Decolonizing American Literature: The Goals, Challenges, and Strategies of Anglophone Writers

Panelists: Gemini Wahhaj, Sehba Sarwar, Oindrila Mukherjee, Namrata Poddar
10:35 am - 11:50 am on Thursday February 8, 2024
Room 2502A, Kansas City Convention Center, Level 2

Description:
Four writers will discuss decolonizing American literature through the examples of literary works in the colonial languages of English and French from black, brown, and Asian writers across the world, as well as literature in Indian languages, including Urdu and Bengali. Panelists will discuss the goals of decolonial anglophone literature and consider the challenges and strategies of writers confronting imperial patterns in American literature.

The panel will be of value to all BIPOC writers and writers who have read in other languages than English or who are interested in understanding the project of decolonizing literature. Panelists will offer a rich diversity of experience, as their reading and academic backgrounds include reading in the Western canon, world literature in colonial languages by colonized writers, and vernacular languages of South Asia. They will offer both an academic take and experience in writing practice.

Outline:
After brief introductions, panelists will speak for 50 minutes addressing the following questions:

- how do we draw on the traditions of decolonial literature around the world,
- how do we write from traditions beyond the anglophone novel,
- how do we negotiate with the expectations of structure and craft in the US publishing industry, and
- what craft strategies do we bring to bridge the gap between accepted narratives and structures and our own literary traditions and goals.

Then open to questions from the audience.

Bios:

Oindrila Mukherjee is the author of the novel The Dream Builders. She is an Associate Professor of Writing at Grand Valley State University. The recipient of fellowships from Emory University and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, she is a Contributing Editor for the literary magazine Aster(Ix).

Sehba Sarwar, author of Black Wings (Veliz Books, 2019), is a recipient of multiple artist awards including the 2023-24 Artist Award (Los Angeles’s Department of Culture), the 2014-15 Artistic Innovations Grant (Mid-America Arts Alliance), and others. Her short stories have been anthologized by Feminist Press, Akashic Books, and Harper Collins India, and her essays have appeared in the New York Times, Callaloo, LA Times, Creative Times Report, and elsewhere. The founder of a social justice arts organization, Sarwar has produced publications and art shows, and her Borderlines series (2013-2018) explores South Asian and North American borders. She is currently based in Los Angeles.

Gemini Wahhaj: Gemini Wahhaj is the author of the novel The Children of This Madness (7.13 Books, December 2023) and the short-story collection Katy Family (Jackleg Press, Spring 2025). Her fiction is in or forthcoming in Granta, Third Coast, Chicago Quarterly Review, and other magazines. She has a PhD in creative writing from the University of Houston, where she received the James A. Michener award for fiction and the Cambor/Inprint fellowship. She was senior editor of Feminist Economics. She is Associate Professor of English at Lone Star College in Houston.