda for the consultation.

That doesn’t mean students do whatever they wish. Rather, we give advice and instruction based on our assessment of the situation. Sometimes, I redirect a student’s concerns (“I know you’re worried about grammar, but you’ve bigger issue with argument”); sometimes, I re-affirm instincts (“that’s exactly what you need help with”). Often, I divide sessions in two, first covering structure (question, thesis, source integration, “flow”), then style and grammar (citation format, ESL issues, tone).

We ask more than answer, helping students hone in on crucial moments in their work. For example, I ask students to focus-free-write a summary of their essay if their thesis or introductory paragraph needs work. This freewrite usually turns out to be a more effective introduction. When the solution to a writing problem comes from their own writing, it gives students confidence. Hopefully, repeated visits internalise this process.

ON PLAGIARISM

by Laurel Fantauzzo

Literature, and the study of stories, is different from a discipline like math. There is no one correct answer to be found on the Internet or in an answer key. The assignments of literature ask you to trust yourself to form an original opinion, backed up by facts you can find, and represent, with clarity. Such a pursuit requires you to be honest with yourself, and with your readers.

I understand the impulse to do as little as possible to turn in a paper for a passing grade, especially if you don’t have a particular passion for literature, and you’re feeling pressure from other parts of your life as a student. But Google can’t teach you how to value and trust your own opinions; using someone else’s analysis won’t strengthen your own ability to create original ideas.

We don’t need any more copycats and Google searchers in the world. We need original ideas and original voices. Developing your own way of thinking takes time, patience, and practice.

As instructors and writers, we want to support you in trusting yourselves as original, critical thinkers. That’s an ability you need in order to change and affect anything you observe in this world: your own unique, evidence-based points of view. We value that in you as students. We hope you learn to value it in yourselves.
TRAVEL WRITING IN KERALA
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We started with a pre-trip workshop in the Writers’ Centre where the group responded to family photographs and writing prompts that introduced the art and writing practices that we used on the trip, and generated reflection about existing ideas about self and heritage. While in Kerala we spent four days exploring Cochin and two days floating down the backwaters from Alleppey recording life around the river through sound, visual art, and writing.

One prompt asked the group to describe nothing but the water for 60 minutes—and believe it or not one or two of us needed more time! On the last day, we began the first draft of a literary travel essay that thinks about personal encounters with the unknown. We all started in the same way: “I came… I saw… I encountered…and then, I found…” And from there our writing wildly diverged. These compositions will be finished during a final workshop back in Singapore in March.

see page 4 for group poem written by the Kerala LAB team

WORDS FROM AWAY
by Robin Hemley

As I’m away, my mind has been on postcards. My friend, the author Michael Martone, sends postcards to dozens of his friends whenever he travels. It’s old school and that’s partly why he does it. He also wears a bow tie. My friend, the author Lawrence Sutin, once wrote an entire memoir centered on his extensive postcard collection of cards from the 19th and early 20th centuries, fittingly titled, A POSTCARD MEMOIR. But my favourite use of postcards is the novelist Carolyn Chute’s habit of sending authors postcards as she’s reading their books, giving them progress reports as she goes.

I love this as writers so rarely have the immediate connection with their audience that actors, dancers, and musicians have, except when they give readings. I’ve taken recently to writing postcards on Facebook to authors telling them where I am in their books. It’s a nice way to promote their books, I think, and also to let them know that I’m engaged with the worlds they’ve created.

WRITING AS HEALING
by Lawrence Ypil

Last February 16 in our very own campus’s Quiet Room, the Writers’ Centre held its very first installment of the Writing as Healing series. An ongoing collaboration with Wellness, Writing as Healing is a reading and writing series led by Lawrence Ypil and Dean’s Fellow Vanessa Kim that explores the role of writing in the in honouring and bearing witness to life experiences.

When writing is often seen as a means towards an end - the filling out of applications, the writing of academic papers - this series aims to reclaim writing’s role in the nurturing of a creative engagement with the world.

For the first session, Writing as Healing focused on the power of poetry as a mode of navigating through transition periods in life, seen as a kind of attentiveness towards a moment. Students who participated in the event wrote poems exploring images honouring the complexity and mystery of their experiences.

For the second installment, we will explore writing and the night. “In Deep Dark of Night – To Write” will be held on March 23, Wednesday, at 10:30 pm in the Quiet Room. Bring a notebook, pen, and your favorite poem/prose excerpt about the night. The third installment will be about writing at dawn.
We are all trained in school to answer exam questions and find evidence to support our answers. Teachers always look for examples and details when they read essay exams, and mark down tests that don’t provide enough. When you get to college and start writing papers, the first instinct you have is to think about the prompt, come up with an answer, and then start combing the course readings for examples and quotations that support that answer.

You’re doing it wrong.

When professors and other scholars in the humanities write papers, we don’t usually start with an “answer.” Instead, we pore over the documents in front of us, looking for the patterns that emerge. We may have a question in mind, but we wait for the documents to answer it, rather than cherry picking evidence that supports a pre-conceived idea.

The best undergraduate papers do the same thing. They let the course readings (or research sources) answer the question for them. The evidence provides the argument, rather than bolstering it.

My pro-tip: Let the evidence speak for itself. Approach each prompt with no pre-conceptions, and let the answer come from the material. It’s not just better writing, but it’s more fun and interesting that way. WC

CALLING

by Gautam Joseph

I ask Larry about leaving medical school to write. It feels too personal a question to be flung half way across that big squarish table in the Writers’ Centre, but it’s done. And Larry’s answer is short. He says he found his calling.

He turns it around. ‘What’s yours?’ Your calling. My calling.

I’m taken by surprise, and after several starts, I digress, fumble through something about childhood Catholic values, about writing as confession.

This calling, it nags over the next two weeks. May be because of the cover letters and applications I see at the Writers’ Centre. Because I assist in clarifying passions, values, causes. But also because my own stock answer has expired. I’m the development dude who writes alright, whose skill is to write, his fight is for rights. It feels off for how it rhymes, with what’s expected.

I google ‘your calling’. And it was trending the year before. Huffington Post, Forbes. I find a listicle I like. Something about the intersection between the thing you quietly do - on your own and well, and that need out there that cries out to you. Yet what got me all tangled, was that slight spiritual twist to the word - calling. The emotional simplicity it suggests. I feel like I know it. But it turns up no straight answers.

So instead, I indulge what ran through my head and didn’t say as Larry asked ‘What’s yours?’ Your calling. That’s the sort of question I usually avoid my parents and take up part-time jobs for.

Then there’s an old line from an old book. Seeking means having a goal, but finding means being free, being open, having no goal.

What’s yours? Your calling. WC

THE WRITERS’ CENTRE TRAVELS TO DELHI

by Caroline Manela

Over spring break, I had the opportunity to speak about the Yale-NUS Writers’ Centre at “Line by Line,” Shiv Nadar University’s Annual English Conference. In my conference paper (my first piece of academic writing since my senior thesis!), I grappled with one question that’s been on my mind for a year and a half: how does my work in the Writing Centre connect with my residential, advising role?

I presented examples of our Writers’ Centre Staff collaborating with the Dean of Students’ Office, including this year’s Freshmen Orientation Trips. I argued that by bridging the divide between student life and academics, educators can create a community in which writing is a part of everyday life, rather than a cumbersome task we push off until a few days, or hours, before the deadline.

Heidi Stalla and Dean’s Fellow Lauren Seaman, also presented their work at the conference, drawing on experiences from Yale-NUS as well as their previous institutions. The major takeaway for me from this conference and a summer institute I attended on Writing Center administration is simple: we’re unusual, we’re weird, and we’re trying something new and amazing here at the Writers’ Centre. WC

FROM THE SHELF OF...

Tse Hao Guang

1. Fainting with Freedom, Ouyang Yu
Soap bubble poetry, halfway between being and becoming, reflective of the mind that blew it, bilingual and annoyed, bored and shocked at its own boredom.

2. Between Stations, Boey Kim Cheng
Real life stories from a Singaporean pilgrim. Reflections on his difficult childhood intertwined with his sense of un-belonging and wanderlust. Out-of-print gem.

3. Stories, Sergio Ramírez
Darkly surreal shorts that comment on the social and political absurdities of 1960s Nicaragua. Fun fact: Ramírez more famously served as Vice President from 1985-1990. Probably out-of-print too.

4. Submission, Michel Houellebecq
Powerful novel about a near-future France which has elected a Muslim party to power. Really a scathing critique of the emptiness of secular humanism. Hilarious in a twisted way.

5. Gone Case: A Graphic Novel, Dave Chua and Koh Hong Teng
Visual adaptation of the wonderful novel by Chua. Loved the realist style, but ultimately preferred the novel better for its language. WC
Describe, you say, the “sound”.

OK.

Kerala is a bridge projecting its voice of Bus and motorcycle honks by my side.

Sound in Kerala is breath recycling The dum de dum of a heart rumble—Continuous, like a truck.

My ear hears thumps in stereo—But it’s just my heart like a truck trying to carry its load.

Bull Bull Brom Plop Tweet Twittle Swoosh Swoosh Vroom Birds Fans Water Dumped Into Water Banana Leaves Crunching Showering Chain Saws Going? (Or were those Birds?)

The agitation of engine on water skin confuses the moment: Is it becoming? Loud or Soft? I can’t tell. Slumber splash of the river Smoky vroom of manic motors

Effervescent youth and the rhythm of crows—Behind it all a distant flute and a woman’s voice.

Those crows don’t get tired and those crickets never cease their warbling: Warbling of men, cawing of machinery A beep, and again, another—Gravel crunches under wheels Confusing nature with these warbling voices—

A lull. What is real?

And then—interrupting—a beep! The angry, insistent demanding car honks, crow honks, The warbling honks of men.

Describe, you say, sound:

A low rumble, a crescendo up the bridge, The forte staccato of this horn, this honk, as it crosses and then Descends.

Describe, you say, sound.

It’s a symphony of pinks and oranges, A symphony of paper against skin against paper.

This paper, this skin, this paper Where I am sitting out of bounds Where I have written these sounds, Even still, in paper, in pink, in skin, In orange, in Kerala, They’re not for me.

### CONSULTATION CORNER

by Caroline Manela

A big shout-out from the Writers’ Centre to CIPE for sending students our way and collaborating on writing workshops on personal statements!

Pitching yourself to a company or organization can be difficult, and sometimes, if you’re worried you might not have the exact qualifications, writing a cover letter can feel more like creative writing than you’d like. I’ve spent most of my consultations helping students find assertiveness and confidence in their voice. I ask them to find all the times they wrote, “I think I can…” and change them to “I will.” I give them timed writing prompts like: “Why this organization?” and “Why should it be you?” We’ve also spent time tailoring cover letters to specific jobs—this includes researching the company, as well as thinking about how to frame your specific skills.

I even dug up my old cover letters from my freshmen year of college to remind myself what it’s like to write a cover letter for the first time: not fun, but much easier with someone to guide you through the process. WC

### UPCOMING EVENTS

Watch out for our Readers Series continuing next month!

BERNICE CHAULY WITH HEIDI STALLA AND ALEITHIA LOW

LATE NIGHT WRITE AND OTHER WORKSHOPS!