

## **EVENT TITLE: Native Tongues: Teaching Creative Writing to Multilingual International Students**

**Event Description:** Given how fundamental a writer's language is to the experience and portrayal of their world, how does the negotiation between a multilingual writer's "home" language and writing language (English) present both challenges and opportunities? Creative writing teachers from three continents explore how multilingual students can be supported and encouraged, and discuss conditions under which writers not only translate but also integrate plural languages and legacies into new experiences and thought.

### **EVENT CATEGORY: Pedagogy**

#### **Event Organizer & Moderator**

**Huan Hsu:** Huan Hsu is the author of *The Porcelain Thief: Searching the Middle Kingdom for Buried China*. His essays and fiction have appeared in *Slate*, *The Guardian*, *The Literary Review*, and *Lucky Peach*. He teaches journalism and creative writing at Amsterdam University College in the Netherlands.

#### **Event Participants**

**Hedgie Choi:** Hedgie Choi is an MFA candidate for fiction at The Writing Seminars. She received her MFA in poetry from the Michener Center for Writers in 2021. She translated *Pillar of Books* by Moon Bo Young and co-translated *Hysteria* by Kim Yideum.

**Wade Geary:** Wade Geary is a lecturer at Amsterdam University College where he teaches writing and literature courses. In addition to his teaching duties, he is an academic advisor and the capstone coordinator.

**Jane Lewty:** Jane Lewty is the author of two collections of poetry: *Bravura Cool* and *In One Form To Find Another*. She has also co-edited two volumes of essays: *Broadcasting Modernism* and *Pornotopias: Image, Desire, Apocalypse*. She has held faculty positions at universities in the UK, USA, and the Netherlands.

**Page Kerry Richards:** Page Richards received her Ph.D. in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard University and a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Boston University. Chair of Creative Writing & Theatre at The University of Hong Kong, she founded and directs The HKU Guild.

#### **Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements**

I will welcome the audience and read the standard reminders.

The seed for this panel was planted many years ago when I read this journal article (attached as a supplemental file). Basically, research has found that East Asians are more sensitive to contextual information than Westerners—which seems to support the stereotype of Westerners being direct and Asians being meandering and which also helped explain why my mom can't tell a story without endless digressions.

So these researchers explored the extent to which this cultural variation was observable in art and photography. I'll try to sum it up concisely (while quoting liberally from the study):

They found that traditional East Asian art was predominately context-inclusive (higher horizons, less emphasis on the face in portraits, more people in scenes) whereas Western art was predominately object-focused (less field information, more emphasis on the face in portraits); when asked to draw landscapes, subjects from East Asia tended to draw pictures with higher horizons and more field information; when asked to take photographs of a model, East Asian subjects tended to place the model in the background as if the model were part of a context whereas Western subjects prioritized the model at the expense of the background; when shown a selection of photographs, subjects from East Asia preferred those that corresponded to the aesthetic traditions of their cultures.

The researchers speculate that culture interacts with aesthetics: For East Asians, who live in a complex social world with many role relations, one's attention is likely to be directed outside oneself and toward the social field. So East Asians developed *context-sensitive attention*—meaning they are attentive to field information and relationships among context elements. In contrast, for Westerners who live in a world with fewer and less significant social relations and role constraints, it may be possible to attend primarily to salient objects. This may be tracked back to the ancient Greeks who learned to attend primarily to discrete objects without being overly concerned with relationships among objects or with field information. As a corollary, Western metaphysics, in general, emphasized the understanding of the properties of objects, the categorization of them, and the discovery of universal rules governing situations and behaviors. Under such philosophical circumstances, Westerners historically have developed *object-oriented attention*.

So you can probably see how I started thinking about this in relation to writing aesthetics and language. If aesthetics are connected with culture, and these aesthetics can be expressed in visual language, what about the interaction between culture, aesthetics, and written language? Given how fundamental a writer's language is to the experience and portrayal of their world, how does the negotiation between a multilingual writer's "home" language and writing language (English) present both challenges and opportunities?

Though English may be the lingua franca for international creative writing, it can also have a marginalizing effect. Recognizing the plurality of linguistic--and ontological--backgrounds is a precondition for inclusivity, visibility, and representation, and leaning into these backgrounds may present exciting opportunities for the development of new voices, new audiences, and new works.

Each of the panelists—creative writing teachers and practitioners across three continents—will introduce themselves and give a brief overview of their personal experiences teaching multilingual creative writers and/or writing as a multilingual person. Over the next hour we'll explore how multilingual students can be supported and encouraged, and discuss conditions under which writers not only translate but also integrate plural languages and legacies into new experiences and thought.

## **Participant Initial Remarks**

### **Hedgie Choi:**

I'll talk about the various issues and challenges that multilingual creative writers encounter, such as the baggage that a "home" language may come with and the tendency for readers, teachers, and writing markets to fixate on identity. I'll also discuss my work as a translator of Korean literature.

### **Wade Geary:**

I have taught creative writing in an international bachelor's program in Amsterdam for more than a decade, where more than half of our students come from outside the Netherlands, and I will share my observations as a way of presenting a sort of state of the union. I've noticed that when students come to AUC, even if they're Dutch, they almost pause certain aspects of their development in their home languages because their entire lives become English-centered; they will even begin conversing in English with students from their home countries. Additionally, the pop culture that often informs students' aesthetic sensibilities—how to structure a narrative, how to create an image—is predominantly English-based. The super-national, cosmopolitan, often elitist bubble of international university programs can divorce students from a sense of place, which is often where writers draw inspiration from, and English becomes the core while other languages remain peripheral. This can create headwinds for anyone trying to tap into their non-English language abilities. Going from the core to the periphery can feel like stroking a cat in the wrong direction.

### **Jane Lewty:**

I have had the ability to teach creative writing in three different systems – the US, the UK, and the Dutch systems – and while each of these systems is quite distinct, the issues and questions addressed by this panel remain uniform for students in each place since these institutions can often be seen as a subset of a larger international ethos. I'm hoping to comment on the way this tension between writing in English and writing in a "home" language can often bring up similar dilemmas for students whilst leaving room for distinct complications depending on a myriad of factors. Specifically, I'm interested in the way these dilemmas can often create opportunities within student writing, specifically for poetry writing.

### **Page Richards:**

Here, in Hong Kong, we talk about many of these questions and issues, literally, daily. We look at the "environments" and even "built environment" of languages, multiple languages as well as visual languages in relation to written languages; questions of "translation" or "self-translation" in relation to "through-lines" of multilingual speakers and writers; the wider ecosystem of languages for multilingual and monolingual speakers/writers upon conception and/or dissemination; and much more. I recently wrote a chapter, "Reframing the Field: Genre and the Rising Twenty-First-Century Multilingual Writer," published in a Routledge collection, "Teaching Creative Writing in Asia," edited by Darryl Whetter. I'll highlight some of the main ideas from the chapter and the collection.

## **Moderator Questions**

- 1) How can creative writing courses be structured to incorporate and explore language besides English in a way that transcends identity and comes closer to aesthetic, where identity can be part of the work but is not central to it? And how can we be inclusive while avoiding the potentially patronizing assumptions that multilingual writers feel stifled by having to write in English, or that they would have something to say in another language?
- 2) What specific activities or exercises can creative writing teachers use in the classroom to give space for multilingual students to mine their language backgrounds? And what about students who only speak English? Is it possible to bend English to other languages, as opposed to the traditional mission of translating other languages into English?
- 3) Where is this all going? What is the future of multilingual creative writing?
- 4) English-only international institutions sometimes package creative writing courses as opportunities for students to improve and strengthen their English speaking and writing skills. While this possibility may exist, it could also create aims that run perpendicular to the student's creative aspirations. How can instructors still aid students, and comment on student writing, when the student has language-based expectations?
- 5) Thinking about audience is a common discussion in creative writing courses, but this conversation can become more complex for multilingual writers. Choosing between English and the "home" language can signify so much regarding identity, et cetera, but it may also simply mean the author is attempting to reach different audiences. (Note: This may seem like a simple choice between international and localized audiences, but this "partitioning" seems reductive.) How can a student balance practical questions which may run counter to issues of identity or transform a literary aesthetic? How can instructors support students with these difficult conversations?
- 6) Creative writing courses often use restriction-based writing exercises to help highlight how constraints can be generative instead of limiting. How can exercises with this approach connect to conversations about the choices inherent in writing in English or a "home" language (which also deal with restriction, albeit in a different way)? Can students understand, and perhaps embrace, how working with restraints in writing may reveal insight into conversations regarding choice of language for a piece of writing?

## Q&A