

Introduction

Academic Travel: Departures

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A quick look at the end of 2022 book lists reassures one that travel writing in its many forms and iterations continues to amass fans and readers alike. National Geographic, the Financial Times, the Independent, the Smithsonian, the Washington Post, and the Economist, just to name a few, all published “best of” lists focused on travel and writing about travel at the year’s close. Scrolling through the long list of recommendations, one can hardly ignore the sheer variety collected under the guise of travel: anthology, memoir, adventure tale, novel, guidebook, cookbook, music, atlas, history, and hiking tips all fell into the broader category. It would not be an exaggeration to note that there was something for everyone in the aforementioned lists. One might argue, however, that the consistent and ongoing interest in travel in all of its manifestations extends beyond the wide range of genres available. A multiplicity of perspectives and broad appeal tell only part of the story.

Surely, the timing of the latest list of travel-related publications also plays an important role in the sheer number of offerings: after the lockdowns associated with COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the world seems ready to return to travel, to travel adventures, and to reading and writing about travel across genres. If travel and travel writing have always been associated with specific historical moments, ranging from the Romantic period in European literature in the eighteenth century to the beginning of modern tourism with Thomas Cook in the mid-nineteenth century to the onset of jet travel after the Second World War, then the current wave is no exception. Yet in this post (or post-post) colonial era, can one still rely on the vocabulary of exploration and discovery to explain twenty-first century travel? How does the traveler at once participate in and diverge from the travel practices and tropes that have led us to where we are today?

We might note that the vocabulary that characterizes traveling recalls very specific subjectivities, ones rooted in European traditions. At the same time, such terms remind us that travel and writing about travel speak to multiple aspects of the human condition, aspects that extend across historical periods and across national borders. Words like odyssey and pilgrimage, wanderlust and adventure, characterize our life journeys. Travel, whether chosen or otherwise, functions on a literal and metaphorical level, providing the traveler with experiences that color their understanding of their place in world, present and future. The traveler learns to navigate the experience of defamiliarization that travel exposes, compares their own limited perspective to that of others who have shared it, and recognizes the sensation of discovery at both the personal and collective level: all of these experiences make for exceptional educational opportunities and teachable moments.

This issue of *intervalla* is dedicated to the educational experience that we build around travel and how we read, write, talk and learn from it. Franklin University Switzerland places Academic Travel at the heart of its liberal arts curriculum, and this volume recounts, in part, the outcomes of that specific, educational process, unpacking and examining different aspects of grounding course goals in the act of traveling, making travel at once the subject and the object of intellectual investigation. The issue goes beyond a single approach, however, and includes other academic perspectives across institutions and programs, in an effort to contribute to the growing body of literature devoted to the practice of educational travel.

In this vein, *Academic Travel: Departures* collects papers from faculty scholars teaching in different disciplines who have either led Academic Travel courses at Franklin University Switzerland, or are invited contributors, teaching at other institutions that also integrate travel as a key part of their educational mission. Though delayed by circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the choice to investigate travel-based learning coincided with Franklin’s fiftieth anniversary. The volume celebrates what many Franklin students, faculty and alum have long considered to be the most unique aspect of their Franklin education. Academic Travel, Franklin’s signature program, incorporates a ten-day to two-week travel experience into a regular, three-credit course each semester, providing both international experience on the ground and an integrated approach to learning. Students are required to complete a minimum of four three-credit Academic

Travel courses, but most do more. Academic Travel brings the classroom into the field, thus providing experiential learning on site: students first build subject knowledge, then put it into practice on site, then reflect on and write about their experiences.

But what distinguishes Academic Travel, and educational travel experiences in general, from other study abroad courses? And what makes “academic” travel different from other forms of travel *per se*? The volume has gathered a variety of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, as well as diverse geographies. Authors were asked to consider questions of travel, privilege and social justice, the ways in which academic and educational travel can be conducted sustainably, intersections between travel and digital cultures, and between innovative experiential learning methods and traditional disciplinary learning goals.

Like any journey, the trajectory towards publication of this volume was not as linear as imagined in the design stages. The world health crisis pushed academics into experimenting with digital communication in ways that provided a necessary sense of reassurance that we were conducting business as usual: some scholars and courses thrived in the digital, others struggled with isolation and/or health concerns. Travel was perhaps the most challenging feature of a Franklin education to recreate, as it was for the institutions of our invited contributors represented here. There are stories that have yet to be shared in full about how learning changed and teaching adapted in travel programs during these challenging times – FLAME University’s Poonam Gandhi, in this volume, points to, but also calls into question projected technological ways forward, arguing that these can never really substitute for experience, and the University of the Witwatersrand’s Nicola Cloete, Catherine Duncan and Anton Coetzee, too, find that alternatives only compromise the transformative potential of collaborative, site-specific encounters. All of the articles in this volume emphasize embodied experience and the value of what is gained through this in the time/space moment, “what spills over” and what “productively disrupts.”

Caroline Wiedmer’s work, “Liquid Learning: The Case for Franklin’s Academic Travel”, which opens this volume, creates a metaphor, inspired by digital imagery, to re-think the term experiential learning as it responds to questions of sustainability, and a correlated shift from global to planetary thinking. Wiedmer’s Academic Travel courses deal with the Holocaust and memory, with integrated travel experiences to Poland, and refugees and mobility, offering field study on site in Greece. How does liquid learning translate into practice for students in places of trauma and extreme duress? Wiedmer’s article goes a long way in suggesting how learning, when embodied, “spills” over the edges of what any travel leader can plan for, plunging students into “unexpected situations” that solicit their understanding of and for “the often-contradictory beliefs and standpoints that coalesce around a topic that is politically and ideologically fraught and that presents an emergent planetary problem with no clear solutions.” Wiedmer’s contribution helps us to see better how the acquisition of new knowledge and skills on Academic Travel becomes almost inseparable from the affective dimension where the messiness, and even repugnance for tastes and smells, demands a kind of flexibility that is more aptly analogized by fluids, the proverbial spilt milk which now takes on a multiplicity of new meanings full of theoretical potential. Wiedmer’s investigation forays across disciplinary boundaries from social justice studies to cultural studies to pedagogy and neuroscience, and is in layered conversation with reflections by Franklin student Grace Bacon – a dialog that visually and symbolically underlines the self-reflexivity of this meditation on moments of learning on the road.

Poonam Gandhi seeks a balance in the current educational climate between immersion and technology to assess and acknowledge how FLAME University’s DISCOVER INDIA Program (DIP) does experiential learning in ways that can both be enmeshed in India’s “historical, and socio-cultural realities” and help students to be theoretically proficient, recording and reflecting in a lasting way on the processes of large-scale research projects in an academic setting. Gandhi argues that “thoughtful and well-rounded individuals” who are simultaneously well prepared for the job market cannot be fostered only in a theoretical learning environment – and indeed the DIP preparatory workshops not only hone students’ research skills, but also provide

them with the concrete tools to produce their own documentary and photographic material, to keep their own accounts and to formulate their own emergency contacts and plans. The unique nature of the engagement with region and space leads Gandhi to reflect on the challenges educational travel programs and their necessary, inherent “real-life experience” teaching face in times when travel is impossible, especially in developing countries, where access to mitigating forms of technology that can mimic these on-the-ground realities still lie out of the reach of the majority. Carefully designed experiential learning modules, Gandhi concludes, are both more accessible and more effective than technological aids for combatting post-pandemic learning fatigue and evening out the playing field of student privilege.

Clarice Zdanski’s *“A Bestiary in Mask: Creative Practices and Transdisciplinary Approaches to the Production of Knowledge”* explores the intersection between studio art and travel. Zdanski suggests that what happens at that site-specific intersection may be described as a contagion, positively connoted, where, as with Gandhi, critical thinking meets “making” through a concerted collective effort: the preparation of a contemporary ceramics exhibition inspired by the Galleria di Storia Naturale in Perugia, Italy. While working with their eyes and hands with the clay that is so important to the region, Zdanski recounts how her students were also asked to reflect on “the place of the artist” and of the institution in society in the approach to philosophical questions of the Anthropocene relevant to the current era and beyond. In an engaged sense, Zdanski’s piece also asks us to interrogate what we can learn from tensions between the real and the imaginary, science and art, and, quite literally, the potential for creative visitor response and engagement with museums and museum collections that, in this world of quick fixes, can push us beyond static showing and telling and promote a slowed-down, intensively reflective artistic “soul-searching process” that also facilitates a unique brand of knowledge acquisition and production. This impetus for a hands-on cross-disciplinary knowledge conveyance that the Academic Travel experience provides, Zdanski demonstrates, can foster both a greater understanding of sustainability concerns and a “sensitivity” to our place in the world and the other living things that share this space with us, through a “journey to real places as well as within oneself.”

Nicola Cloete, Catherine Duncan and Anton Coetzee from the University of the Witwatersrand, like Zdanski, center the collaborative and the participatory in the visual arts and in a simultaneous exploration of self and world, employing a “walking pedagogy” to demonstrate that landscapes are never neutral spaces, and neither are our assumptions about the way(s) these landscapes (and especially postcolonial Lands with a capital L) can and should be viewed and experienced. Reading and understanding (art historical) landscapes makes visible – and experiential – ties between “cultural positionalities” and place, and this further informs both course reactions and course structure. Moved by Lacan’s “quilting point”, Cloete, Duncan and Coetzee demonstrate how layers of hiking, gender, race, history, borders, nationhood and belonging are “pinned together” in evocative and sensory ways in a form of action that is always already “embodied.” These “epistemic walks” decolonize and deconstruct epistemic hierarchies in the traditional classroom space and enable an immersive experiencing of the land as “companion.” University course requirements and these collaborative, embodied ways of producing knowledge, because of their inherent systemic disruption, do not always sit easily together, but, precisely as a result, there are tremendous gains for teaching practice in stoking their tensions at the border of the experimental, the decolonial, the “undisciplined.”

Also “walking” colonial systems and histories is Kate Roy, who asks what it might mean to take courses in the discipline of Postcolonial Studies on the road, into the empir(e)ical. Postcolonial Studies within the academy is in the double bind of being both complicit in and critiquing systemic power structures, and indeed of critiquing with the very material produced by scholars of the Global North; it is marginalized at the very point its marginality is “intellectually commodified.” These ambiguities, Roy identifies, are similarly always already present in an idea of “postcolonial” travel, which holds within itself both a continuation of the colonial system (as desire for the “exotic Other”) and a resistance practice that seeks out elided narratives from “behind the

scenes”, but is itself compromised by the questionable means of this search for authenticity. Encountering these difficult ambiguities of knowledge, power and representation on the ground, and with an experience already shaped by reading, can in fact disrupt the managed and curated course (and tour) in productive, uncomfortable ways, producing the possibility of a more ethical postcolonial tourism that makes visible its systems. Roy’s piece draws on chronotopal experiences on walking tours in Berlin’s Afrikanisches Viertel and Paris’s Goutte d’Or, both lived, “backstage” areas, to show that the way in which these are set up and “traveled into” in time and space matters at every level.

Learning to take risks is part of the core message imparted by Patrick Saveau’s investigation into the shaking off of the tourist gaze and “trained experiences” of looking on folk cultures in Morocco to push beyond “staged authenticity” and the “pseudo-event” to a private back region of Sufi performance. The engulfing, intense sound- and mindscape of music, dance, trance, their embodied effect on the senses and the loss of control create potent parallels with Wiedmer’s conclusions. Academic Travel works best, it seems, not when everything runs smoothly, seamlessly, or pretends to maintain a kind of control that it cannot deliver. Academic Travel will sometimes ask students to confront a spilling over of emotional responses that require trust, and learning in Morocco with Saveau, letting oneself be transported by sacred Sufi performance, comports challenges that words like “audience participation” cannot adequately capture. Students, even when carefully prepared, learn that negotiating cultural difference is quite different when it spins off the page or the performance space. Saveau discusses how transformative student encounters in these moments are as “risky” as they are necessary for Academic Travel to fulfill its unique function in cultivating affective learning through openness to relinquishing control to the Other, the unknown, and thereby confronting the realities of the self.

The self-reflexive “sensation” of discovery is the common project of all the contributions here. There are tensions in the experimental-experiential, in our push to diverge from travel practices and tropes we make mistakes and we learn to better navigate from them. Academic Travel, in every respect, is always already a series of departures.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sara Steinert Borella is the executive director of the Steger Center for International Scholarship, Virginia Tech's European center. As executive director, she facilitates semester and short-term study abroad programs in residence. She is committed to increasing access and to fostering engaged learning as part of this study abroad experience. Her teaching and research have focused on such topics as food studies, intersections of law and culture, mobility and exile, and travel writing. Prior to joining the Steger Center in Fall 2021, she served as the Vice-President and Dean of Academic Affairs and Professor of Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies (CLCS) at Franklin University Switzerland.

Fabio Ferrari is Chair of the Division of Arts and Cultures and Associate Professor of Italian and Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies at Franklin University Switzerland. In his research and teaching, he experiments with creative writing as a means to unlocking authentic reactions to the primary texts and theoretical discourse. His first book, titled *Italian Myths and Counter-Myths of America* was published by Longo Editore, Ravenna, in 2008.

Kate Roy teaches in Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Germanic Studies at Franklin University Switzerland. She studied German and French at the University of Otago/Te Whare Wānanga o Ōtākou and at the University of Manchester, and has published articles and edited volume contributions on diasporic and (post)colonial literature in both languages, as well as editing an earlier volume of *intervalla* on the theme of borders, and co-editing (with Lyn Marven and Andrew Plowman) the volume *The Short Story in German in the Twenty-First Century*. Her current research is focused on comparative studies in postcolonial literatures and cultures and she is committed to learning critically engaged and ethical teaching and research practices for Postcolonial Studies inside and outside of the classroom.