

Imaging/Reimagining Departure and Return

Carlina Duan

The rain is a constant companion during my stay with my grandmother in Kerala, this land of coconuts. Kerala, land of rain. I am in my first year of grad school, and although I've visited India before—I was eight years old the first time—this trip is my first abroad without my parents.

—Aimee Nezhukumatathil, “Monsoon and Peacock,” *Ecotone* 24

About this guide

This teaching guide includes questions for discussion, an in-class activity, and a writing prompt. It is created in conversation with Eve Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading, as described in her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Sedgwick contrasts reparative reading with paranoid reading, noting that we privilege paranoid, or primarily suspicious, reading as “a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (125). In comparison, she writes, the practices of reparative reading are “no less acute . . . , no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantastic” (150). As Sedgwick suggests, reparative reading opens up possibilities for our engagement with the text, making room for joy as a critical reading strategy. This strategy “undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices, are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (151).

Inspired by Sedgwick’s reparative-reading framework, and by a class discussion led by literature scholar Megan Sweeney on texts as offerings, my students and I consider not only the argument, but also the offering of every text. What is the writer trying to state or call into being? What is the writer offering to the world? To us? How can we make ourselves, as readers, more open to receiving a text on its own terms?

Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s essay in *Ecotone*’s Craft Issue offers me the image-work of joy as a technique to variously unlearn, inhabit, and deeply celebrate the many complex textures of inheriting and returning to a place.

This guide is geared toward undergraduate creative-writing classes, but can be adapted for other contexts.

Relevant fields: Creative writing, English

Notes for class preparation: The writing prompt included below asks students to identify a found text to use in their work. To allow them to prepare, you may wish to assign the first three parts of the prompt before a class meeting, and then complete the fourth part in class.

Questions for discussion

A. “I was a girl who loved to draw,” Nezhukumathathil writes in “Monsoon and Peacock” (129). Her images throughout the essay pay particular attention to visual textures and colors in the surrounding world. How is imagery of landscape working in each section? What does the imagery insist on? How do separate images join together to map meaning throughout the work?

B. In “Monsoon and Peacock,” Nezhukumathathil describes moments of learning (and un-learning) “home/land” (or ideas of home/land). She begins with her most recent trip to Kerala. “I’ve learned the small skitter of insects knocking against the mosquito netting over my bed is loudest when the lights are on, so I make it a point to write aerogrammes to my friends back home only in daylight,” she writes (124). She also embeds found texts—an ice cream menu, an excerpt from a fable—into her narratives of place.

i. How does the structure of this essay inform the knowledge of place (or journey toward knowing place) in this essay?

ii. Why might Nezhukumathathil have chosen to split the essay into two parts? Why begin with monsoon, rather than peacock?

C. Choose another work from the Craft Issue, in any genre.

i. List three images of place the work offers that you find especially effective.

ii. Are any of these images made using similar strategies to those in “Monsoon and Peacock”? Describe one such strategy.

Mapping Images

In-class activity

To continue thinking about Question A, we will create individual and collective visual maps of the image-work in the essay.

i. List or draw five to ten of Nezhukumathathil’s images in your notebook.

ii. Next, as a class, list or draw all the images collectively on the board.

iii. Now consider the connections and conversations between images. Are there links? Draw a visual map between the images, showing how they are connected or organized in the essay. What does this map teach you about Nezhukumathathil’s craft choices?

Writing Found Texts

Writing Prompt

- i. Think about a place you've departed, or a place you've returned to. This can be a specific place—a gas station, or your grandmother's kitchen, for example—or a larger place, such as the state of Kerala, India, to which Nezhukumatathil returns. It can be a place that evokes happy memories for you, or more complicated emotions, or both.
- ii. Next, make a list of five sensory details—visual, sonic, tangible, and the like—found in this place.
- iii. Using your list of sensory details and your found text, write the story of your return or departure to or from this place. In leaving or arriving, what did you or might you uncover? What might you give, or give up? What might you reclaim?

Works Cited

Sedgwick, Eve. "Paranoid and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–151. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

About the author

Carlina Duan is a writer-educator from Michigan. The author of the poetry collection *I Wore My Blackest Hair*, she currently teaches at the University of Michigan, where she is also a PhD student in the Joint Program of English and Education. Carlina directs a short-story workshop for young writers at Neutral Zone, a youth center for creative arts in Ann Arbor. She believes in gardens. Visit her at carlinaduan.com.