

EVENT TITLE:

Disrupting the Lexicon: Making Meaning with Polyglot Texts

EVENT DESCRIPTION:

Poets and novelists who collectively speak 10+ languages will explore how words, phrases, and cadences in other languages--in or out of translation--help create meaning, context, atmosphere, and connection in English-language texts. Are there 'rules' for writing with multiple languages? Who makes them? Whom do they serve? What are practical, artistic, and ethical considerations for writers incorporating other languages? How does language inform the way we navigate and write the world?

EVENT CATEGORY:

Fiction and Poetry / Craft & Criticism

MODERATOR INTRODUCTION AND HOUSEKEEPING REMARKS**EVENT PARTICIPANTS:****Event Organizer & Moderator Amy Brill:**

I write everything. My fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *One Story*, *The Common*, *Guernica*, *Electric Literature*, *The Washington Post*, *Medium*, *Salon*, *Lapham's Quarterly*, and in anthologies including *Labor Day*, *Before & After*, and *Lost & Found: Stories from New York*. My first novel, *The Movement of Stars*, was published by Riverhead Books in 2013, and my second novel is... hopefully... coming soon! Very soon. My first translation, of children's book *La Caimana*, was published in 2021. I speak English, Spanish, conversational Hebrew, a smidgen of French and a dollop of Yiddish, my great-grandmother's mother tongue.

I'm joined by four stellar women.

Courtney Maum is the author of five books including the forthcoming memoir *THE YEAR OF THE HORSES*. Her historical novel, *COSTALEGRE*, features characters speaking a range of different languages, and her first book is written from the point of view of a British man, which saw Courtney grappling with the British version of English. She majored in Comparative Literature and translated Michel

Houellebecq for her thesis. Courtney speaks English and French, and is dusting off her Spanish.

Ru Freeman is an award-winning Sri Lankan and American novelist, poet, editor, and critic, whose work appears internationally and in translation. She is the author of the forthcoming story collection, *Sleeping Alone*, and the collection of essays, *Bon Courage*. Her previous works include the novels, *A Disobedient Girl* and *On Sal Mal Lane*, a *New York Times* Editors' Choice Book, and two anthologies, *Extraordinary Rendition: (American) Writers on Palestine*, and *Indivisible: Global Leaders on Shared Security*. She holds an MFA in Poetry, and an MA in labor studies, researching female migrant labor in Kuwait, the UAE, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She has worked at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC; the South Asia office of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); and for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) on social justice initiatives around sanctuary and human rights. She teaches creative writing in the US and abroad and directs the Artist Network at Narrative 4. Ru speaks Sinhala, English, passing French, and what she calls "rudimentary" Italian and Portuguese.

and on the Zooms...

Rosa Alcalá (at 6 am pacific time, praise her), is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *MyOTHER TONGUE* (Futurepoem, 2017), described by Stephanie Burt in the *New York Times* as capturing "the messy emotions and miscommunications that move between languages" and a reminder of "how little precedent there is for honest writing [about mothers and daughters], compared with the epic traditions of fathers and sons." Alcalá's poems have appeared in *The Nation* and *American Poetry Review*, among other journals, and are included in numerous anthologies, such as *Best American Poetry* (Scribner 2019 & 2021); *American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*, edited by Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy (Wesleyan UP, 2018); and *The Poem Is You: 60 Contemporary American Poems and How to Read Them* by Stephanie Burt (Harvard UP, 2016). A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowship, and Runner-Up for a

PEN Translation Award, she is the editor and co-translator of *New & Selected Poems of Cecilia Vicuña* (Kelsey Street Press, 2018). She is Chair of the Department of Creative Writing and Bilingual MFA Program at the University of Texas at El Paso. Rosa speaks Spanish and English.

Nathalie Handal is a poet, playwright, translator, and editor. Originally of a Palestinian family from Bethlehem, she has lived in Europe, Latin America, the Arab world, and the United States. Handal earned an MFA in poetry from Bennington College and an MPhil in drama and English from the University of London. She is the author of the poetry collections *The Neverfield* (1999); *The Lives of Rain* (2005); and *Love and Strange Horses* (2010), winner of the 2011 Gold Medal Independent Publisher Book Award, which the *New York Times* says is “a book that trembles with belonging (and longing);” and *Poet in Andalucía* (2012), which includes, as Alice Walker wrote, “poems of depth and weight and the sorrowing song of longing and resolve”; the flash collection *The Republics* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), winner of the Arab American Book Award; and *Life in a Country Album* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 Palestine Book Award. Nathalie speaks French, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Creole, and English, and has knowledge of Greek, Portuguese, Russian, and Armenian.

INTRODUCTION:

This panel is a direct result of my own need to work through a creative problem. My novel, *Hotel Havana*, is about a Jewish immigrant to Havana in 1938. Her native tongue is Yiddish—my paternal grandmother’s only language, and one I heard sporadically growing up but never learned to speak. She is living, though, in a Spanish-speaking country—luckily, I *do* speak fluent Spanish—but of course, the book is in English. So all three languages made appearances throughout. But when my agent read the first draft, among other things, she said I had to figure out the rules for what appeared in what language. The rules? What rules? Who are they for? How are they formed? If language is the heart of connection, inclusion, belonging—of literature itself—how could I best express fear, loss, joy, desire, and grief that spanned cultures and tongues? This question seemed especially resonant at this moment, in our

nation of immigrants, comprised of people who have built and rebuilt lives and selves on the foundation and scaffold of language: what Aleksander Hemon has called a "trail of homelands, no longer available except by way of memory, music, and storytelling."

And that is what brought us here. Each of our panelists' work is informed by other languages, sometimes more than one, and all of us incorporate those into our texts. I've asked each panelist to prepare a very short reading—a minute or two—of a passage or poem that does this in a way they feel passionate about. So we will begin there.

SHORT READINGS FROM PANELISTS

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. (Nathalie Handal) You're our most impressive polyglot, and I want to share something you said in an interview -- "Languages are openings that make visible the shadows and breaths of other places and people." Can you expand on that a little bit?
2. (Courtney Maum) I want to turn from the ephemeral idea of shadows and breaths to the more practical craft area—how and when do we place words, phrases, entire chunks of dialogue, in other languages in our work? Are there "rules," as my agent—who I adore, by the way—told me there had to be? What are they? Courtney, in *Costalegre*, there are French, German, and Spanish phrases you leave in the vernacular. You've framed this as "proximity versus distance to the narrator—can you talk about the effect of that on the reader and the balance between exclusion (if the reader doesn't speak that language) and verisimilitude? How do we make those decisions? Everyone can chime in on this.
3. (Rosa Alcalá) Many of us are teachers, and some of us were raised in, or studied and learned in multiple languages. As the chair of a bilingual MFA program, how do you create space for more than English? And how does that contrast with the kind of messaging you received in school about what was permitted in terms of multilingual writing, code-switching, etc.?

4. (Ru Freeman) I'd like to touch on the question of whether language *belongs* to anyone. Is it cultural currency, subject to appropriation, or is it for everyone to engage with, stumble through, reach for, in service of a story? Of art? Of communication? As someone who does so much work in the arena of social justice, human rights, and migrant issues, and as a writer who works across multiple genres, can you share your thoughts on this?

5. (All) Is there an inherent act of translation involved in the writing of fiction and poetry to begin with? Which is to ask, when you write from a different gender or age, when we embody a character on the page, are we inherently writing in a different language?

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE