Travelling Fellowship report for the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

ONLY CONNECT

Dispatches from around the world

Africa, Asia, South America, Antipodes, Middle East

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Further related writing and photography can be found at my website

© Photograph by Anita Sethi: Butterfly in Singapore

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Photograph by Anita Sethi

Flower in Bay of Plenty, New Zealand

CONNECTING: How I have shared my Travelling Fellowship experiences

Below is a summary of places where my fellowship has been credited, and those where I have communicated knowledge gained throughout my fellowship travels:

WEBSITE MAGAZINE PROJECT

I have continued to add new material to my website magazine, building new sections under **Cultural Adventures, Eco-Adventures, Travelling Fellowship**. I have also founded the new website magazine 'Global Dispatches / World of Stories' www.globaldispatches.co.uk. My websites are organic and evolving, and use various forms of expression – articles, blog, and photography - to reflect the places visited from a myriad of perspectives. I have established contacts overseas who are contributing guest material. My project has thus benefited communities including the "internet community".

Audience: I have reached an audience of over **40, 000** through my website projects.

PUBLIC SPEAKING AND EVENTS

An enthusiastic public speaker, I have presented my research at relevant conferences. My solo event at the **Hay Festival** received a good review, with the *Daily Telegraph* writing:

> **"Anita's Adventures in Wonderlands were worth it for the stories she picked up along the way.** She says her "wonderlands" are not only about the countries she has seen but the places you imagine in your head and most importantly the wonder in the journey, no matter how tough. Key line: "Everyday, no matter how tired you are, you have to write down the details of what you saw that day before they vanish. The discipline of documentation is essential to travel writing."

I also appeared as a highlighted speaker at **How the Light Gets In festival** in June 2011, and in Autumn 2011 shall be appearing at the **South Asian Literature Festival** and the **Manchester Literature Festival.** I have interviewed author and travel writer Paul Theroux at **London's Southbank Centre,** discussing issues related to travel.

Audience: I have reached a live audience of over **500 people** through speaking events.

PRINT AND BROADCAST MEDIA

I have written articles about topics explored during my travels in ***The Guardian, The National, New Statesman*****,** been reviewed in the ***Daily Telegraph*****,** and been Interview of the Week in the Indian newspaper, ***Yentha***. In broadcasting I have spoken about my travels on the **BBC World Service** and **Resonance FM.**

Audience: I have reached an estimated audience of over **1 million people** through print and broadcast media.

ONLY CONNECT
Around the World in Stories

Introduction: Aims and Background of my Travelling Fellowship

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is what it takes to sit down and listen" - Winston Churchill

During my travelling fellowship, I encountered numerous forms of human connection, from the traditional to the modern, from the religious to the technological. I sent tweets from a bus travelling between Nairobi and Mombassa and Skyped whilst in a remote backwater of the Indian ocean. I listened to young girls wearing hijab describe why they loved blogging. I watched an Indian guru demonstrate how (he believed) we could connect to God through mastering special breathing techniques. I have long been fascinated with forms of connection around the world, and the many ways in which storytelling can be used to connect across the gulfs of cultures and continents. Along the way, I heard vast and exhilarating forms of storytelling whilst also encountering ways in which people are prohibited from sharing their stories; those who cannot connect - and it is this which was a key concern of my project.

I heard people communicate through multiple different languages including Swahili, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Chinese, Tamil, Spanish, English, and through the wordless communication of body language: the universal communication of hugs and handshakes, laughter or tears. As I travelled I became greatly more attuned to the subtleties and nuances of human connection: how a shake of the head in India can mean an affirmative rather than negative; how the left hand is not used in the Islamic world for financial transactions; and of course throughout the strict Islamic world how the body must be covered in accordance with religious and cultural traditions. The complexities of connection in different parts of the world is at the heart of my project.

I connected from one place to another via many means of transport, with eco-friendly travel a key concern, travelling overland where possible by train, bus, rickshaw and over sea by ferry. Much of the world is missed through flying, also ecologically destructive and I aspired to chronicle the subtle, changing diversity of people and place and the eco-

friendliness of an overland journey. I travelled by matatu through the bustling streets of Nairobi as local songs blared out; I took the overnight bus from Nairobi to Mombassa, reaching the Kenyan coast as morning broke. I sat on the back of a camel with a local from Mombassa as we bumpily road upon the sand with the life of the sparkling blue Indian Ocean teeming around us. I was a passenger on a motorcycle as a local Maldivian drove me around Male; a poignant journey as he pointed out the places where his friends had died in the tsunami. I sailed by speedboat across the churning sea. I took a train through the vast landscape of New Zealand to arrive in the Bay of Plenty for Christmas.

Since I began my career as a journalist and writer, means of communicating have changed, moving from print to online and I aimed to capture the stories I gathered in newer mediums; online via a website magazine, blogs, as well as the visual story of photograph slideshows. Winston Churchill would surely be turning in his grave if he could witness the attenuation of print journalism. As print space is cut down, the web offers more space and it is vital to use it to encourage the exploration of complex ideas and debate. Journalism and literature can change the way a mind thinks, and by extension, help to change the world. My aim was to research stories from around the world, and explore new ways of conveying those stories, including an online writing platform featuring global dispatches.

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen", said Churchill. Churchill's maxim aptly summarises my two-pronged approach: dispatching as I travelled, whilst also engaging in intensive study of the people and places to which I travelled, absorbing, gathering, collating the wealth of stories and knowledge along the way as well as establishing crucial connections with locals in each country with whom a dialogue could continue online even when we had parted ways.

As I travelled, communication did not only become a means but the story itself.

Unheard voices

I am extremely interested in capturing stories from the unreported world, including those voices which go unheard in the mainstream media. The written and spoken words are powerful organs for moulding and expressing opinion. Yet, in far too many countries (both East and West) it is another means of oppression, of maintaining systems of injustice and silencing the pain of the people. It takes great courage to speak out. I have long been interested in writing and journalistic practices in countries whose output is limited whether

through censorship (such as Iran or Iraq) or through poor resources and facilities (such as Africa and parts of South America). In 2007 I travelled through Iran and was struck by the levels of censorship; the contrast to the freedom of expression we often take for granted. Visiting Guyana in 2004, I encountered the poor literacy rates: there is no publishing house in the country, for example. I also read many stories in local newspapers around the world that failed to make it into mainstream foreign reportage.

Oppression of the media is linked with other forms of oppression: of women, the rich over the poor, of children. There is a wealth of voices which ought to be heard which will bring real benefit to the UK community. I throughout studied world affairs, literature, politics and history - as an understanding of the past helps to shed light on the present day world in which we live. It is a far cry from the glittering wealth of the Traveller's Club Pall Mall, London, or the safety of a newspaper office, to the poverty and obscurity of the man I met flogging sunhats outside Borobudur Temple, Indonesia, who beseeched: "Remember me, my name Ingar". I aimed through my project for some of those voices from the margins to be heard and remembered.

I left England with the objective of gaining greater knowledge of international writing and journalism whist working on specific stories. Conferences I aimed to attend included the Storymoja Festival 2010 in Nairobi which explored African storytelling traditions through an array of writers and speakers. Kenya is my father's birthplace but a place I have never until now had the opportunity to visit, and know little about my family history. Limited media is a symptom of this wider dearth in recorded facts, including those about heritage. This lack of knowledge about one's own past is shared by many and I believe that illuminating ways to understand where we are from will bring great benefit to the multiethnic UK community.

"The past is a foreign country", said LP Hartley and one important strand of my fellowship was to venture to the country where my father was born yet where I had never been, along the way researching the histories of Africa, India, South America and England which form part of my ancestral story of travel.

I found that it was important to keep open-minded to unexpected stories along the way. Places which were initially mere stopovers on my journey, such as Singapore, proved rich in stories directly relevant to my project as I encountered the fascinating Indian diaspora in

the “Little India” area, and understood more about the diasporic elements of my own history.

Understanding the stories of those far from us can bring insight into our own selves and community. Through sharing voices, journalism and literature can help to expand minds. I aimed to break down the rigid boundaries separating not only people but also disciplines. As Churchill's diverse interests show, disciplines overlap: journalism and literature are sister forms; politics becomes interwoven with the personal. This trip also crucially benefited my own skills and development as a writer. As much as I have been connecting with people and places far from me, a strand of my fellowship has also been to connect with the missing pieces of my own history. “Only connect”, said E M Forster and as I travelled the world on my fellowship I found ever more empowering means of connecting.

Throughout this report, I reflect upon what I have learnt throughout my fellowship, and discuss ways in which knowledge and best practices observed overseas might bring benefit to UK communities.

I am including this essay published in Granta online magazine, as it provides background information into the ideas behind my project of 'connecting':

ESSAYS & MEMOIR | ANITA SETHI

Only Connect

Begin Call

'Only connect!' beseeched E.M. Forster. Could Mr Forster have envisaged a world in which one person connected with another, thousands of miles away, through free video and voice calls, instant messages and file sharing, via a computer and broadband internet connection and a company called Skype? Humans are now so freely connected through computers as to cause consternation to governments like those of Russia and China.

Skype is on a mission to 'enable the world's conversations,' says its President, Josh Silverman. 'Allowing the world to communicate for free empowers and links people and communities everywhere,' he believes. The etymology of the word 'conversation' is 'act of living with', or 'to live with, keep company with'. But does Skype improve or impair that capacity for good human connection? How are conversations and thus relationships and identities changing in the age of Skype, as so many of us now have online presences?

Stemming from a wider curiosity (which has been encouraged by Skype and new technology), I want to connect with those far from me, researching for long-lost relatives, scattered family overseas, and friends and strangers, too. I want to learn more about how they might pass each day; their ideas about the world; the texture not only of their

voices but of their lives. Indeed, I want to get back to the etymological root meaning of that word, conversation. The fundamental impossibility of being in two places at once has driven me to communicate virtually, and now to delve beneath the hype about Skype. Only connect, I think, as I begin Skyping. Far from being alone in my internet stirrings, there are currently 12, 868, 311 people online at the same time as me. There we have it – the breathing human and the virtual, in two places at once.

It is 1:03 a.m. in Sydney and the middle of the afternoon here in England. A white tick against a green background tells me that I am connected. I am 'keeping company' with those also bearing this status. 'This is the best time to be using Skype, as I get to chat to people overseas,' explains a long-lost Australian acquaintance, whom I'll call 'Ash'. Hearing his voice with all its quirks of accent elevates the communication from the brief exchange of written instant messages. The novelty is also in being able to see the person in glorious three-dimensionality, as well as hear their voices. I can see in the background the place where they live; the colours of the walls and pictures which adorn it – a glimpse of their context. For this is all we get in the virtual world: glimpses. I can see the expression on the face as they are talking and am more carefully attuned to it. As I listen to a tale of heartbreak unfold, hearing how Ash was cheated on by a girlfriend, I watch his face as it shows anger, upset, resignation, pensiveness, hurt, humour, a spectrum of human emotion passing over it in the space of just over an hour, as swift as an interplay of clouds passing through the sky, now overcast, now bright. Skype exhibits how much of communication is non-verbal (although the visual and phonic are allowed, touch and smell are of course still excluded). This becomes important with rather monosyllabic acquaintances, or those who have greater facility with the spoken than written word.

To what extent are these exchanges close to 'living with' (that etymological root of conversation) or actually a form of detachment; a pseudo-version of 'to live with/keep company with' and thus an inadequate substitute for the real thing? The performativity of the experience is in some respects akin to watching real-life television; an unfolding soap opera in which the players are not fictional. However, this is no television programme. At times, I am spooked by the experience. The connection is patchy and Ash's blurred face breaks, as if it is a scifi movie and the pixels are about to disperse. His mouth cracks open and then the screen freezes, with an elongated black hole where his mouth should be. The frozen moment.

The screen freeze-frames a particular expression, that of the jilted lover, etching into the mind a mood that, were Ash in my presence, I may not even have noticed. Thus is the paradox of Skype; being at once removed and yet brought closer to seeing and

comprehending through these strange glitches and hiatuses, the mobility of the human face and emotion it carries. As he scratches his head, the screen suddenly stops, leaving his image there, hand raised aloft – pensiveness freeze-framed. I have learnt about his life; work, love, education. There has been more knowledge exchanged in this conversation than in the previous twenty-something years of our lives.

But these glitches can also be just that – frustrating ruptures in the flow of conversation, breaking the illusion of closeness. Skype freezes at a crucial moment in the plot story of fraught romance. As he is explaining the complexities of his love triangle, the screen suddenly plunges into silence and blacks out. 'Hello,' I bellow, wondering whose side this mishap is on. The sound begins again but he is now caught up in the flow of the story and already sailed on, sketching characters and incidents, so I must pause him and tell him to rewind, go back to the moment when. . .

It is not only across oceans that Skype connects, but with people in the next room, as I discovered through an excited ten year old, who ushers me next door, eager to experiment with talking virtually. But it's another patchy connection and when I re-enter the room, I hear my voice on the sound system as a tinny droning and my body is elongated. The experience is uncanny. It is the eerie sense of viewing a thing both alive yet not alive; or stepping into a fun-house hall of mirrors; the self distorted. The inherent comedy of the situation is appreciated by children: as the webcam works for a few moments, the key instinct is to exaggerate what is already distorted – to pull funny faces. The webcam has been recording and has forever captured the hyperbolic sticking out of tongues, rolling eyes and clownish grins.

The new generation is learning the language of these communications even in childhood and are taught of the dangers of allowing the private and public realms to overlap, the need for online protection. The way we adjust Privacy settings, allowing only a portion of our private world to be viewed, can also be a reflection of personality and identity: the sensible; the paranoid; the open and closed mentality; the small and wide social circle. Should I be myself or assume a cyber identity? This latter choice is not applicable to video chatting on Skype, of course. There is no hiding one's true appearance behind a cartoon sketch or image of a politician or popstar (there is, of course, the option of putting a paper bag over one's head during the video conversation if one does not wish to be seen, or just utilizing Skype as a telephone rather than as a video-cam). There remain manifold dangers of identity confusion, with multiple people of the same name, and no need to upload a photograph - as I discovered when searching for a long lost cousin in India. I am excited by the prospect of having found him, but how can I verify that I have the right

'Sanjeev'? Via instant message (he doesn't have webcam), I ask questions about mutual family and for his nickname. He cannot answer. He replies. 'If that is your wish, then I am. I am whoever you want me to be.' Cyberspace indeed offers a frightening capacity to be whoever we want to be.

Reciprocity can be difficult to read in the complex tangle of human relationships: was a glance a sign to proceed or retreat? Is the relationship now defunct? But there are many tools that more ostensibly exhibit reciprocity – or unreciprocity – on multimedia functions; being followed on Twitter and yet not following back, for example, or using 'Limited Profile' on Facebook, or 'Blocking' people.

The implications for the democratization of communication are clear in the very way that Skype is being censored by those opposing democracy. Reuters recently reported that Russia's most powerful big business lobby has declared Skype a threat to national security and is working to regulate it. In October 2008, news broke that China has been monitoring and censoring politically sensitive words sent over Skype. Skype is free to those with broadband connection, enabling instantaneous communication between remote regions. But that other kind of 'free', the freedom of the written and spoken word, of the press, is a key limitation for non-democracies, thus Skype and services like it are being targeted for a clamp-down.

But is technology anthropologist Stefana Broadbent right to suggest, as she did in July this year, that a 'democratization of intimacy' has occurred? She also pointed out the eroded compartmentalization of work and family life. Skype has indeed woven multi-faceted, overlapping functions for itself. Whilst it is light entertainment for some, where funny faces might be pulled, for others it is a life-line and even a method of parenting.

Non-verbal communication becomes even more paramount when communicating with a child, for whom concentration spans are short and gestures and tactility are foremost. With high divorce rates and globalization, there is a new generation of 'Skype Daddies' and Skype children, who will know their parents primarily through their presence in their computer screen. Not for these children the touch of the human body – instead these Skype kids must learn a new kind of affection, dispensed virtually. Affection must be wired into the consciousness in new ways, not by touch, but by the intonation of voice, the observation of a kindly expression.

There is no denying that despite bringing me closer to some people, there is still the sense of a chasm, a loneliness leaking through these online messages, a heightened sense of the

person being there and yet not there, a ghostly absent presence. Being in two places at once has been achieved – but at a non-monetary cost. Still, Skype is liberating me in my quest to connect with family and people I might not otherwise ever meet. Through Skype, I am cementing broken connections. I hear stories of how, in the time since our last being in touch, one has had a brain operation; another, a car crash; for another, life is 'hard but good'. Online as I type is an old travelling companion in Ireland; a lost university acquaintance; and a relative in a village in Berbice, Guyana. It is sunset there, he tells me via instant message, and he is closing up his gas station for the day. 'Only connect!' remains an important philosophy, and we must keep learning how to do so in ever more effective ways…

But wait, excuse me for a moment, for as I type, somebody is calling me. Our words are connected across oceans as we swap tales of life in London and Berbice.

Then the screen flickers and our voices vanish.

* * * * *

Mapping the World : Itinerary

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANITA SETHI

During the course of planning and preparing for my trip, I voraciously looked at maps, gaining a greater sense of the size and contours of the world I was going to travel around. I visited the Magnificent Maps exhibition at the British Library where I inspected an astonishing array of maps from ancient times to the present day including the largest atlas in the world - which was taller than me. Maps of all sizes, colours, and shapes filled the exhibition halls, some so intricate and ornate that they looked like works of art in themselves. The exhibition was divided into maps that were at the time designed to be displayed in public and those in private inner sanctums. The maps from colonial times showed England, and its centre of power, London, to be disproportionately large on the scale of things, fringed with gold. Some maps detailed territory names that no longer exist, in others one could see disputed borders. Maps designed by ruling powers showed a clear political agenda.

I looked at the maps of the countries and continents which are part of my ancestral history: England, Europe, Kenya, Africa, India, Guyana, South America. I looked at the ways in which these chunks of land floating on the sea have changed over the decades: how "British East Africa/ the Protectorate" has become Kenya; how British Guiana has become Guyana; how the new country of Pakistan was formed.

Things have progressed very far since the days of those early mappings of the world by imperial rulers. I begin to plot out my path on Google Maps, where anybody can create their own personal map of the world, add in their destinations or dreamed off destinations. The internet has played a democratising part in re-considering notions of where the centre of power might lie. As I grew increasingly excited about the possibilities, and filled in the details of my itinerary, I also met obstacles to my grand plan: mainly that its ambition would need to be scaled down.

It was fascinating discovering as I researched the most cost-effective and eco-friendly means of travelling just how much certain parts of the world are more cut off than those firmly on the tourist trail; how flying between countries which are geographically much closer to each other was actually more expensive than return flights to the UK, for example, and the great cost of internal travel within the vast continent of South America: flying between Bogota and Georgetown, for example, was the same price as return flights to the UK.

This caused me to revise my original itinerary into a more realistic route; the many places in South America would have to be cut down. However, in the limitations there also arose unexpected nut fruitful new opportunities and routes: in the end the most effective way of travelling was a round the world ticket which enabled me to tailor-make the trip within a certain milage. "**Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm",** said Winston Churchill - and indeed what seems like a curtailment of the original plan actually opened up new adventures: I factored in a trip to the Maldives and Kerala, expanding my explorations of the Indian Ocean which I gained through a visit to Mombassa, acquiring a huge insight into the power and limitations of storytelling in one of the most vulnerable countries on the planet, a place recently moved from dictatorship to democracy. With an oral storytelling tradition many are also now exploring the best ways of recording history from generation to generation. Here is a place where the map of the world is at the very forefront of the mind: for example, the

President of the Maldives has been investigating possible places to relocate the Maldivian people should sea levels rise to such an extent that the islands are no longer habitable; here is a place so vulnerable that it might one day be washed off the map. Giving a workshop in a school in the Maldives I met with many fresh perspectives and ideas about the environment and climate change that we in the UK would benefit from listening to as we too must learn how to best look after the fragile eco-systems in which we live, at danger from carbon emissions and global warming.

"The past is a foreign country", said LP Hartley and what maps do we have to navigate that? There are the stories we are told about it and those that history tells us. The foreign country of the past was one territory of my journey as I travelled to the lands of my ancestors, and it was fascinating throughout exploring the juxtaposition of historical versions of places - and meeting these places for myself in all the force and colour of the present day.

KENYA: Dreams from my Father

"We are fixed and certain only when we are movement" -Thomas Wolfe.

It is September, the first Autumn leaves in London have reddened and begun to fall as the tube rumbles towards Heathrow, Terminal 5. I am ready to leave London and establish connections not through the virtual means of Skype or Twitter or telephone but in person. My first stop is Kenya, the country where my father was born and grew up but where I have never yet been. I shall visit Nairobi where I will search for the house where my father, uncles and aunt spent their childhood - an element of connecting to my personal history. I shall also attend the Storymoja Festival, and interview writers including Benjamin Zephaniah and a host of international writers from Kenya, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Uganda who have written about topics including genocide, illegal abortion, and tribe warfare.

The plane wings glint in the autumn light, and as we rise through the air, London falls away beneath me until its buildings and motorways fade to a mere speck and then vanish. And yet, as I leave England geographically I feel it growing closer to me, in the mind, as I contemplate the visit to my father's childhood house: will the house still be there? Will it be the same? How will it feel visiting it? How will the experience change my own perspective? And in what ways is heritage, and our understanding of our ethnic origins, important to us? As the UK becomes increasingly multicultural, to what extent does it benefit the wider community having an understanding of the long journey which brought many immigrants to England? I am conscious of my need to understand the past in order to better understand the situation of the present. The aircraft is one of the emptiest I have been on, the seats next to me, empty, reinforcing that this is not a hugely popular tourist destination. On the plane, the song "Goodbye, England" by Laura Marling plays. Soon one culture gives way to another as the sound of Kenyan music filters through Jomo Kenyatta airport.

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Filling in the jigsaw: an overview of my Kenyan adventures

I listen to the Kenyan music echoing around Jomo Kenyatta airport, soothing as I wait for the conveyor belt to churn out my luggage. Dotted throughout this area of the airport are African sculptures. I walk through customs and see a crowd gathered waiting for the latest

arrivees. There are placards and pieces of paper held up with names written on them; people meeting each other for the first time here in the airport with no other identifying details but the recognition of their name. I peer among the crowd but cannot see my name in the sea of writing, in the mass of people. I walk throughout the length and breadth of the area, people approach me offering to change money, offering lifts in cars. I peer at the placards and then I feel a shiver of recognition as I see the words ANITA SETHI, black letters written with thick pen on the paper. There waiting patiently with my name held aloft is a man named Moses who works with the Storymoja project, who has kindly come to collect me and waiting with him is Ryan Lewis from San Francisco who is another delegate who will be staying in the same house with me. We all breathe a little more deeply with relief that we are now united - we, from three different countries - finally united. My first glimpse of Nairobi is under cover of the night, driving along the relatively empty highways and to writer and publisher Muthoni's house.

It was quite a momentous occasion for me setting foot in Nairobi as this was the country that filled in a missing piece in my geographical jigsaw of heritage. Filling in pieces in the jigsaw of a story (whether a real story or a fictional story) will be a theme throughout my trip in a number of ways. Ryan is a representative here from the fascinating 826 Valencia project, founded by writer Dave Eggers, which teaches children to make a book their own book within 2 hours. In the first 24 hours I spend in Kenya, the project has been working out the logistics of how to make the book with the facilities here (accessing a photocopier for example). It's a project that started in the US and there are now multiple branches around the US with a lot of outreach work and field trips. I spent part of my first day in the Storymoja offices in Spring Valley with Ryan from the book-making project and various other festival attendees, where I saw the enormous amount of work which goes on behind the scenes of fitting such events together - juggling sessions and rotas and venues and such like into the enticing whole.

Stories from Unheard Voices. I have also been reading the books for the multiple events I am chairing as some of the books are not available in England or are still in manuscript form - these are truly stories from the unreported world. I will be meeting and interviewing authors from countries including Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria who have written about topics including genocide, illegal abortion, and tribe warfare.

Travelling with locals is, I find, the best way to travel and with Millie and Claudette, two university students, I take a public bus or "matutu"; with loud music blazing out of the bus and bodies packed tightly together we travel through the streets of Kenya. The next

few weeks will indeed be a thrilling ride through stories, ideas and music, from Kenya and around the world.

The Railway Children

"Nowhere is it ordained that history moves in a straight line" - Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*

"We cannot escape history" - Abraham Lincoln

Once upon a time, before Nairobi existed at all, before the gleaming high rise hotels and global company headquarters of multinational businesses sprung up in its skyline, before it was transformed into a railway town, there was in its place a mere swamp.

Then, in 1899 a supply depot of the Ugandan Railway was built. The area proved a fruitful location for life because its rivers could be a source of water for the camp, and it was well positioned between Mombassa and Kampala. What was once a mere swamp became the bustling railway headquarters. In 1907 Nairobi became the capital of "British East Africa", the British protectorate and became the first stop for British colonialists exploring the area. Now that this was the hub of activity, human hands were needed to labour on the train-lines, to keep the wheels turning, to build something glorious. Indentured labourers were imported by the British from India, to work on the railways.

My grandfather, Pyare Lal Sethi, arrived from India and worked for the East African Railways and Harbours Company. The trains became known locally as "The Lunatic Express". The city's expansion, however, angered the Massai and Kikuyu people inciting the Mau Mau rebellion and it was during these tempestuous political times that my father, aunts and uncles grew up. Meanwhile tensions simmered and finally explored; with pressure mounting, the British relinquished their rule, and in 1963 when Kenya gained Independence from the British, my grandfather's job was Africanized which caused the dispersal of the family, some heading for India, others for that jewel in the imperial crown, England.

2010, Ngara. It is over a hundred years since the first railway depot grew out of that swamp and I am now venturing through the Ngara district of Nairobi, in search of the Railway Quarters where my father spent his childhood. I drive past markets teeming with life, rubbled roads, all baking beneath the hot afternoon sun. The people I stop and ask

for directions have not heard of “Park Road” and shake their head blankly. Things which once existed had now vanished; blind spots of history. One man has, though, heard of the Railway Quarters although it appears there might be more than one area known as “The Railway Quarters”. I arrive at what seems like near-identical looking houses. I clutch the piece of paper now growing hot and clammy in my hands bearing the address of 39a Railway Quarters, Ngara, near Park Road; other nearby personal landmarks include the primary school City High School and secondary school called Jamhuri High School (then called Duke of Gloucester School in line with the prevalent colonial names of the time).

“There is the railway quarters”, says a man his hand outstretched and we follow the path, with Ryan making helpful suggestions and peer out at the numbers until we find “39”. So this is it. Or might be it. I inspect the photograph I have of uncles and cousins outside the house and show Ryan.

“This is definitely it”, he says, looking from the photograph to the the actual house: “Look there are the same windows and the same structure”.

I breathe a sigh of relief, reassured by another pair of verifying eyes.

The house has what looks like a corrugated iron roof, walls made of pale chocolate-coloured stone, a red door, and a dark green sign with the white numerals “39”. One window is slightly ajar but there is no sign of any movement inside. So what does it mean then, this house, which is connected to my own history? What is the significance of its bricks and mortar? Of course, it is not only the house itself but the life that went on inside it, and the life of the town which teemed around it. I imagine here on this flattened dry grass beneath the burning sun, my father as a small boy, and my uncles, aunts and grandparents. I imagine the rumble of the ground as a train approached nearby. I imagine the daily walk to the local school, through a neighbourhood largely segregated along racial lines.

Ryan takes a photograph of me standing outside the house. The present moment now meets the past.

RAILWAY QUARTERS, NAIROBI

The strongest sense I have is of the stark contrast between the reality before me and the image I had in my head. The image in my mind, conjured by childhood stories, is of a more capacious house with a hammock, full of the bustle of life, of an idyllic scene. I did not imagine the the levels of poverty. Reality - and the myths of the past we carry in our minds (LP Hartley's "the past is a foreign country") are often two separate things.

I first heard those stories of the past in bedtime tales my father told, some which featured the landscape of the past. They were stories heard in snatches and fragments during the sporadic weekends that we visited my father's house, since my parents divorced when I was about five years old. These stories featured typical childhood pranks among the many siblings, and a life lived largely outdoors beneath the generous sun. How much of these stories were real? How much was embellished for the entertainment of young children? How much was embroidered over by my own imagination, listening to these tales of the past, as I did, alongside adventure tales that were in my father's house, books such as Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels and fairytales such as a fat pale pink edition of Grimm's Tales? So, it was in my father's house in Stretford, Manchester, that I first imagined his old house, not the one he had left, but the very first one, the one in which he was born, thousands of miles away from Stretford's persistent drizzle. Thinking back to those early stories, juxtaposed with the adventure stories and fairytales, it strikes me how much we yearn to make an ordered narrative of our own lives - and our ancestors' lives - one in which we can turn the pages so that events follow events in an ordered fashion.

However, as is the case in many immigrant narratives, my sense of the story of the past was fragmented.

Reading Barack Obama's autobiography, *Dreams From My Father,* in my mid-20s was revelatory: here was the President of the United States himself who could write in a candid manner about the pains and confusion of parenthood; the complexities passed down from one generation to the next; all the dreams and fears which are an unspoken part of our inheritance. Instead of shying from the story of the past, it was one that could be confronted and explored - by taking an actual journey, through travelling to make a difference. Separated families in the culture in which I grew up were more stigmatized then they are today; more of a taboo subject and I was not encouraged to talk openly about it; thus, the complex, often messy business of personal history grew to weigh heavily in the mind as it was not explored openly. As I entered my twenties, however, I could see how the past could shape the present, how patterns of thought and behaviour could be replayed, sometimes quite subconsciously. I never visited Kenya or India during my childhood and it was under my own impetus that I did so; until then the landscapes remained as stories, mythical lands, missing pieces in a jigsaw.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", said George Santayana. Paradoxically, by being aware of one's own history, one is more free of it. I felt a duty to learn from the past, its virtues and vices, and move forward into a future where mistakes are not repeated; to ensure progress is made in history rather than stagnation or regression.

As we made our way out from the Railway Quarters and on to the main street to inspect the street stalls, a missing piece of my jigsaw had slotted into place.

I am free to come to the country and leave as I choose (finances and such like permitted of course) and it is this freedom now, that often we so take for granted, which is at the forefront of my mind as I contemplate how and why my forefathers left this land.

The way I leave: I get back into the taxi with Ryan and we make our way back; through Ngara, past the market stalls and ramshackle houses; on through the traffic stopped still and heavy in the hot sun. Ryan will leave for San Francisco. I will be leaving for the next stage of this adventure.

How they left, in the 1960s: it was not entirely a free decision for many Indians to leave Kenya, since in 1963 when the country gained Independence, many people who had

British passports were not allowed to continue in their jobs. Although they had been brought over by the British to work in jobs including building that "Lunatic Express", the train from Nairobi to Kampala, along with many other jobs, the decline of the British rule would mean the devaluing of that passport and would prompt the next stage of their journey; away from Kenya and to England itself. [1]

It was the 60s when my own father arrived in England, now in my mind carrying the mythical £5 note he has told me about, his entire funds (whether this is an exaggeration or not, the point is that funds were scarce). England is a country whose culture had been transplanted many thousands of miles away evident for example in education with such named schools as Duke of Gloucester and yet it was a country whose soil he and many of the Indian refugees were to step onto for the first time.

The trains were to continue to chug through the story of the next generation as he went on to work for train companies, living in the north of England, and settling in Manchester, far from the heat and instead under the rainy skies, but a city also on the brink of change, a city which was at the heart of industrialization. The mode of travel is thus part of the story of the reason for travel at all.

This was a generation of Indians who knew about leaving things behind the hard way; not through choice but of necessity. These were a generation who knew how significant the colour not only of the skin, but of the passport, proved to be.

How has this journey changed me? Not only the journey itself, but also the opportunity to reflect upon it through writing this report, has changed my thinking, perspective and ideas in a number of ways. There are some moments, when you suddenly feel the whole weight of history in that moment; the thousands of miles which have preceded you standing in the place you are standing; the millions of seconds; the countless words spoken in multiple languages; the meals eaten; the rice grown; the fields tilled; the soil watered; the skin cleaned and scrubbed; the hours toiled to make a living. There are some moments when you feel the weight of history bearing down on a moment and feel the invisible connections between the past and present, between yourself and your ancestors and that moment - standing in front the house of a pale-chocolate colour with a faded blood-red door, in the midst of the sweltering African heat - that moment was one of them. Then the moment passes and you are looking at where you have just come from, where you are, and the future: a blank slate to be written, a journey to be mapped.

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[1] Many thanks to an article in the archives of the *New York Review of Books,* "The Lost Indians of Kenya", published 1971, for background information on Kenyan Indians

Eco-trip to NAKURU: **Connecting with Nature**

With the weight of human history in the mind, its wars and ethnic clashes, its long journeys, and with some insight gained into how we humans hang together (or hang separately), it is instructive to journey into nature to see how the delicate eco-system maintains itself. In contrast to the smog and skyscraper sky line, I visited the Nakuru National Park.

Starlings, egrets, hippos, deer, water buffalo, zebras, and one lion curled up in a tree all made themselves seen during my trip to Nakuru.

It was a two and a half hour drive from Nairobi to Nakuru, home of the National Park which is mainly advertised for its flamingo and I spend many hours enchanted by searching for our feathered friends. The flamingos remained tantalising throughout the trip - not at first visible at all. Then, as we drove on through the rubble-filled roads, they appeared as the faintest smudge of colour, a shadow of pink in the horizon, a horizon which we never quite knew how close we would actually reach.

In the meantime, there was plenty to distract the mind from the thought of flamingos. There was the appearance of a heron, its large neck stretched out so it appeared a sliver of silver in the green.

Then there were birds the like of which I did not know a name for but turned out to be egrets.

A tiny bright blue starling fluttered by so fleetingly.

Cheek by jowl (quite literally) with the miniscule was the mammoth - the largest mammal I have seen so far in my years on planet earth: a huge hippo. The hippo is significant here, and indeed is used as a symbol in the Storytelling festival itself.

Then there they were - close enough to see the very spread of their wings as pelicans swooped and dove amidst the pink astonishment of colour. Flamingos. Everywhere.

Up and on to the highest summit, Out of Africa viewing point, where a picnic spot meant we could tuck into the bread and cheese and water we had brought with us from the supermarket nearby the offices. Later that evening we watch the actual film Out of Africa, and it is fascinating to have seen the actual landscape which so inspired the famous film as well as to have heard some lesser well-known stories from Kenya.

Throughout I was delighted to have brought with me the camera I initially feared being too heavy, for its zoom is fantastic and picked out the tiniest wrinkle on the grey hippo skin, the brilliance of the blue feather which suddenly spread open, the very eye of the lion as it gazed upon us, the nuances of the changes of light, fading into a deep blood red and then draining out of the sky as we stayed in the park until closing time, something new to spot at every turn. It was a trip through which I learnt to be more attuned to detail and more concentrated and focussed on the present-moment: I quite literally changed my perspective.

The drive there and back entailed passing the Great Rift Valley and we stopped off to admire the vast landscape of heights and depths rolling away into the horizon and were approached by a man selling curiosities which I inspect; miniature versions of the

landscape we are looking at; tiny ornaments of the Great Rift Valley which you can fit into your pocket and forever have with you; as well as basketfuls of wooden animals.

We also take a boat trip along the fresh water lake, Lake Naivasha, northwest of Nairobi, and sailing along I glimpse water buffalo and hippos galore and feel a sense of wonder to be so close to so many creatures I have seen for the first time. As part of my eco-adventures it is particularly fascinating to see an organic garden, and hear gardening techniques and why these eco-friendly means are so important. Gazing upon the delicious-looking beds of tomato, lettuce, and cauliflower, for us to take heed of such environmentally friendly ways of living would bring great benefits to the UK.

KENYA: CONFERENCES AND EVENTS ATTENDED
Connecting through Conversations

The events in which I participated in Kenya offered the thought-provoking opportunity to view personal experience in a wider political context, for example discussing people's thoughts about the new Kenyan constitution, issues of political corruption, and the role of religion. I listened to a debate chaired by Rob Macaire the British High Commissioner to Kenya, examining the lives of Muslims in Kenya and Britain, featuring a panel including the CEO of Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance, Hassan Ole Naado. I also participated in a session about how new media and technology are influencing the way we communicate and becoming new outlets for writers to convey their ideas. I was judge and chair of a very popular Twitter competition which received 26, 000 entries around the theme of To Be African, and also appeared as a panellist, sharing ideas with local Kenyans in a Creative Enterprise panel.

An audience with writer Benjamin Zephaniah: 'The aerodynamic tongue'

"The aerodynamic tongue" was a phrase in one of the many powerful poems read out by Benjamin Zephaniah in a session I chaired with him. His performance inspired delighted laughter from the packed out audience both young and old.

His biography wove its way through his performance, from his father telling him to "be a man" and his comic refutal of this, to leaving school aged 13, his stints in prison where he decided to direct his energies away from destructive acts and towards the creative act of poetry and campaigning for the rights of humans and animals. I have been particularly interested in his experiences of delinquency and how he escaped this.

Prizes are also a theme in his life: there was the time that he was let out of prison to appear on TV accepting a prize from Cliff Richard; and that award he rejected - the OBE in 2003. As Zephaniah well knows, literary prizes are not always the sign of merit, and Zephaniah insisted to a youngster in the audience who asked for advice to always remember that their own writing was just as important as any published author.

By the end of the session, Zephaniah had the whole audience singing, "Don't Worry Be Happy", and also demonstrated some Kung Fu fighting.

One question at the heart of the discussion was the power of oral storytelling, something Zephaniah champions, and is of course so resonant here in Africa where stories, myths, and legends have a long history of being shared in the spoken word.

MEETING WRITERS IN KENYA

The creative enterprises in Kenya

The "aerodynamic tongue", to use Benjamin Zephaniah's phrase, was also demonstrated in the British Council Marquee, where I moderated a British Council panel on the Creative Industries. At the heart of the session was the pressing question: how can one make one's passion into a profitable living? A couple of quotes to fortify the will recurred throughout the session relevant to people starting out anywhere in the world:

"Ever tried? Ever Failed? No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail better" - Samuel Beckett

"Genius is 99 per cent perspiration. One percent inspiration" - Thomas Edison.

"The faster we fail the more we learn", said one panellist. "Take everything as a gift". We also discussed the importance of blogs to both spread your voice and meet people who share your interests. A panellist pointed out that it is important to mix with those not in

the creative industries, too, for example he hosted an event attended by farmers which proved insightful: just as the soil is tilled until it is fit for growing things in it, so creative ideas will come when the soil is fertile enough. Another lesson emphasized throughout was: "Never give up; what ever you do; never give up".

I asked audience members to share their hopes and dreams for the future and what they had learnt from the session and some of the responses are detailed below:

Dreams: Lady from a theatre and performing arts company

"Since I joined the performing arts it's been my dream not to restrain myself to one art form. When I do a project I do it with confidence and passion as I look at it as an opportunity to build up not to break me down. I do it without thinking so I do it well. I want to be a performing artist who will never be scared of any project which comes before her."

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"When you're in a place of laughter and play you filter out all the bad ideas. It's important to have fun".

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One audience member shared how his creativity has been affected by worries of where his bread will come from; now he will just go for it.

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Another audience member said that they have learnt that art always comes from the heart: "If you are focussed only on business and want to just take your money and go that is not the best approach; if it's from the heart people will come back. "If you do it from the heart you will have something to smile about for the rest of your life".

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One guest from the UK said they had learnt how many skills there are in Kenya, and instead of looking to bring skills from abroad they will utilize the skills already present.

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The writer Barassa spoke about gaining inspiration from the story of her own country.

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One young man involved in 3d animation said: "I really believe in getting my inspiration from Africa. I really want to tell the African stories not just in 3d but in comics, 2D, and try and give out things for free."

* * * * *

Living under Dictatorship

WHAT WAS IT REALLY LIKE LIVING UNDER IDI AMIN?

In keeping my project's aim to gain greater insight into stories from the unreported world, the human side of stories we see as mere news headlines, I interviewed the Ugandan writer David Kaiza, whose forthcoming book explores true experiences of living during the Idi Amin dictatorship. There was also opportunity for audience questions at the end, where it was fascinating and insightful to hear the perspective of locals.

The discussion ranged far and wide; Kaiza was born during the regime and recounts what it was like living under a system of imperialism.
"The clearest memory I have is from April 1979. It was a Sunday, in northern Uganda. I was four years old. It was a visceral memory. What comes to me is a memory of fear. Many of my friends were orphans; their fathers had been killed". Then the film The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin came out. But as a journalist you want to know what happened, not just received opinion".
Storymoja has a series of Personal Witness stories and Kaiza's forthcoming book will fall within this series. He points out how people have a particular stereotyped version of a country, gained through films including The Last King of Scotland or the Rise and Fall of Idi Ain, but as a journalist it is Kaiza's ambition to know what happened beyond received opinion. "It's what I called exoticism; these things are made for people abroad about what people think of as 'Africa' - people just see a load of people yelling and shouting. So I wanted to take on the invisible faces. But of course it was not easy. I know so many people whose parents died. Also, 1971 saw the expulsion of Asians; it's a deeply shameful thing for Ugandans; it's a stain on your history and your time. So it was emotionally very hurtful. One interviewer running a charter company told me - after the fall of the British empire; people with British passports had their citizenship devalued . At the airport, people were in tears, being abused in the most indecent manner. It was too much for me to handle. Why is it that thirty years later this is too painful to get into? There were threats to be chopped up and sent back in a body bag. Idi Amin has become a figure of fun which has prevented any other attempt to tell his story. There was a divide and rule policy that happened under colonialism. The death toll during the regime will never be fully known. In 1970s there was a breakdown of state apparatus, structural breakdowns and evils. There are all these stories flying around but it is important to look in a scholarly way".

* * * * *

Authors from Rwanda, Nigeria, Kenya

I interviewed a group of writers from different countries including Rwanda, Nigeria, and Kenya, about their work, including many stories from voices unheard dealing with genocide, domestic violence, and inequality. Nigerian Igoni Barrett won the BBC World Service short story competition in 2005, and is the author of a collection of short stories, *From Caves of Rotten Teeth*; Martin Njaga is author of *Brethren of Ngondu*; Emmanual Kariuki writes for young readers and his latest book *The Red Coat* has been nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin literary award. The 23 year old writer Barassa explores the history of genocide in Rwanda, and the destructive effect of tribalism.

Martin Njaga from Kenya tells me that: "Where you live affects what you write about". He grew up in a rural part of Kenya and writes about how religion influences people's way of thinking. His work is also fuelled by anger: he was writing a non-fiction article about abortion - which is illegal but prevalent - which prompted him to explore these complexities in fiction. "I think life is a tragedy. It is harder to write in a way that affirms life", said Nigerian Igoni Barrett. They also pointed out to the lengthy process of actually getting published which can take years since there are far fewer publishing houses and those existing do not have such an established infrastructure. "One of the advantages of writing from Africa is that you can never lack stories", said Martin Njaga - and during my stay in Kenya I gained a fascinating insight into some of these stories

Some observations on Kenya's Reading Culture

"If you want to hide something from an African person, hide it in a book" is a popular saying in Africa. There are various reasons why whatever it is that is hidden might not be found. Books by international authors are relatively expensive to buy - up to 5000 shillings, whilst the average wage for Kenyan authors without an education is 10, 000 shillings.

Writers as well as readers face challenges. There is no commercial infrastructure of publishing. One local Kenyan writer, Emmanuel Kariuki, tells me that although his book was delivered to the publishers in 1998, it was not published until 2003. He therefore advises writers to have eggs in as many baskets as possible.

The noticeboard in the Sarit Centre, Nairobi, offers a host of things for sale, from saris to silverware, and it is here that one Nairobian, Martin Njaga went when he decided he wanted to be a writer. He saw an advert for a typewriter but could not afford to buy it until he had saved for three months. Now Njaga is a published author, writing about issues such as abortion, which is illegal in Kenya, at least on paper. "I did research on abortion and some of the figures which come out are just shocking. My book is about how people are forced to make decisions they shouldn't have to make".

He is also a member of Storymoja Publishers which is implementing various campaigns to encourage reading. "Reading empowers. Reading is an affordable thrill. Reading defeats tribalism. Reading halts mental decline. Reading is about shared experiences. Reading accelerates economic development. Reading feeds the brain". These are some of the mottos emblazoned on the bright pink posters made by Storymoja publishers, founded three years ago in Kenya and publishing a wide range of writing.

There are various reading and writing initiatives springing up in a country which is hungry for words. The general vision of Storymoja is to create what they have dubbed a 'Reading Revolution', aiming to get a book into every hand in Kenya. The project will visit different schools and engage youngsters in reading books. The 'Reading Marathon' campaign encourages children to read 4 books within less than a year, setting a world record by filling a stadium with 20, 000 or more people, letting them read for as long as they want and anything they want. They hope to get the Kenyan National Library services on board, who have a lot of available space. The libraries in Kenya are often eerily empty, another measure of how deep the lack of a reading culture is.

The kind of new books being published here are a great indicator of problems, trends and hopes within society itself. One book is called simply "Uta Do?" ("What to do?") by Agatha Verdadero, advising about how people can make a living in a country with an endemic employment problem. The first page reads: "Jobs out there are as scarce as Wangige matatus after 8pm". Anyone who has tried waiting for one of these matatus (a local bus) after dark will know how hard to come by they are. Another project is called "Living Memories" based on the idea that history is not as strongly recorded as in other countries yet it is nevertheless very important for individuals to be aware of it. "If history is not recorded, history is going to die", explains the project developer. One book in the series is

“Kenya’s Untold Stories” by Al Kags about people who lived in 1950s colonial Kenya and the Mau Mau fighters. The aim is to create a monument of Kenyan memories, both dark and joyful, past and present.

Recently, the 826 Valencia project visited Nairobi: founded in San Francisco by writer Dave Eggers it teaches children how to make their own book in two hours. At the Railway Club where the Storymoja Festival was held, school children could be seen happily clutching the bright books they themselves had made, telling of their hopes and fears. So enamoured were they of their books that they could not be parted from them. The aim is now to extend the ‘Publish Your Own Book project’ to all schools in the country, as a national campaign. The festival also hosted writers from countries including Rwanda, where there are no publishing houses at all.

“Even with all the limits of having few publishing houses and poor publishing infrastructure, one of the advantages of writing from Africa is that you can never lack stories”, explains Martin Njaga. “It’s a very dramatic continent and you can never lack stuff to write about”. Kenyan writers have an inspirational literary history: writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o emerged as a favourite to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010, until pipped to the post by Mario Vargas Llosa. The new reading initiatives should encourage a future generation of Nobel Prize winners.

Article published in The National newspaper:

The 826 National project makes an impression in Kenya

Anita Sethi

Jan 4, 2011

The hot African sun is shining generously over festival tents in a field filled with splendid statues. Emerging from one tent are beaming children, brandishing brightly coloured books, which they themselves have made in two hours.

They have been in a Publish Your Own Book workshop led by the admirable not-for-profit company 826 National, which is the brainchild of the acclaimed writer Dave Eggers (the author of Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, and more recently, Zeitoun) and is devoted to improving the reading, writing and literacy skills of underprivileged youth.

First founded in San Francisco, so popular was the initiative that it spread to cities throughout the United States and 20,000 children now have access to free sessions. A core philosophy of the project is to have "field trips" and special projects, taking skills beyond immediate locality - and now we are many thousands of miles away from San Francisco, at the Storymoja Hay Festival, in the heart of Nairobi.

The concept is indeed gathering a more global reach and has most recently inspired a fantastic version in London, the Ministry of Stories, led by the bestselling author Nick Hornby.

Modelling itself on 826 National, it has Dave Eggers's blessing and a host of illustrious advisers, including Zadie Smith and Roddy Doyle, who himself founded the 826-inspired project Fighting Words, in Dublin.

An underpinning belief of the Ministry of Stories is that "writing has the power to unleash young people's extraordinary imaginations and, in doing so, to build confidence and self-

respect". The initiative has gained support not only from the people but from politicians, with Prime Minister David Cameron hosting a party for Hornby and the co-founders.

These projects are no dry academic affair: even the buildings in which they are housed display the architecture of the imagination: the San Francisco headquarters, which resembles the hull of a ship, is a "pirate supply store". And the London shop is monster-themed.

Whether pirates or monsters, inside them young people can be found writing stories, workshopping, being mentored. Indeed, "behind the shelves of monster supplies, there's an entrance to another secret place", says the Ministry of Stories.

So what exactly are the special ingredients of this new wave of popular literary projects sweeping through the world? I had the opportunity to get beneath the skin of this "movement", and enter the "secret place" of the imagination in action, witnessing the wonderful 826 National workshops over several days in October at the prestigious Storymoja Hay Festival, and speaking to workshop attendees and organisers.

What unites these projects over the miles is the passion for story-telling, and imparting the ability to tell stories to the younger generation the world over. Projects designed by 826 National explore the possibilities of storytelling in an ambitious range of forms, from chapbooks and magazines to student newspapers and books.

There are also special projects, such as two delightful books of letters to President Obama and to First Lady Michelle Obama that have caused a stir stateside. Similarly, the Ministry of Stories states that "all forms of writing are valid - from song lyrics to play scripts, screenplays to journalism, blogging to games, poems to graphic novels. The best results are achieved by making writing seriously playful."

When the talented founder of Kenya's dynamic Storymoja publishers, Muthoni Garland - herself a Caine Prize-nominated writer - first read about 826 National projects, including the bookmaking project, she was "salivating". After all, the principle of "Storymoja" is "Many Stories. One World", and among its inspired projects, it hosts the splendid annual Storymoja Hay Festival, which partners with the Hay Festival.

This year, audiences that included many schoolchildren had access to phenomenal performances by a host of local and international writers, including Benjamin Zephaniah.

"The bookmaking sessions seemed absolutely perfect as a tool to empower youngsters to exercise their imaginations to produce tangible work. And it demystified the 'scary' publishing process," says Garland. Eggers was "wonderfully receptive" to their invitation and dispatched an "amazing representative", the enthusiastic operations manager Ryan Lewis to lead the storytelling and bookmaking programme and teach the Storymoja team, led by Aleya, about how to implement the bookmaking initiative.

The love of stories is indeed a guiding philosophy, whether taught by Hornby in Hoxton, or Eggers in the US, or Lewis in Nairobi. The workshops I witnessed explored the very heart of what makes a story.

And the children were excited to explore the nuts and bolts of storytelling - character, plot, setting - and dreamt up worlds by turns wonderful and terrifying, imbuing their characters with hopes and fears, tracing out their trajectories. With the Hay Festival wristband upon arms busily sketching out stories, children imagined riding to school on dinosaurs, and superheroes saving the planet.

"Our students are craving high-energy, relevant and compelling learning opportunities. Teachers are also always looking for unique writing projects for their students," explains Lewis.

How was it possible to put this project in action not in a purpose-designed building in the US, but in a tent in a field in Kenya? The main challenge of running the project in Nairobi was co-ordinating logistics, explains Lewis.

The storytelling and bookmaking programme is usually run in centres equipped with photocopiers, computers, projectors and binding machines to help produce beautiful books for the students to take home. "Figuring out how to still offer the high quality of the final product that students deserve, while working out of a tent classroom in a field, required some creative adaptation," Lewis says.

The workshops proved immensely successful, reaching more than 100 students between the ages of eight and 12.

"Once the project was underway, it ran incredibly close to the version we do all the time in the US. We encourage the students to get as creative as possible, and this energy organically fuels the spirit and fun nature of the programme," Lewis says. "Each session was a high-energy and dynamic two hours of writing," with students he found to be intelligent, excited, involved and eventually overjoyed to receive the books they had written.

It is crucial, explains Garland, that young people have access to such intellectually stimulating initiatives at an early age. "The health of the mind - the ability to create and interrogate ideas - is critical for our economic growth and social development," she says. "Yet, educational emphasis in East Africa and many other parts of the world is still weighted towards cramming static facts to pass exams rather than on nurturing the capacity to think.

"In a region where many sleep hungry, and live in poor, hostile environments, it is tempting to consider the nurturing of 'thinking' as less of a priority. But achieving meaningful change of our difficult circumstances can only happen if we nurture the capacity to develop and implement the solutions ourselves".

Storymoja is visiting schools across the country to sign them up for Publish Your Own Book sessions as part of a larger "reading revolution" campaign. "The highlight of the campaign will be a world record attempt to overturn the self-defeating, widely held perception that Africans do not read", says Garland.

The aim is to gather the largest number of people who will read aloud simultaneously at one location, and also encourage donations of books to a newly built public library in

Nairobi. With Kenyan National Library Services a key partner, they are seeking other partners to make this possible.

I caught up with Michael Onsando, a 20-year-old student at the University of Nairobi and an aspiring writer, who interns at Storymoja and volunteered with 826 National book-making. "Working with the children was amazing," he says. "The fact that they still see the best of the world that we ourselves have long failed to see was an eye-opener. I think it was great for the kids and helped with self-esteem."

According to 826 National, "connecting inner-city students with these creative and generous mentors allows students to dream and achieve on a grand scale." And indeed, whether this inner city is San Francisco, London or Nairobi, the dreams of the students are being rendered into colourful display.

Inside the tent in Nairobi, children sketched out their dreams with charcoal pencil, felt-tip pen and considerable talent. The stories, reflecting ideas as bright as the paper written on, are sure to linger on long after the festival.

The road to Mombassa

After an incredibly educative time in Nairobi, I am heading for the Kenyan coast at Mombassa, accompanied by Millie who was born in Mombassa. We travel in a truly local way - by bus. The bus station is heaving with people and a long queue snakes from the ticket counter as we queue for tickets for the MASH bus which competes with the COAST bus to take people down to Mombassa overnight, a journey of approximately 442 kilometres. There are no tourists but myself in the bus. After a bumpy journey, the darkness begins to rise like a veil being lifted. I have journeyed from one city to another, from one day to another. We arrive in Mombassa as morning light is just breaking over the city, casting a pale pink glow over the life which is already teeming at 6am: the rickshaws already jostling for our attention, churning up dust with their wheels; the matatus blaring their horns, people already awake and beginning their life in the streets. I see a glimpse of home: a rickshaw called “Old Trafford” among the chaos of dust and traffic. There is a hint of sea salt in the air, although the sea is still some way from here. Exploring the city, we pass a salmon-pink-coloured mosque; and a port where slave trading occurred. Travelling through Mombassa with a native of the city, who was born and schooled here, I remember that just 50 years ago due to the racial segregation it would not have been so likely that we would have walked through the city together. I go down to the beach and there see the teeming life of the glittering Indian ocean: camels carrying humans; men selling sandles and baskets of curiosities; locals swimming far out to sea and back again, to land.

COAST OF MOMBASSA: PHOTOGRAPH BY ANITA SETHI

REFLECTIONS: How this research can benefit the UK community

A version of the 826 Valencia project I witnessed in action in Kenya has already been implemented in the UK, in the Ministry of Stories project in London (as described in my article above). However, there is much greater scope for projects such as these in the UK, and I would like to see one implemented in Manchester and the area of Trafford where I grew up. Famed far and wide as the home of Manchester United football club, Old Trafford is statistically one of the most deprived boroughs of the UK and literacy projects such as this would benefit the community. As a student I worked at an examining board during Summer holidays, script-checking GCSE examination papers: in far too many the basic concept of a paragraph was not grasped, with a line stopping half-way through a sentence to begin again half-way down the next sentence. In far too many I checked the score only to confirm with a sinking heart that this was indeed another fail. As more of our countries' youth clubs are closed down it is vital that children have some form of intellectual and social stimulation and projects such as the one I witnessed in action in Nairobi would be one positive step forward.

INDIAN OCEAN ADVENTURES

It is along the Indian Ocean that my ancestors once sailed to work as indentured labourers. Hundreds of years later, I had the opportunity to explore the Indian Ocean from a myriad of perspectives - Mombassa, the Maldives and Kerala - and to capture some of the stories of inhabitants living on its shores. In the Maldives I had the opportunity to listen to many stories from the unreported world as well as explore the theme of vulnerability.

Tsunami Stories

I sit on a patterned mat as a breeze blows through the palm trees and the Indian Ocean glimmers beneath the setting sun. I am in one of the most vulnerable places on earth, the Maldives. I hear a short and powerful tribute to the crucial role played by Minivian Radio in connecting people during and after the tragedy of the tsuanami. "I think this is the most beautiful island I have seen in my whole life", says Ahmed Naseer, during a short talk on "Stories from the Tsunami". Ahmed Naseer explains the ways in which he distracted himself from "the stark reality he was facing". He parallels his return home to the home-coming of the Chilean miners. "As an exile I am fortunate enough to be given the chance of returning home and continuing with my life. It has been a long and winding road and I am still to feel a sense of arrival", he says. He also gave a reminder of all that is still left to achieve: "We have a lot of work to do before we can declare ourselves mission accomplished".

The event falls into silence and music after half an hour, which somehow seem fitting forms to commemorate the tragedy of **the tsunami.**

Male

I meet Razzan, a local Maldivian, at the oldest theatre in Male. After some staple snacks (fish, understandably popular here), I got my first taste of Male, as Razzan kindly gave me a mini-tour around Male on his motorbike. As the afternoon sun blazed down, we passed everything from government buildings to the National Museum to the popular music shop

Island Records, grand mosques, cemeteries, the MNBC offices, and the country's green and red flag fluttering in a sudden breeze. We also passed a monument to victims of the tsunami and Razzan explained how he himself was playing cricket at the time, when a huge wave swamped the area and he had to dash to a top floor to escape – the vulnerability of the islands shall be one of the topics of discussion during the events I attend.

Razzan then showed me one of his favourite places in town – the chocolate shop. The site of the evening's music concert soon came into view – a stage is set and gleaming white against the backdrop of blue sea and palm trees – certainly a sight to whet the appetite.

WORKSHOPS

This is a photograph of the class to whom I gave a workshop; although in the midst of Exams that week, they produced some funny and clever writing during the session, exploring their passions and interests, ranging from blogging to butterflies.

The wonderful children at Hiriya School For Girls explored their ideas about the environment, and their passions and interests, during this workshop, producing some great pieces of writing, shared below:

Thoughts about the Environment:

* * *

"My name is Fathmath Rooba. I am 14 years old. My passions include music and photography. I think the Environment is one of the major things we should talk about and discuss. As a human being it is our responsibility to take care of our environment. Even a small difference can change the world"

* * *

"Hello! I am Shiran. I'm 14 years old. I think that the global environment should be taken care of. Unpredictable climate change and sea level rise are issues that can be a threat to humans. As well, I like music. Almost everybody in the world likes music. The most beautiful thing is I like your name and the way you speak".

* * *

"Mostly, I like watching matches of football. Manchester United is my favourite club. I listen to MGMI, Oasis and Kate Perry. I listen to them while I study as well. I believe that small countries would submerge if we do not start to do our job as an individual to stop global warming and climate change. As an individual, you can do simple things like planting trees, switching off the lights when not needed and there are many other things you could do. One of the things I like to do is tell my friends and family members about how important it is to stop the climate change".
- Riuman Mohammed Zahir, 13 years old.

* * *

“My name is Aishath Mihna Mohammed and I’m almost 14 years old. I’ve always loved history and writing. I’ve been writing really short stories since I was five. I used to write comics but got bored of it and started to write fantasy and true life, mostly what I dream about. Most of my ideas come to my mind through dreams. I’ve always loved music. I play piano and guitar and also love to sing. I always dreamt of becoming an archaeologist.

About the environment, it’s been getting pretty worse. The last chemistry lesson we had, our teacher told us carbon dioxide is the gas which is increasing. So I guess there’s only one solution – planting trees and working together.

And I would really love to thank you for coming and spending your time here. Thank you again!”

* * *

“I’m Aminath Hana, a grade 8 student. I’m 13 years old. I have a huge interest in football. I love the club Chelsea. I love to play netball. I have an interest in diving. I love animals, birds, and all living life. I would not miss a chance to go and explore in other countries. Mostly about the environment! We need to think about it seriously otherwise later in our future we will have to suffer. We have many things we can do. Hold our hands together to help our environment”.

ART AND MUSIC

As well as the natural beauty of the Aarah Island setting, the aesthetic pleasures were heightened by powerful paintings displayed by the United Artists of Maldives.

MUSIC

Harubee / Bodu Beru

Silhouettes of dancing bodies fall upon the sand.
The palm trees are vivid green against the inky black sky, illuminated by the stage lighting. Some dance before the stage, others sit on the patterned mats and enjoy watching the spectacle.

HARUBEE / Bodu Beru's expressive dancing and drum beats won the MNBC One Bodu Beru Challenge 2010. Tonight, the hypnotic beat of their drums energizes the crowd who dance for hours, in impressive twists and turns. At the 'Artificial Beach' on Male: I listened to singer songwriter Appi in an intimate acoustic set with Fa'thu. The Dinba Family, with an energy as fresh as the seabreeze, showcase their reggae rhythms. FASYLIVE blends contemporary rock and traditional 'Bodu Beru' drumming from the acclaimed album FASYLIVE Silver. I also heard The Olympians, whose hindi-inspired pop spans a three decade career, to include the classic hits 'Dhauruvaa Mihandhaanthah' and 'Reyrey Mihen Khiaalu Kollan Aadhevey'.

Such is the exuberance of entertainment that it spills out to the very end of the evening. I catch the last ferry back to Male, and the drumming, the singing, the dancing continue, all the way until the ferry reaches land. Taking the ferry back also proved a fantastic way to meet the locals, including one lady and her young daughter also undertaking the journey from Male to Aarah Island and back again, with whom I stayed in virtual touch, and who later shared why she had decided to leave the Maldives and start a new life in Sri Lanka, in the hope that her daughter would have a more secure, less vulnerable, future.

On climate change

"I'm a member of the planet – and that's why I'm here trying to make a difference to this country", said Mark Lynas, a sentiment echoing throughout the festival, where young and old gathered to debate an issue affecting all. All agreed that action was needed, from the grassroots to the government.

During the debate with Mark Lynas and Simad Saeed, the President's special advisor on Climate Change, a passionate voice in the crowd spoke up for the youth, asking, what hope is there for them? **"The youth are going to waste. We need a grassroots movement",** he insisted.

Later, in the Vilu Hall, the British Council's International Climate Champions gave young people aged 18 to 23 years old a voice on environmental issues, to **"inspire positive action to mitigate the effects of climate change"**. Their roles shall be developed over the coming year.

These voices of youth were a powerful reminder of the generation that shall inherit the earth.

On Survival: attitudes in the developing world versus the first world

Audience members were transported deep into the heart of the South American rainforests and to Monty Don's "fascinating and deeply inspirational time" in Cuba among other locations, during a talk ripe with anecdotes, including the sticky issue of ethics: should one accept fruit which has been washed in the Amazon in which a dead dog has just floated by?

Monty Don honed his fertile experience to explore important issues. He described the thousands of organic projects now in place in Cuba, and also made the important point that without skills and knowledge, enthusiasm alone will take a much longer time to gain practical results.

Monty Don cuts to the very quick of life and death and here in the Maldives, he made thought-provoking comments on survival, and the contrast between those who are on the brink of extinction and driven to do what they must to survive, compared to our modern world in which "we don't have to do anything". He quoted the Bob Dylan lyric, "It's a wonder we can even feed ourselves".

Living under dictatorship

As well as exploring the concept of “transitional justice”, Peter Godwin detailed his sense of being an outsider, living between two worlds, and the concept of home, as also explored in his memoirs, “When the Crocodile Eats the Sun” and “Mukiwa: a White Boy in Africa”, which won the George Orwell Prize and the Apple/Esquire/Waterstones Award.

He also gave insight into his creative processes of storytelling, from the intimacies of the first-person and the “cinematic metaphor” he feels best describes memoir-writing, to how his childhood has influenced not only the content but the very cadences of his language. He spoke of the importance of using detail to find the universal, how to write for two audiences, and the “thrill of recognition” that writing can spark, at the realization that you are not alone.

His new book, “The Fear: The Last Days of Robert Mugabe” is described by Paul Theroux as “a chronicle of the mess that is Zimbabwe…an important book detailing the violent realities, the grotesque injustices, the hunger, the sadness, and a portrait of Mugabe, the tyrant who is the cause of it all”.

What has happened in Zimbabwe, he said, is a “tragedy in the true dramatic Greek sense of the word”. Godwin described how dictators “live in a bubble”, in a “state of altered reality”. The session was filled with sparkling anecdotes, and he injected humour into grave themes, having the whole audience in laughter at his tips for coping if you ever find yourself next to a dictator, and how one particular dictator has been spotted looking for lipstick in Manhattan.

On Twitter, the role of women, and democracy:

An audience with Shobhaa De

Shobhaa De turned sixty around the same time that India celebrated 60 years of Independence from British rule. This intertwining of her own life and her nation's history is a theme throughout her work, which explores multifaceted urban India, from the struggles of the young attempting to break into Bollywood, to the institution of marriage as it has evolved over generations. The versatile writer explores storytelling in many genres, from the newspaper column to the novel to memoir. She is not afraid of controversy and speaking her mind, indeed believes it is the writer's duty to do so, and among topics she has spoken out for include taking on Shah Rukh Khan for his views on the Mumbai terror attacks.

In her latest book, "Shobhaa at Sixty", she urges women to embrace the ageing process and shake off the shackles of neurosis and low self-esteem.

The power of the Internet is something Shobhaa is passionate about. “If you don’t have a presence online these days, you don’t exist”, she commented. She has embraced the blogging and Twitter revolutions, and spoke about how, through the net, she has gained an intimate connection with her readers; never censors her negative comments; and love’s blogging ability to capture the concrete details of life.

Her Twitter picture features her with a real lion. Indeed, this image defines her character as a risk-taker and always one to approach what others would fear: she discussed the various risks she has taken over her career; and how being a women is itself a risky business.

Her books (including the bestseller “Superstar India”) tackle the theme of stardom, asking – what is it really that makes a true star?

As we walked to the event, we stopped to admire the sun setting deep red over the Indian Ocean. By the end of the conversation, the stars were gleaming amongst the palm trees, and the moon hanging bright over the Maldives.

Adventures in Singapore

BUTTERFLY LANDS ON MY WRIST, SINGAPORE

I arrived in Singapore at night-time, on a flight from Mumbai. On my first morning in Singapore I took the opportunity to explore the streets filled with interesting architecture and soak in the sights. One of the first things that met my eye in the Little India area where I was staying was a huge map - not of Singapore but of India. It was part of an advertisement; a symbol used to convey connectivity since the area in which it hung had a large Indian diasporic community. It was fascinating speaking with locals about their experiences of diaspora which developed my thinking and research into the Indian diasporas to Kenya, the West Indies, South Africa and the UK.

I also had the opportunity to interview some young female dancers studying Indian classical dance about the pleasures gained through dance as well as the expectations and

barriers they face, encounters which enriched the cultural dimension of the trip. This part of my trip was a lesson to remain open-minded rather than rigid whilst on a journey, since unexpected encounters and places can prove extremely fruitful and relevant.

Interviews with two women taking Indian dance classes at Stamford Arts Centre, Singapore.

"My dreams for the future would be to make the world a better place. How do we do that? It's what Gandhi said: 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. You can't go around saving everybody but you can be inspiring, bring about true change to the world. Indian dance connects me to the part of myself that allows me to feel love - and when I love myself I can love the world. I wanted to learn Indian dance many years ago but something was blocking me until a friend encouraged me to try dance. I like the way dance can bring me into focus, that my mind would not be wandering but would be here and now. I would be present, in my body, and feel love for the world and a connection with others - those who are dancing, and those who are not dancing - we are all human beings" - female dancer, 27 years old, Singapore.

"What is it like to be a young woman in Singapore? Here you have the freedom to wear what you want. In India you are more restricted. Dancing is stress relief for me. I was born in Kerala, in Varkala. I come from a small village near Varkala, very laid back, very close to nature. I was 13 when I came to Singapore. Now I feel more Singaporean although I do go to India often to see my grandparents and visit my old house. My roots are still strong. When I was in India my parents took me to dance. Dancing is a spiritual thing to me. It's more than just dance - it gives you a chance to connect with your own culture. It brings you closer to spirituality. When you dance you express yourself and connect. I definitely feel like I've changed since I started dancing. I know more about Indian culture now. The beauty of it is that you can do what you want, without being forced" - 32 year old teacher, born in Varkala, India, living in Singapore

I wrote a travel article about Singapore which I am including below.

Travel article published in The National newspaper, Travel section:

A butterfly is perched upon my palm, a butterfly so huge that its wings stretch larger than my handspan. So long does it perch there, as calmly as if sitting on the bark of a tree, that I have enough time to gaze at the intricacies of the ink-black tigerprint markings upon its white wings. I am surrounded by over a thousand butterflies, including almost 50 endangered species here in the Butterfly Park on Sentosa Island, a tropical Disneyland a short cable car ride off the south coast of Singapore from Mount Faber. It turns out that there are many other winged creatures, too, with louder voices to vie for attention: as the setting sun turns the sky a deep orange, blue macaws and parrots sqwark noisily.

I have reached the end of a nature trail which tempted me with the words on a sign at the entrance quoting Wordsworth: "Go forth into the light of things. Let nature be your teacher". I'm now exhausted but it has been a welcome respite from the concrete jungle of skyscrapers and tacky souvenirs, and I have indeed learnt a lot, more so after visiting an exhibition about the 'Butterflies of Singapore and South East Asia'. For us wingless humans, the Sky Tower with its revolving glass-windowed cabin offers an uplifting ride into the skies, reaching a birds-eye view of these southern Islands.

Just as diverse as the wildlife are Singapore's intriguing layerings of human history, with an ethnic mix including Malay, Chinese, Tamil, Arab, and Indian, the cultural imprints apparant in everything from architecture to art, food to fashion. Although often dismissed by would-be tourists as a mere stopover destination en route to countries elsewhere, Singapore proves such a compellingly complex and intricate place that I often linger to absorb the atmospheric details.

I stay in a new boutique hotel called the Moon Hotel (23 Dickinson Road) so named for its futuristic design concept, with compact rooms complete with plump white pillows so soft that lying on them feels like quite literally floating in space. The hotel is situated in the heart of Little India, the perfect location from which to explore districts from Little India to Chinatown, from the Colonial District and the Quays, to Orchard Road.

There is no better way to gain a flavour of Singapore's diverse culture than strolling through streets where 'living history' pulses all around.

I step out from the Moon Hotel into the hot morning sun. It's like stepping from futuristic design into a mishmash of the past as I stroll by a fascinating blend of architectures, from Arabic to Victorian. I gaze at pastel-coloured mosques along Arab Street, marvel at the national monument of the Abdul Gaffoor Mosque, and ornate temples such as the Temple of 1000 Lights, with yellow tiger statues at the entrance, a huge Buddha apparently weighing several hundred tonnes, and a mother-of-pearl footprint. With such interesting juxtapositions of colours and cultures at every turn, it's wise to leave plenty of unscheduled time to lose yourself amongst these sights.

Silks and scents and sounds spill into the street - Arabic and Asian culture transplanted thousands of miles away. A short walk away is "Kampong Glam" (known to tourists as the Arab Quarter), filled with Middle Eastern cafes and, nearby, the 24 hour Mustafa Shopping Centre.
It is an intense experience for all of the senses: the taste-buds (cafes such as the 'Thai Muslim Seafood' with its bright orange facade); music filters from the "Glassy Junction: Hindi and Punjabi Music Lounge" and the eyes soak in the bright flash of sequenced saris in textile shops.

"Little India" does indeed feel like "a miniature version of India", as a local described the experience of living there to me. Until, that is, I glance above and glimpse a Singaporean signature: in the distance huge silver skyscrapers gleam in the sunlight.

I find myself gazing down a literal melting pot of spiced curry in a street side cafe and it is pungent moments such as this when the cliche of the 'melting pot' rings true. Everywhere apparent is the convergence of cultures and diasporic communities. As the midday heat rises, I buy some mineral water from a bed of chilled ice in the crate of a hawker. I walk further on towards the 'Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple' (thought to bring worshippers good luck). Nearby I find a cafe filled with delicacies called "Good Husband biscuit", "Good Wife biscuit" and a fist-shaped pastry named "Buddha's Hand With Lotus Paste".

I shelter from the midday sun and soak up knowledge in the National Museum of Singapore housed in a grand neoclassical building. Particularly engrossing is the museum's capacious History Gallery, tracing Singapore's history from the 14th century to the present-day. The permanent Living Galleries detail the changing role of fashion, food, photography and film, and I watch a powerful depiction of food-making; on a screen a pair of hands kneeds dough, beside the words "roti prata". Nearby the museum is the green oasis of the Fort Canning Park (in whose grounds is a house of Stamford Raffles) and the Asean Sculpture Garden.

A bronze sculpture catches the sunlight outside the Singapore Art Museum which is just a short walk away and well worth the visit. "Another Day (The Coolies)" by artist Chong Fah Cheong depicts two people sharing a meal. An artist's statement explains how the image immortalizes the coolie: "Historically, coolies were bonded workmen who arrived in colonial Singapore to labour under inhospitable conditions. Many were assigned to work at the waterfront where trade was fast and furious". The 'coolies' depicted by Chong are from the 1970s and 80s and worked at warehouses and bumboats before urban redevelopment transformed the Singapore River.

The history of the Singapore River also ripples through Chinatown, which is so-called because the original Chinese immigrants lived there, whilst working along the river. The Chinatown Heritage Centre vividly evokes the area's harsh past through video exhibitions.

A statue of Sir Stamford Raffles gazes over the River. It was Raffles who delineated the city's ethnically divided neighbourhoods, and the grand Raffles Hotel pays homage to him. Inside hangs a black sign with a white elephant, and the words "British India". Raffles Courtyard, Restaurant and Gazebo Bar, are alive with colonial ghosts, whilst pandering to the purses of the modern-day tourist: "How can one resist the temptation to shop at Raffles", reads a sign.

There are other curious remnants of colonialism. A bright red pillar post box catches my eye whilst I'm passing through The Fullerton Heritage Gallery at the Fullerton Hotel. A golden plaque announces that the post box is a legacy of the British colonial era, the first introduced in 1873.

So what is life like along the river now? I hunt for the "Merlion", perhaps Singapore's most famous icon, and after a drive down Orchard Road, glittering with designer stores, the taxi driver stops at the edge of the gleaming moonlit river. "Here. Lion. Water", he says. I step out into the night, and after further directions, finally find the lion, spouting water from his mighty mouth, and surrounding him, the lively heart of Singapore's nightlife at One Fullerton. A Pet Shop Boy's song filters from the OverEasy bar, its lyrics about the convergence of East and West, seeming to aptly capture the spirit of a place on so many cultural borderlands.

Along the waterfront are dotted sculptures and artworks and the great wheel lit up by the moonlight casts magnificent reflections into the black water. Conversation From Nature by artist Lee Soo Hong, visualizes "Man and Nature in harmony", while The Rose of Sharon symbolizes the cultural exchange between Korea and Singapore.

Next, I find myself gazing down on the city from a grand height, after ascending to the top of the plush Marina Bay Sands Singapore, via the SkyPark viewing tower (it's possible to visit the SkyPark for $20 without actually staying in the hotel). Designed by the renowned architect Moshe Safdie, Sands SkyPark, offers a 360 degree view over the country's skyline. It is surreal to witness the open air swimming pool which, beneath the moonlight appears, mirage-like, to be spilling down into the city.

The city glitters jewel-like beneath me and the black river ebbs and flows. From high above, the Fullerton Hotel looks like a tiny golden toy. After exploring the city's past, this formidable feat of architecture on which I stand definitely boasts Singapores's designs on the future with further plans for expansion. Here there's a sense that this 24 hour city is excited by its own possibilities. A meal at the Ku De Ta restaurant allows visitors to savour the sights a little longer; but gazing down at the reflections on the water so far below, I feel a flutter of butterflies in the stomach.

The pillows of the Moon Hotel tempt me back, but it's difficult to tear myself away from the real moonlight, falling so enchantingly over Singapore.

REFLECTIONS: Only Connect

Above is a photograph I took of a picture that I noticed hanging on the walls of Starbucks at One Fullerton, Singapore, a coffee shop situated on the edge of the sea which laps around Marina Bay. It seemed an example of globalisation that the coffee beans from those vast fields I drove past should end up here. “STARBUCKS COFFEE” are the words stamped on to the picture, just reaching into the body of the elephant. I wonder if the people sipping this coffee - with such a simple picture in mind of a cliched touristic image of Kenya - have any concept of that vast journey those coffee beans have made, and the human hands that worked in the fields, ensuring that the coffee would be just right for tasting.

My fellowship project is called "Only Connect" (E M Forster managed to capture a great truth in just two words of the novel *Howard's End).* The title has proved resonant in so many more ways then I had originally envisaged. I have explored connections within countries, such as the new generation of tweeters in Kenya, the importance of the online world for the dissemination of stories in the new democracy of the Maldives, and the burgeoning growth of the internet in India in many aspects of life - as well as the capacity of such connections to convey hitherto hidden stories and lives.

A source of constant surprises, however, has been the astonishing web of connections between countries themselves. Singapore is indeed a fascinating convergence of cultures and I have found strands of my travels connecting here.

In the Stamford Arts Centre, a dancer I was interviewing happened to be from Kerala, and regularly returns to visit Trivandrum. She was born in Varkala, which I also visited recently. We discussed the Indian diasporic community here, the connections between Kerala, and more broadly the rest of India, and the immigration to Singapore. She also shed insight into what it is like to be an artist - and a young woman - in Singapore compared with in India.

"Only connect"? Indeed.

AUSTRALASIA

Extract from article published in The Guardian

Wild blue yonder: Australia's Blue Mountains

New South Wales's Blue Mountains offer peace and quiet – not to mention awe-inspiring landscape and magical places to stay

I'm sitting on the pea-green seats of the train, gazing out into a world fast vanishing beneath a gauzy, shimmery mist. As we climb two hours west from Central Station, Sydney the mist cloaks the vast plateaus, it snakes through the dark forests and curls around the clifftops and canyons that comprise the Blue Mountains. I'm in search of the peace and quiet that attracts Sydneysiders year round to the one million hectares of New South Wales that are named after the blue haze of the eucalyptus oils. As the angry sky darkens and rain thunders down, I confess to feeling slightly fearful, as well as excited, at the prospect of staying alone in a secret eco cottage with acres between myself and the nearest human being.

I step out into Katoomba, the tourist hub of the Blue Mountains (with soggy tourists aplenty today), and it's as if I've stepped into some wonderland at the top of the Magic Faraway Tree. Even the facades of the dinky buildings are shrouded in mist. I shelter in a quaint little cake shop, and even it – and the chocolate fondant I scoff – are like something from a fairytale land. [....]

Horses whinny and chomp in the fields. Peewees sing. Great yellow butterflies flutter past. I walk west from the cottage with the long wet grass tickling my legs, past tall gum trees and along the creek paddock, keeping an eye out for wallabies and kangaroos and wombat holes – and snakes! As I walk towards the blue hills of Oberon and the Jenolan Caves, I feel quite tiny. The sun begins to set, silhouetting the trees, night-time encroaches over the

cliffs until the sky is on fire, although I spin round and it's still broad daylight behind me. It's little wonder that the Blue Mountains are a favourite haunt of artists.

I want to explore the nooks and crannies of the Blue Mountains. An obvious place to start is Katoomba, the crowded gateway town to the area, and the region's most visited destination, which has cafes and bars, and adventure operators offering to arrange trips into the bush. Nature spotting bush walks, horse-riding adventures, walking along the famous Six Foot Track footpath to caves and Megalong Valley, a ride on the steep scenic railway and the Skyway cable car can all be arranged here.

Over a bite to eat, though, in the art deco Cafe Zuppa, I flick through a brochure and I spot a picture of Blackheath, a smaller village 20 minutes' drive away, so named because of its wild, open-heath scenery, often charred by bushfires, but blooming with rhododendrons in spring.

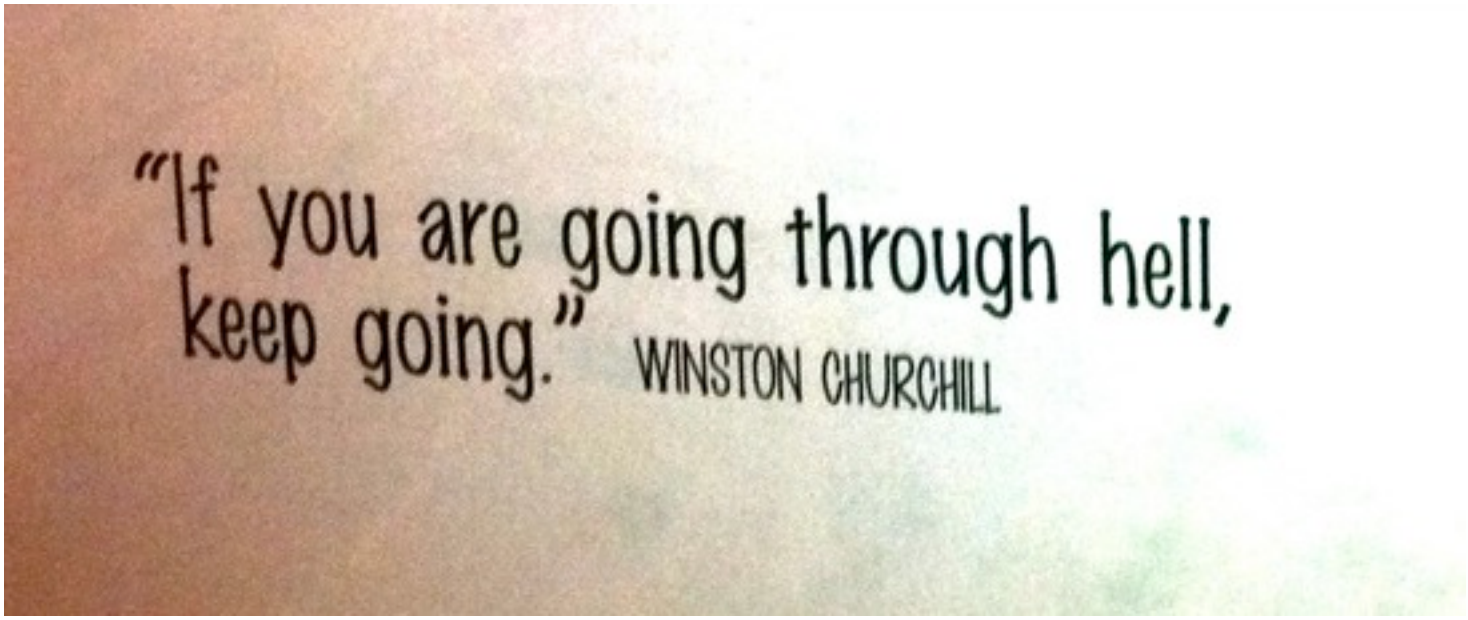
It's peace and quiet I yearn for, after all, so I set off in search of it. En route the driver points out some lovely places to stay: the Possums Hideaway nestled within gardens, Redleaf Resort, and Bower Cottage, with a blue bird on its sign. I ask him to stop so I can take a peek, and crunch up the gravelly path to a yellow facade. It's love at first sight. I have found it – the cottage of my dreams! Its location, on Evans Lookout Road, was perfect too: not far from one of the most stunning viewpoints of the Mountains, Evans Lookout, and after apple juice in the Bush Rock Cafe, I gave my new trainers a run for their money, jogging along the narrow, deserted pathways to the viewpoint.

Even in this place of solitude, I eventually run into a group of tourists, peering through binoculars at the trio of Aborigine maidens turned to stone by a sorcerer, as myth has it. These Three Sisters, viewed from Echo Point near Katoomba, are one of the most popular attractions of the mountains.

Then I am back on the pea-green seats of the train chugging down through the beautiful mists and into the bright hot heart of Sydney. I take with me a little more space in my head – and that's the secret of why you would stay alone in a cottage in the wilderness of Australia.

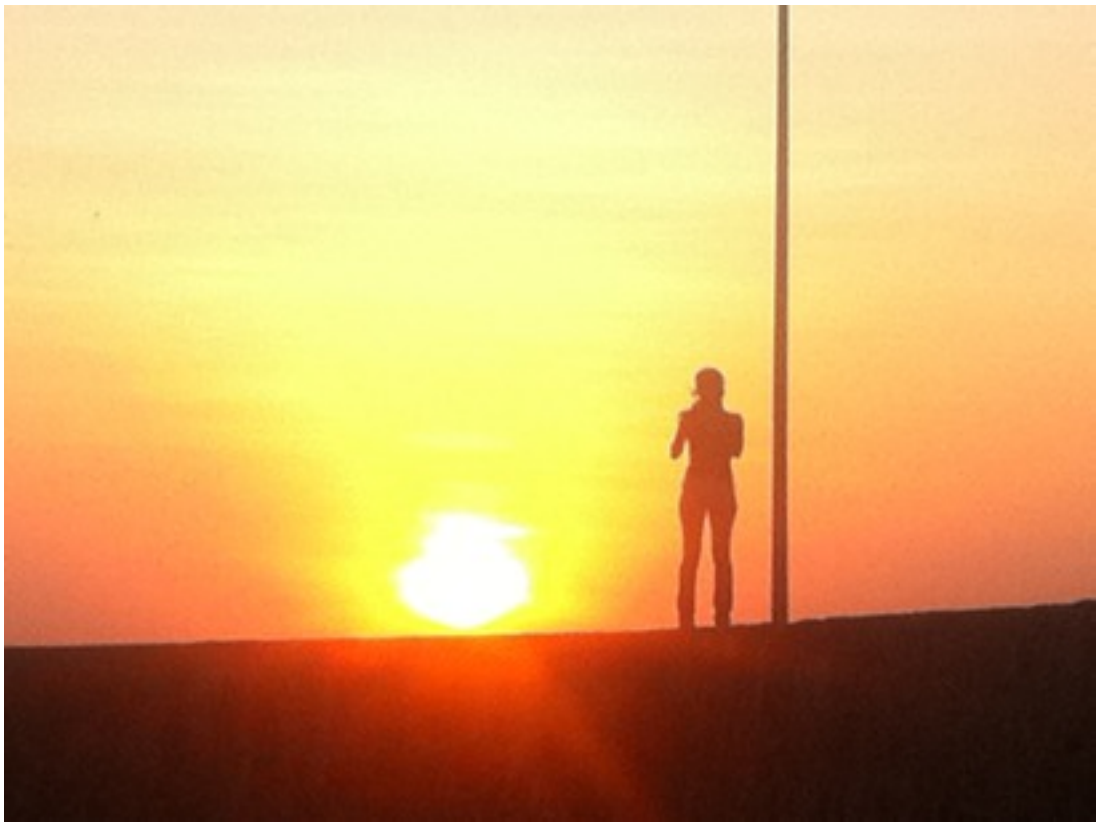
REFLECTIONS: "If you're going through hell keep going" - Winston Churchill

It was on the wall of a lift in a youth hostel in New Zealand that I saw these wise words of stoic wisdom from Churchill, in this case on a poster advertising adventure sports. It was, however, a good motto to keep in mind during the more challenging parts of the trip, and it is one I retain in mind for future journeys, too. What might seem like a "hell" at the time, during a particularly arduous stretch of the trip might eventually make for the most insightful parts of the journey. Such a moment occurred during my trip whilst travelling on the overnight bus from Mombassa to Nairobi. The bus was stopped by police (as surreal as it sounds, apparently they feared that weapons were hidden inside a fish that was being transported). All passangers had to disembark and stand with their arms outstretched. In the end, the bus - and all of the passengers - was left to go in its way without harm - yet it was an insight into the random police checks in the area and to always remain calm under stressful circumstances.



SOUTH AMERICA

CARIBBEAN COAST: PHOTOGRAPH BY ANITA SETHI



I arrive in South America when it is bitterly cold in England, the heart of deep mid-winter. So cold in England that it darkens at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and the sun does not so much as say hello even during the height of the morning.

The sun, however, is still letting off its warmth even though it is night-time when I arrive in South America. The warmth is the first thing I notice when I step out of the airport in Colombia. It is only five minutes ride away to the hostel I am staying in, and I gasp at the first glimpse of the ocean and gasp even deeper when I raise my head upwards and see a huge deep sky of textured inky blues and blacks, but most of all I gasp at the stars. An abundance of stars that actually twinkle. I have seen many stars in my lifetime, but in contrast to the ones I have seen hanging over Manchester, UK, the ones I saw in the wide open skies of New Zealand and the vast sky I now gazed upon over the Caribbean sea actually fulfilled the action of that verb: visibly twinkling. The nursery rhyme, had it been written by one gazing upwards now, might read: "Twinkle, Twinkle, Enormous Star, How I

Wonder What You Are". I breathe deeply, not only with relief to have arrived, but also because it is such a pleasure to breathe, since the air here tastes and smells fresh.

If the paragraph above paints an idyllic scene I soon saw a tale of two cities; within walking distance the vast gulf between rich and poor opened up; in town there stands the centre-piece of the luxurious Santa Clara Hotel, with its ruddy pink walls, swimming pool, grand architecture. And then just a few calles away - la pobreza - poverty. I read a tweet from someone staying in the Santa Clara which said that they had seen "no guns, no dogs", - yet had they ventured only a few moments walk from the comforts of their luxury, in these calles, they would have seen dogs, and the guns hanging on the albeit friendly and hospitable policemen patrolling the area.

The great multicultural riches of the Caribbean coast were a feast for the eyes and I spent many hours experimenting with photography as a means to capture this diversity, and the striking light and shade of the area; the light so intense and bright just before sun set, the colours so rich, the shades and darknesses equally profound.

Walking through the streets along which people pushed crates of fruit, and women carried their children, I glimpsed a group of men playing cards: weathered, pale brown hands throw down the King of Spades, the Queen of Hearts, one man cheers as he wins, and one wonders: what hand will be dealt next?

In Colombia I visited the newspaper offices of El Universal. On the wall in a conference room in which I waited, an old map of South America hangs, and I gaze at it, fascinated at how the continent used to be named, demarcated, and imagined. At these same newspaper offices Gabriel Garcia Marquez once worked as a journalist.
Later, El Universal's culture editor, Gustavo Tatis, who has lived in the city for 30 years, sheds insights into his experiences of being both a journalist and writer, the various challenges of each form, and the inspiration of the Caribbean coast on his work. He explores the "mythology" of the place, the influences of both personal and cultural memory, and how culture under the hands of dictatorial rule can become a form of oppression rather than expression.

I also visited Maria Feliz arthouse cinema and there saw a portrayal of the Bogata underworld of drug cartels and violence in the film "La Sangre y La Lluvia".

I have long been attracted to South American literature, and the Spanish language, having studied Spanish A level and and went on to study its literature, reading voraciously the work of a wide variety of writers, from Gabriel Garcia Marquez to modern-day writers. I am also fascinated by non-Spanish language writers such as the Guyanese Wilson Harris, and the West Indian VS Naipaul, and novels conjuring the complexities of life in the Caribbean including Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys.

I found myself face-to-face with the raw heat and light of the Caribbean coast itself, watching its sun set into an astonishment of blood-red, and a girl walking along the city's stone wall towards the sun, silhouetted, growing smaller and smaller until to the naked eye she appeared to have walked right into the heart of the setting sun and vanished there.

It was fascinating to see for oneself the kind of surreal sights, the tricks of light and intensity that gave rise to the literary genre of "magic realism". Colombia has a rich literary history, with Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez compellingly conjuring the calles of Cartagena in such landmark novels as Love in a Time of Cholera throughout which roam some memorable characters.

If Marquez' adventures in 'magic realism' found a new form to describe a complicated reality, the discussion about the best form of communication is one that continues to rage today in a world just as challenging. I engaged in many discussions debating past and present means of communication. There were many writers whom I met throughout my travels wearing two if not three hats (metaphorically), who shed insight into dual careers as both novelists and journalists, for example. How does one tell a story at all? I have explored not only geographical but stylistic and ideological territories.
I also encountered, though, more traditional forms of communication - such as the incantatory beat of the drum, the haunting notes of the piano, and the cadences of the human voice.

The tone of my experiences was as varied as the musical cadences, sweeping from serious to humorous. On the agenda at one event I attended was how crucial it is to have humour in life and literature: in an event called "Humour in Writing", waves of laughter rose and fell through the capacious room from whose ceiling white lanterns were suspended, as the

Argentinean Luis Pescetti, author of many children's books, explored his career as a music therapist and educationalist.

It was only weeks after the recent devastating floods in the region, and yet day-to-day life appeared (on the surface at least) to be continuing as normal. It was while gazing upon the crates of fruit (the bright melons, the fruit crushed into icy drink) and walking further to side street shops selling traditional Spanish chorizos that the cliche of the "melting pot" strikes you with all the pungent full force of truth. Here I was, at the melting pot of cultures on the Caribbean coast, surrounded by striking architecture and bright flowers spilling from balconies, also the perfect location to explore some of those facets of reality that contributed to present-day literature and journalism - and how communication between cultures and across continents might best be achieved today.

Conclusions: World of Stories

A keen advocate of social responsibility, I have engaged in discussions ranging far and wide, across geopolitics, arts and culture, women's issues, new media and the environment, society and education, examining how we might bring about change to benefit the common good. With the belief that words have the power to effect change, I have drawn inspiration from those who are activists as well as writers, including the Indian writer and human rights activists Shashi Tharoor, and activist Lydia Cacho, a journalist specialising in violence and gender, and managing a care centre for female victims of abuse in Mexico. I was also inspired by the writer Tarun Tejpal, author of The Alchemy of Desire and editor of the news magazine Tehelka, who described how India is a society in great flux and an incredibly complex country trying to find a sense of clarity. "We have an unequal and unjust world. In some sense the quest of art has to be justice." He expressed his belief that the novel is a "fundamentally subversive form and should challenge the status quo". A vast swathe of the country's citizens, he said, were not free agents, but straitened by circumstances.

One recurrent theme has been the differences between dictatorships and democracy: what does it mean to have a true democracy? This is tied in, of course, with issues of free speech and a free press - the ability of a citizen to connect with their communities and with the wider world and to communicate their thoughts and beliefs, within the bounds of the law. I have interviewed people whose lives have straddled both dictatorships and democracies, as well as both imperialist and independent rule, and these people had great insights to share which bring benefit to us here in the UK as we must still debate and implement effective forms of governance. Following my Fellowship I also had the chance to visit Iraq, where the thinking, ideas, and perspectives gained throughout my travels helped me better to understand the new democracy and former dictatorship.

As the riots of Summer 2011 show, there are some within society who value human life so little as to be able to rob from a wounded young boy, and for whom forms of expression are not the spoken or written word, but instead the anarchic and destructive anti-communication of violence - a lit match used to set ablaze homes and livelihoods, of weapons used to inflict hurt. As violence becomes the way in which our own governing powers respond to violence, and as our Prime Minister uses the language of war, declaring

" war on rioters", it is ever more important to remember the lessons of the past, the lessons learnt by those countries around the world who have struggled through violence - it is not with a knife or a gun or a baton but through dialogue and conversation that we might understand those unlike our own selves, that we might build bridges to a better future for all.

A higher than hoped percentage within the UK itself suffers from poor literacy levels, and in order to foster effective dialogue and communication - to better connect - these literacy rates could be improved through implementing schemes such as the one described in the Kenya section of this report: making the process of storytelling and learning into an enjoyable communal activity where it is possible to see the results of one's own efforts, and opening more centres in deprived areas which foster the teaching and practice of storytelling and improving literacy and reading skills. Schemes such as this (modelled upon the 826 Valencia project demonstrated in Nairobi) would rely on volunteers as government funding becomes increasingly scarce and thus the notion of the "common good" is crucial.

There has been some debate recently over the role of social media in the riots: if outlets such as Twitter aided the spread of the rioting should they therefore be curtailed during periods of rioting? As the events of the Arab Spring showed, such outlets also communicate vital information and can have a positive, democratizing force, and crucially can garner people into working towards the "common good" - for example, riot clean-ups were organized overnight in major cities thanks to the force of the web and Twitter. Therefore it is vital that young people have the opportunity to *learn how best to use these tools* - which have the potential to be either creative or destructive depending on the way in which they are used. Here the lessons learned through the workshops I attended and gave around the world are of great benefit: We need more workshops for young people, educating them in the potentialities available to them for good communication - the ways that they can better connect.

"The nano-second community": how online communication might effect positive change:

I have also been gauging the ways in which social media outlets are being used to connect here in the UK by organizations who have a key interest in freedom of expression. For example, I spoke with the Director of English PEN, Jonathan Heawood, meeting at PEN's

founding centre in London. PEN campaigns for writers' freedoms around the world, such as free speech issues around libel in the UK and issues of censorship, as well as working with schools, prisons and refugee groups. "A really positive, creative way of supporting world writers is just to make sure that they're read", says Heawood. Its recent libel campaign succeeded in the government reforming libel laws. The power of online communciation played a role in this since the campaign went 'viral', garnering thousands of signatures, among them many high profile supporters. "This might never have happened with old school marketing", acknowledges Heawood. He also points out the limitations of the Twitter-world, such as its encouragement of a short attention span. "It's more of a nano-second community", he says. A "nano-second community" seems like a an apt term to describe these kind of new communities - where one's attention can be grabbed momentarily, enough time, for example, to sign a petition, make a donation, or even have one's ideas changed - thus, in some small yet significant way such a moment can effect change. These snatched moments in time can have a cumulatively enormous power to effect change - and to make a difference.

It is my aim to use online writing space to hold people's attention for lengthier time-spans via powerful writing, for example in my web magazine, globaldispatches.co.uk - exploring ways to capture the concentration in a world where our concentration is increasingly fragmented.

Questions beget more questions:

I have thought about questions on a wide range of topics: at the dawn of a new century, how can we fulfill the promise of the 'common good'? What are the difficulties of investigative journalism and reporting in today's world? How can we present information and ideas in an innovative way? How should we best listen and speak? Questions beget more questions, and these are issues at the core of my work that I continue exploring, and continue documenting new perspectives and ideas in my website magazine projects whilst maintaining links with contacts established overseas.

My travels have strengthened my commitment to the need for good communication and breaking down barriers between cultures and continents in order to connect with - and share stories and ideas with - those unlike our own selves. I have also seen the great interconnectivity of our stories; those we think of as being far removed actually have some unexpected link, not least the shared fact of being human. I therefore chose the name "World of Stories / global dispatches" for my website magazine, as it reflects how much our world is made up of the stories we are told, and those that we tell.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ANITA SETHI
SUN SETS IN NAKURU, KENYA