

EVENT TITLE: Writing South-East Asia Away From The Western Gaze

EVENT DESCRIPTION: How can we tell our stories on our own terms? Five Anglophone writers from Myanmar, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand talk about reclaiming perspectives and writing that does not pander to orientalist expectations. What does it mean to use English, an imperial language, in this decolonial work, particularly in such multicultural, multilingual countries, and what is the role of translation in navigating this cultural and linguistic fluidity?

Opening Remarks:

- Welcome to our panel on Anglophone writing from South-east Asia. I'm Jeremy Tiang, and I am joined here by Sunisa Manning, YZ Chin and Gina Apostol, and on the screen by Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint.
- Today we will reflect on what it means for our writing practices that we write in English, a colonial language, and how this has affected our work.
- What are the strategies with which we have tried to reclaim the language for ourselves, rather than reinscribing colonial hierarchies?

To start us off, we have Sunisa Manning, a Thai and American novelist. She's the author of *A Good True Thai*, which was a finalist for the 2020 Epigram Books Fiction Prize for Southeast Asian Writers. The recipient of the Steinbeck Fellowship, a residency from Hedgebrook, and other honors, she lives in Philadelphia.

Sunisa, you said in an interview that while writing *A Good True Thai*: “The way I wrote about Thailand, and I did it deliberately, was not to show it to foreigners. If the outside of the circle is what foreigners see, I really wanted to write for the inside of the circle – I wanted to write a book that took place entirely within a Thai consciousness that isn’t mediated by this white, usually foreign gaze.”

Could you say more about where you situate yourself, as someone who grew up in Bangkok and now lives in the US, and about the role the English language plays in your writing? Was it a conscious choice to write in English?

Our second speaker is YZ Chin, the author of *Edge Case*, a novel, and the story collection *Though I Get Home*, which won the Louise Meriwether First Book Prize and the Asian/Pacific American Award For Literature honor title. Her translation of *The Age of Goodbyes* by Li Zishu is forthcoming.

YZ, in your recent novel *Edge Case*, your protagonist Edwina describes growing up in Malaysia and reading “the most English stories possible, by the likes of Enid Blyton,” while also experiencing music from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the news in Malay, and Hollywood films. She says, “I’d been dipped indiscriminately into the great vat dyes of so many different cultures that were not strictly ‘mine,’ never examining the biases of their origins until I was already a horrid patchwork quilt of clashing colors.” How far does this reflect your own experience, and has this cultural patchwork had a bearing on your choice to write in English?

Next we have Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint, the author of the novel *The End of Peril, the End of Enmity, the End of Strife, A Haven* (Noemi Press, 2018), which won an Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, and *Names for Light: A Family History* (Graywolf Press, 2021), which won the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize.

Thirii, in *Names for Light* you describe your resentment of the English language, which is your “native tongue, though not the only one,” and describe being asked “how to pronounce your name in your language. Yes, your language, the one that belongs to you, the only one that is really yours. This language, English, of course, is ours.” How does this fraught relationship with English in your writing, and have you ever felt moved to write in your other “native tongue(s)”?

Our final speaker is Gina Apostol, whose last novels, *Insurrecto* and *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*, explore the Philippine revolutions against America and Spain. Her third novel, *Gun Dealers' Daughter*, won the 2013 PEN/Open Book Award. Her first two novels won the Juan Laya Prize (Philippine National Book Award).”

Gina, in your bildungsroman *Bibliolepsy*, your protagonist Primi Peregrino talks about reading Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* twice, “once in English, in a corrupt version of sentimental miasma, and second in Tagalog, in a stark, lucid urgency that made me want to kill all Spaniards above ten years of age.” One might presume that the language a person writes in, even more than the one they read in, shapes their perspective. How do you think your choice of English has affected your writing?

Staying with you, Gina, the main character of your novel *Insurrecto* is a translator named Magsalin, which means “to translate” in Tagalog. Could you say a bit about the role of translation in the corpus of Filipino literature, and the ways translation interacts with Anglophone work?

YZ, not only are you an accomplished author, your first book as a translator is being published later this year – Li Zi Shu’s *The Age of Goodbyes*. How did you find your way into literary translation, and do you think the experience will change your Anglophone writing?

Thirii, you speak in your book about the importance of naming – “Names change often when a country is created by men. Men know that names, that words, hold power. This is why they impose their names on women.” Even the name of the country is fraught, with “Burma” coming from the “remarkably–if not maliciously–bad” British transliteration, while “Myanmar” could be seen as legitimizing the military junta.

You also reflect on the difference connotations of words – for example, “island” in English “is a place of escape, of wonder, land appearing where land was not expected” while “kyun” in Bamar is “a dismal, claustrophobic... a place trapped by water, a forsaken place, a place of banishment.” These movements between languages constitute an act of translation, of sorts. How do you navigate the slipperiness of writing about a place, using words in English that may not always have the same resonance?

Sunisa, when we first meet Lek in *A Good True Thai*, she is performing an act of double translation – talking about *Madame Bovary* as she fights to keep her place in school, “her mind skittering over the French novel, turning the words into English. Underneath in Thai she wondered if she even wanted to stay here.” I think many of us in the diaspora can identify with this double or triple consciousness, and the way it is tied to language. Do you think this is something you will continue to explore in your writing?

And finally, a question for all our panelists: Many of our books have incorporated resistance movements such as insurrections and

demonstrations. Many of these are still contested events in the countries where they took place.

What is your research process, and how does it account for the Western gaze? How do you navigate the fact that many historical sources are colonial in origin? At the same time, how can we account for bias in places where the narrative is controlled by the government?

Now let's take some questions from the audience.