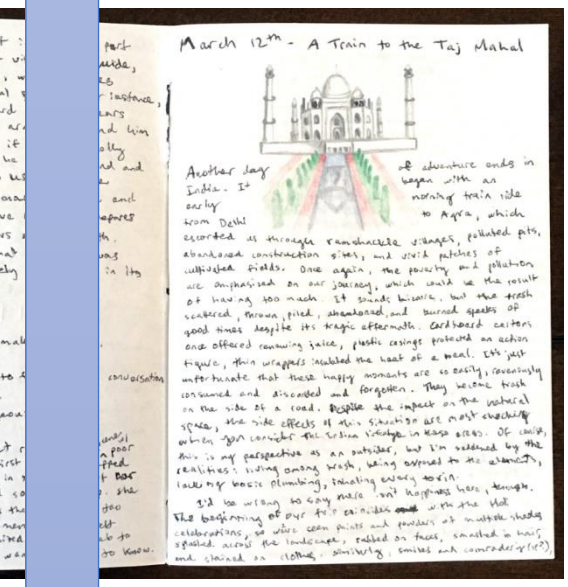
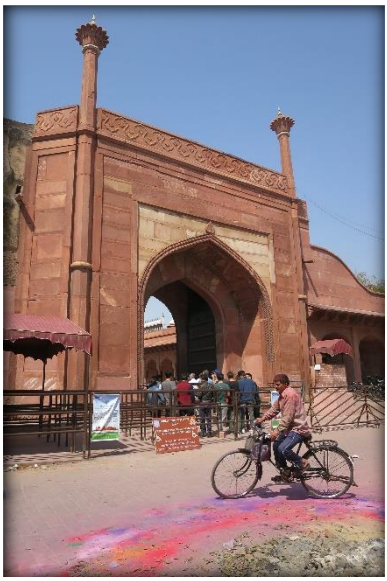
NAVIGATING THE INTENSE BEAUTY AND STARTLING CHALLENGES OF A PARADOXICAL INDIA: A BRIEF REPORT


March 12th - A Train to the Taj Mahal



Where should I start? Can I even find the right words to describe my experience in India? Probably not. In fact, I'd argue I'm not the best source of information. After our grueling 30-hour journey home, my first instinct was to list everything I needed upon entering my apartment to make me a happy, sane person again. That list featured a burger, a shower, an opportunity to binge-watch TV, significant video game time, and sleep. So much sleep.

I did all those things.

I want to own this truth because I think there might be something valuable in my quest for comfort upon our return from a country where comforts can be so rare—achieved by few, unreachable for most, and unknowable for too many others.

So...what is my goal now? Should I just put on my "Privileged American Traveler" hat and list all the ills facing India that we do not need to worry about in America? Should I wax poetic about the striking distinctions between wealth and poverty in this South Asian country? Should I talk about the pollution...or...the trash...or...the piles upon piles of discarded waste? Of course, the ideal answer is "no." When I think about "Bringing Home India," I really want to talk about how many dogs I wanted to bring home with me *literally*. I really want to describe what it felt like to step inside the Taj Mahal. I want to share all the miraculous colors of the saris, each and every craftsmen's and craftswoman's wares, a selection of cheap souvenirs, and a bouquet of flowers from the Kolkata flower market.

Unfortunately, my words can only go so far. **So, here are some pictures!**

These are some of my favorite shots from the trip. These are the images that define much of my experience, my memory, and my conception of such a fascinating country. However, if I've learned anything about India—from the colleagues that prepared us before we left and the people we met along the way—it's impossible to ignore India's paradoxical nature, the dark truths masked by pristine surfaces or exposed in fleshy wounds, the dystopian underbelly existing in any country, especially our own.

A PEAK INSIDE THE KOLKATA MARKETS

March 17 & 18 - Kolkata: The Expected India

While Kolkata carries the third densest population in India, it feels quite distinct. This could be because I'm getting used to the culture and city life of the country. However, elements that overwhelmed me in Delhi feel muted here. Traffic is *less* terrifying, vendors are *less* aggressive, and the everyday hustle and bustle persists without too much demand on the traveler.

Over these past couple days, we've been granted an incredible glimpse into the lives and labors of idol-makers, Kumar (sculptors), florists, and tradesmen. In Kumartuli, we wandered narrow alleys filled with artisans and their wondrous handiwork displayed at all stages of the process. For some, gathering mounds of clay from the nearby river is the first step. Then, after shaping figures in bound straw skeletons, the clay is packed and molded into the straw, forming the bodies of idols and even saints (like Mother Teresa). The same level of detail is present in the Kolkata flower markets. Garlands are stacked in massive piles by countless vendors; wreathes display flowers of all colors, sizes, and types; ornate flowered headdresses and bouquets wait to be packed, shipped, or sold.

Both markets are gorgeous and inspiring feasts for the eyes, but I'm drawn to their darkness too. When I think back to the artists and potters in Kumartuli, I can't help but notice the backbreaking work, the people put on display for a tourist's entertainment, the incredibly detailed artworks treated as souvenirs, the towering idols sold to the wealthy and displayed in mansions far away from the talents that designed them. Similar concerns struck me as we toured the Mullick Ghat Flower Market, where men, women, and children bathe themselves in the polluted Hooghly River just steps from the entrance to the covered portion. What about the competition those same individuals must face every day to sell identical flowers, arrangements, and more? What terrible burden must it be to pluck, design, sell, and protect something so fragile and fleeting?

Beyond all these thoughts and questions, I am most drawn to this picture from our market visits. The size does it no favors here, but, when it is blown up, it is strikingly beautiful and complex and dynamic. The yellows and oranges are almost enough to distract one from the dilapidated buildings that seem to float in the background, the trash rivaling the size and number of the piled garlands, the film of dirt and dust that washes out the unsteady tarped structures. This, for me, is the dystopian landscape that most intrigues me about India, and really any of the countries my students explore in my Film and Literature course. I value the paradoxes: the beauty enveloped by pollution, the control amidst chaos, the individual artistry all mechanically pursue, the wealth of resources matched by devastating hunger.

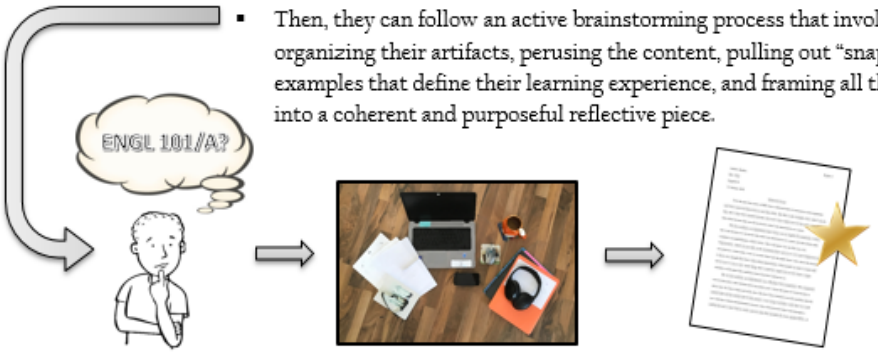
INDIA INSPIRATION:
ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS TO TRY IN CLASS

The *Active* Reflective Writing Experience

- This assignment could take multiple pathways: It could be part of an e-portfolio, a single writing assignment (similar to the reflective writing required in a number of our MC English classes), or a brief preliminary writing activity. More specifically, reflection is key to any portfolio a student develops for a class, allowing him or her the chance to narrate the learning process in a course, share deliverables, and select artifacts and designs to articulate one's experience. If pursuing this pathway, students would be encouraged to take advantage of their phones and social media apps to build a virtual storyboard of their learning experience in class, taking pictures in the classroom, saving snapshots of their favorite paragraphs or sentences, recording pieces of their relevant "home" work, and noting every valuable course experience they can that underscores their learning.

  Since I do not have the benefit of resetting my Spring 2017 classes to make this a course goal, I approached this assignment as a just one of the many strategies a student could use to prepare for an upcoming in-class Reflective essay. I shared my "Navigating the Intense Beauty and Startling Challenges of a Paradoxical India: A Brief Report" with my classes, asked them to read portions of the text with me, and led a conversation about "reflection"—the intended purpose, the process, the required next steps, and the importance of simply revisiting what has been learned to determine what it means as well as where we can take it in the future.

  ➔ *What did this look like in class?*
  - Before we read the first page of my document together, I asked my students to consider some of the unique features of my writing. What stands out to you as distinct from academic writing? How do I attempt to keep my reading audience interested? Do you notice any rhetorical strategies or literary devices? What about the format intrigues you?
  - In responding to my questions, students noted the honesty, humor, first-person language, document design, pictures, questions, and descriptive qualities. Many of these responses were brief, but I received enough reactions to segue to my next point: Purpose.
    - My main goal was to underscore how important it is for each student to revisit the writing assignments he or she has outlined, drafted, and revised and to treat them as primary sources or course artifacts. The same way I look at one of my pictures or a journal entry or a souvenir from India and consider all the memories and meanings involved is the same way my students should examine their written work.
    - Then, they can follow an active brainstorming process that involves organizing their artifacts, perusing the content, pulling out "snapshots" and examples that define their learning experience, and framing all these ideas into a coherent and purposeful reflective piece.



Close Reading a Travel Artifact

- This is a brief and simple brainstorming activity for students that they are likely to enjoy, especially because it involves looking at imagery and engaging in debate. While visiting India, I carried my camera with me everywhere, and, while it was never my intention to highlight the darker aspects of the country, it was amazing to me how many of my casual snapshots captured "conflicting beauty."
- **Here are two examples:**

- While challenging to appreciate at this size, both images are striking to me as the photographer and a professor. I would even argue there is a pastoral idealism captured here in the way the individuals depicted are immersed in these two natural environments.
- However, I'm also intrigued by the paradoxes here, and I think any professor, regardless of discipline, could find an angle worth examining in class with the support of an opening close reading activity of a relevant image or artifact.

Linking *The Hunger Games* to Present-Day India

- If you've read *The Hunger Games* or seen the films, you are already familiar with the basic premise: Panem, a dystopian country of the future, features a strict division between the wealthy and the poor, a massive population divided into distinct labor districts that essentially cultivate the resources exploited by the wealthy in the Capitol. The distinctions between these two social worlds are striking, which are best emphasized by the films' shared color palette. The heart of each district is defined by shabby or abandoned buildings, derelict homes, ruins, and gloomy cinematography that captures every shade of gray, beige, and brown. In contrast, the Capitol explodes with color and style: massive skyscrapers pierce the sky with their unique designs, the Capitol citizens' garb fascinates with neon colors and extravagant flourishes, and the make-up caked on faces is simply outrageous. Essentially, Suzanne Collins' prose and the directors' visual style draw a clear division between the poor and wealthy in this fictionalized future.

  It is fictional worlds like those created by Collins and other past and present speculative and science fiction authors that continually intrigue a broad reading audience, especially today's youth. That's why you may have noticed a surge of teen audience-driven film franchises in recent years, including *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*, and more. Right now, a healthy population of readers and viewers is drawn to the dark alternative realities or dystopias imagined by countless authors and translated to the big screen for further capitalistic gain. Now, I want you to think about it: Why is this the case? Why do we value these stories? Perhaps, we crave a glimpse into the future. Maybe we are morbidly fascinated by the many ways our world can end. Maybe the answer is simply *escapism*.

  Whatever you decide to argue is fine with me, but I want to emphasize the point that these escapes into fictional dystopias are becoming more and more difficult to separate from reality. In fact, they may no longer feel like escape when we consider the divisive political climates that define many nations across the globe, including our own. It's true, too, that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as George Orwell's *1984* have seen marked sales jumps in 2017. The issues explored in these texts, among many others, take on a renewed sense of relevance today, and these texts provide numerous pathways for our students to not only navigate these unsettling topics but also link fiction to our everyday experience.

  This is where India enters the conversation because, for me—as a traveler and educator—India is a country where so many of the fears voiced in speculative fiction have begun to manifest. This is especially true in terms of environmental degradation, overpopulation, access to opportunity, and poverty.

➔ *What is this assignment?*

- After reading *The Hunger Games* and exploring the many unique topics, including Collins' critiques of social class division, poverty, consumer culture, and media obsession, in class conversation, I would ask my students to consider the global significance of this text as it echoes the current state of India. However, in asking students to enhance their global citizenry and knowledge-base, I also want them to reframe their perspectives of India's perceived ills by questioning the same topics in the United States.

➔ *The "In-Progress" Assignment Prompt*

- Now that we have read Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* as well as watched Gary Ross's film adaptation, I want you to consider the global significance of dystopia as a genre. More specifically, think of *The Hunger Games* as a work of speculative fiction that imagines consequences that define a post-apocalyptic future, such as hunger, poverty, oppression, class division, and propaganda. We have already discussed these topics at length in class, but, now, I want you to explore them in the real world.

  For this paper, I want you to build an arguable comparison between *The Hunger Games*' Panem and present day India, a country in which Montgomery College is currently developing academic institution partnerships. Since India is a massive country, I cannot expect you to explore every dystopian theme we have discussed in class, so **I want you to select <u>one</u> relevant topic—hunger, poverty, oppression, class division, OR propaganda—to define your paper's focus.** I am also open to other topic ideas as long as you can prove their relevance to our text and India.

  In choosing your topic, you have officially begun the project, and how you elect to develop it from this point forward is up to you. With that said, *I do have suggestions to guide your writing process:*

  a. Summarize how your selected topic is explored in Collins' *The Hunger Games*.
  b. Explain how this topic is relevant to India.
  c. Forward an arguable thesis about how *The Hunger Games* and India show similarities and/or differences regarding this topic.
  d. Visit the library or library website and begin your research process, locating credible sources that offer data, statistics, facts, and more about India and your selected topic. Use these sources to introduce your unfamiliar reading audience to the context surrounding your selected topic and India.
  e. Compare and/or contrast Panem's fictionalized and India's realized topic.
  f. Answer the "So what" question.

- The Basics:
  - This assignment would be most successful as a longer research paper, so, after more fine-tuning, I would offer it in my ENGL 102 or 235 courses. I think it could also be repurposed by courses within the Social Sciences.
  - This could be a 5-10-page paper, but, for ENGL 102 and 235, I would assign it as a 5-7-page Documented Comparison and Contrast Essay.
  - Ideally, students would have three weeks to compose the essay, and I would require preliminary work, including a graded outline.
  - The grade rubric would prioritize Purpose, Structure, Argument, Organization, Logic, Research, and Grammar/Punctuation/Mechanics.

- Finally, while I want more time to enhance this prompt, it inspires many other ideas, including reflection on US issues, an exploration of resistance organizations around the world, opportunities for students to replace India with another country they would prefer to research, and comparisons between the US and India *or another country* through the lens of dystopian fiction.

INSPIRATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While my colleagues and I were in India, we were very fortunate to visit two universities: OP Jindal Global University and Osmania University. These were especially rewarding visits since they paved the way for Montgomery College's Global Humanities Institute to solidify ties with these institutions and define new ways for MC students and faculty to experience India through Global Classrooms, Sabbaticals Abroad, and more. Selfishly, I was also excited to meet fellow English faculty at both schools, and, beyond sharing a passion for composition and literature, one colleague introduced me to an expert in Indian science fiction, Dr. Sami Ahmad Khan. He provided me with the following list of Indian science fiction novels that I could include in my next section of ENGL 235.

S. No.	Name of the Text	Author	Publisher	Year
1.	*The Last Jet Engine Laugh*	Ruchir Joshi	Harper Collins	2001
2.	*Signal Red*	Rimi Chatterjee	Penguin	2005
3.	*Generation 14*	Priya Sarukkai Chabria	Zubaan/Penguin	2008
4.	*Escape*	Manjula Padmanabhan	Picador	2008
5.	*Gods of War*	Ashok Banker	Penguin	2009
6.	*The Beast with 9 Billion Feet (YA)*	Anil Menon	Zubaan	2009
7.	*Vimana (YA)*	Mainak Dhar	Penguin	2012
8.	*Zombiestan(YA)*	Mainak Dhar	Duckbill	2012
9.	*Toke*	Jugal Mody	Harper Collins	2012
10.	*Baramulla Bomber*	Suraj C. Prasad	Niyogi	2013
11.	*The Competent Authority*	Shovon Chowdhury	Aleph	2013

In constructing this list for me, though, Dr. Khan did disclose one concern: "I must say this: SF, at least in the language I'm familiar with (English), is a fledgling field of study. From both creative and critical aspects, it isn't as developed as it is in the US. Consequently, no major film adaptations of these novels have been undertaken." Of course, this creates a minor issue for my ideal ENGL 235 course scheme, which introduces students to a novel and then its film adaptation. However, since it is my goal to globalize my course, I think that means not only adding foreign texts to my reading list but also reevaluating my current perspective of the course and the scheme I've used three times before.

It's time to reconsider the texts I introduce to my students, and that means I need to diversify the selection. It's also time to deviate from the established scheme to include more articles, unique text pairings (an Indian Dystopian Novel with an American Dystopian Film), and discussions of relevant news items. *It's time to read for fun and simply see where it takes me and how it might inspire my course redesign!*

ABOUT GLOBAL LEARNING: SOME RESPONSES

Global Self-Awareness – In traveling to India, I experienced a country, which, in many respects, was completely unlike my own. I've never needed to be thoughtful about the water I drink or food I eat. I rarely consider the trash that impacts our own local spaces. I'm often dismissive of the homeless when we cross paths. Upon our return to the US, these same topics started to manifest in high relief; they seem to matter more to me than they ever have in the past. Perhaps, it was the valuable words shared by Jayani Bonnerjee and Sucharita Sen, two of our Jindal Global University faculty contacts, that inspired this change as well. They argued the enhanced focus on global perspectives indirectly encouraged their students to overlook the local issues. In my future courses, I hope to remind my students to value their global citizenship while also using what they learn about the struggles and successes of other countries to inform their responses to and interest in shared local concerns.

Perspective Taking – Well, I'm fully aware of this truth: I'm a white American dude that needs to appreciate histories of entrenched privilege. It's challenging for me to navigate this, but I *hope* I'm at least decent about using my education, sensitivity, respect, and kindness to explore other cultures, interact with new people, and value our distinctions and similarities. In writing notes in my journal during the trip, I often caught myself making judgements that seemed rushed, baseless, unaware of contexts and I thought, "Geez, this is something you would write and get chewed out for as a college student. Erase!"

Understanding Global Systems – Right now, I still need time to address this section fully, as well as a couple others, but here's a brief thought: I was so impressed by the Jindal Global University students who participated in the conversation about American politics, and they revealed something I suppose I knew to be true but didn't fully appreciate: The United States of America is a fixture of global media. I think many of those students knew more than our own students would about American politics, Obama's administration, and Trump. They even put me to shame! I'll be honest and say I pay attention to the scary American political climate *and* Justin Trudeau. That's about it.

Knowledge Application – As an avid traveler, I am inspired by this trip to India, the conversations I've shared with colleagues, the incredible sights I've seen, the mouthwatering food (which I've started to crave again), and so much more. As an English professor at Montgomery College, I am excited to apply my travel experience to my course design, topic selection, assignment creation, and student mentoring. I want to provide an opportunity for my students to transport themselves to a new country when we read the work of an unfamiliar author, and I think my photos, personal anecdotes, and growing understanding of India will serve that ambition well. Last spring, I began this journey by applying for the opportunity to travel to India, and, in that application, I described my goal to enhance one of my favorite courses—Film and Literature—with new texts that broaden my students' cultural awareness as well as their participation in global contexts. Soon, they will be asked to navigate the beginnings of communist Russia; explore complex themes about gender, adolescence, and natural disaster in America, and unpack the paradoxes of India. Let the course redesign commence!

Global Learning Values

Global Self-Awareness: develop a mature identity with understanding of the interrelationships among the self, local and global communities, and the natural and physical world.

Perspective Taking: how one's place in the world both informs and limits one's knowledge; to understand the interrelationships between multiple perspectives.

Cultural Diversity: recognizing the origins and influences of one's cultural heritage and its limitations; understanding race, ethnicity, gender, nationhood, religion, and class.

Personal and Social Responsibility: recognizing one's responsibilities to society--locally, nationally, and globally requires developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action.

Understanding Global Systems: the complex and overlapping worldwide systems, including natural systems and human systems operating in observable patterns

Knowledge Application: integrated and systemic understanding of challenges facing cultures on the local and global levels.

AACU Value Rubrics