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How to drown: bilingual creative writers in a sea of meanings

Abstract:

In many Southeast Asian countries, English represents a colonial tradition, whose merits co-exist alongside other languages that are also seen as creative: Mandarin, Tagalog, Cantonese, Malay. In the everyday, the bilingualism that emerges in these spaces is playful, with languages like Chinglish and Taglish re-invigorating the old kingdoms of proper English. And yet, as English educators we often take the playfulness out of language learning: we treat English as hierarchical, class-driven, authoritative, dignified, a certificate through which students can maximize their prospects. This essay argues for a playful teaching of English writing that does not see failure in grammar mistakes, or incorrectness in accents. Taking inspiration from writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, as well as my own bilingual creative writing students, I explore the ways in which we can perceive of English as a creative medium to communicate self-expression and feeling. In Hong Kong where I work, the colonial routes of bilingualism have always been in the colonial power's favor, but this has hinged on the presumption that translation was done obediently, in respect to a sacred and immovable linguistic hierarchy, a tower of babel. Teaching in English need not be an authoritative nor a colonial practice. Instead, we can offer students an aporia of meaning engaged in play, delight, and failure.

Biographical Note:

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The student interviewees approached our panel of writing professors, eager to display their well-practiced writing skills, their frenetic eyes troubled by the knowledge that only one of them could be accepted into our writing program. We gave the students a basic prompt: 'Describe summer in two sentences'. The three of them, each in their early twenties, shuffled the cuffs of their black business suits and tapped their university-brand pens on small leaflets of paper. After ten minutes they handed back their writing samples. Their responses were typical: women dancing in fields, boys and girls in love, descriptions of flowers that could have been from Wordsworth's fabricated sun-drenched Lake District (it's really rain-drenched). The students were applying to join our creative writing program at Hong Kong Baptist University, and to do so, they had to prove their ability to use English creatively. After ten minutes, the other professors and I graded their work without remorse, checking for proper grammar, clever word play, or anything that didn't sound cliché. Check, check plus, check minus.

I grew distraught at the sudden immediacy through which the papers could be graded. There was a given standard for all languages, audiences and peoples that fell under creative writing. Summer—what was summer to these Hong Kong students? Perhaps we'd never know. That was not the question we asked. I walked out praying this would be the last time I'd ever give a test like this. 'Describe summer in two sentences' – for whom are they describing summer? In what genre are they hoping to fit into (prose, poetry, song lyrics)? Without attending to these issues the answers are implicitly placed within the proud and inescapable tradition of British literary colonisation. The audience? Implicitly English natives, implicitly white, implicitly within the grand tradition of literary merit becoming more irrelevant with every Harry Potter-like franchise. What are we teaching these Asian students – whom Western media paints as lacking so much in creative and critical thinking – that to be 'creative' was to mimic the white European literary tradition?

And then the broken English. If these sparse sentences were meant for a Hong Kong audience, the grammar would change drastically. Instead, we grind their sentences up as if in a blender, treating each grammar error like a rock that brings the machine to a sudden halt. At every pause we mark their failures. Readers should not 'work' to read your work. If your work fails to put us at ease in our own language, it is your failure, not ours.

In Hong Kong we teach our students in English, which is not their mother tongue.[1] This makes our context for creative writing bilingual, so that the meaning of words become arbitrary.[2] Doris Sommer's *Bilingual Aesthetics* describes bilingual creativity as an overloaded system that unsettles meanings:

> When more than one word points to a familiar thing, the excess shows that no one word can own or be that thing. Several contending words point, each imperfectly...Words are not proper and don't stay put. They wander into adjacent language fields, get lost in translation, pick up tics from foreign interference, and so can't quite mean what they say. (loc 203)

This bilingual context is a marked departure from America, Canada, and the U.K., wherein only one language, English, passes for creative merit, with others relegated to the realm of annoying babble. In Hong Kong, as in many Southeast Asian countries,

English represents a colonial tradition alongside native creative languages—Mandarin, Tagalog, Cantonese, Malay. It's a context known for producing 'bilingual fun,' where Chinglish and Taglish re-invigorate the old kingdoms of proper English. Bilingualism *is* fun because we are expected to make mistakes, even to fail, which too can be an aesthetic—for what is more enjoyable than a book of failures?[3]

But if English language learning is anything in Hong Kong, it's certainly not fun. It's hierarchical, class-driven, authoritative, dignified. It's a certificate through which students seek to maximise their prospects. Having learned this is what English is, our students writhe from embarrassment when they fail, while teachers preach with zeal the single-handed mantra of unaccented English. Can we dare our students to take pleasure in failure, to see creative writing as a game that has no perfect way of being played?

Lofty Men, Chiefly White.

Like many Americans, I grew up monolingual. My grandparents spoke a foreign tongue, Illocano, and since Filipinos were speaking Tagalog, my 'mother tongue' was an impossible language. It was never creative, never dignified, never worth the time. So at university I took classes in German, and when I lived abroad I learned Korean, and finally Mandarin, which I learned for two years at the University of Washington, and two more living in Nanjing. Despite my ongoing attempts to learn other tongues, I still identify as monolingual (despite this training, despite living in Korea, China, and Hong Kong). Even if I converse in Mandarin for an hour, I still feel like I am only faking it: the monolingual passing as the real deal.

Jhumpa Lahiri describes learning Italian, a twenty-year venture for her, as a deep lake, with a distant shore that 'seems too far away, beyond my abilities' (3). We watch others swim across in a confident, relaxed manner. But we, monolinguals for life, can only swim the circumference, holding safely onto the edges, and as we wade away, we see the dark blue in the lake's center, wherein lies the possibility of drowning. Lahiri's decision to take on Italian was not motivated by financial or educational uplift.[4]

Like my Hong Kong students, Lahiri lives in a 'kind of linguistic exile,' where her mother tongue has been marked as non-national to her country (Bengali in America, Cantonese in the People's Republic of China). Outside of Hong Kong and Guangdong province, my students feel a linguistic detachment. Their use of global dominant languages—English, Mandarin, Spanish—can only be approached from the outside, marked as foreign, as belonging only to the small province in Southern China and to the jam-packed city of Hong Kong.[5] As an American professor, this is a linguistic estrangement I have never had to confront in the same way. My estrangement has been sexual (queer) and racial (a mixture of Filipino, Chinese, Hawaiian, and white heritages). But even as a native English speaker, my estrangement has too been linguistic, as I was raised unable to speak outside of the ethnic-patois of lower class America. I spoke a denigrated tongue that didn't know Shakespearean romance but knew 'hooking up,' 'hittin' that.' An unruly language learner, I was placed into remedial speech classes, grammar classes, writing classes, and even today, as Dr. Patterson, I still feel like a language poser.

My students and I have that in common—in the eyes of the global English white audience, we will never speak with authority. Our yearning to claim ourselves as creative artists will always seem foolish, out of place. But because we do not belong to a language, we are full of hope and possibility. My role is not to intimidate them with language, or to present English as the kingdom's locked gate, but as a game where everybody, in one way or another, fails. I have gone through two Mandarin teachers in the past year for the same reason. Those who allow me to fail, who do not expect me to pass as a native speaker, but who correct me as an outsider, these are the teachers who make me think well, and creatively, in Chinese.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, charts her creative growth not through, but despite the English instructors in Singapore's University of Malaya (Lim was raised Peranakan in Melaka). Malayan students, she writes, believed English acquisition was 'mystically beyond mere study but was achieved as innate talent' (115). British instructors reinforced this belief. Lim describes them as 'lofty men, chiefly white, to whom we were uninteresting children of the Asian masses' (182). The instructors' disinterest stemmed from the same belief that original, creative use of English cannot come from a bilingual mindset.[6]

Language learning does not prepare students to write creatively. If they engage with English literature, film, or television, it's as outsiders, admirers, distant lovers whose marriage is never meant to be. Poetry too becomes a means of learning English, not a means of re-creation. It represents a gate marked in the beauty of English architecture, but the gate is always locked. As professors we can give them the key, show them the interior, but as soon as we leave, the tour ends. Are we, the teachers, not also the colonial mimics? Can we not see ourselves in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's recollection of 1960s Singapore? She writes:

> We had grown up in a compulsory language system, but, as if to strip us of all language, we were constantly reminded that this language did not being to us. Depriving us of Chinese or Malay or Hindi, British teachers reminded us nonetheless that English was only on loan, a borrowed tongue which we could only garble. (187)

Lim's 'we' are the locals, but the 'we' that concerns me are those like myself, the colonial mimic now turned into the 'native English speaker' who lives and works in Asia, the 'we' who dangles the keys of innate English talent as my birthright. And who can blame me for preaching the myth of innate English creativity – it's the very currency that gives me access to this space, to a higher salary than a local, had they my job. So in practice I rely on my students accepting my interpretations. I depend upon their dependence. If they question my reading, I shake my keys at them, reminding them that they haven't really been allowed access, except through me.

Southeast Asia English

English-language creativity writing in Hong Kong sets the standard for much of Asia, a prideful stamp, except that the standard for Hong Kong is undoubtedly the British colonial literary tradition. Colonialism has transmogrified into empire and global capitalism, but like colonials in the past, its ideas are always formed and reinforced through the education apparatus.[7] English in Southeast Asia today does not merely represent a colonial legacy, but a colonial present – the global dominance of cultural superiority, today figured through the creative prowess represented by the West (the

creative production of Hollywood, the innovation of the tech industry). Creativity in English sets the standard, registering as original and unique while the rest can merely copy (or plagiarise, as we so often accuse our Asian students).

Where English colonial education has been the norm, bilingualism has often been its educational sedative; growing hand-in-hand with multicultural policies encouraging diversity and understanding of others. For minorities and diasporic groups in Canada and the United States, bilingual education is known to enable paths to integration and citizenship without needing to assimilate in terms of adopting religion or values (Tölölyan). In the postcolonial state of Hong Kong, Cantonese is often understood within a form of sovereignty responding to British imperialism (in English) and Chinese imperialism (in Mandarin). This colonial situation has collapsed 'daily language' into a single 'local language' that closes off relations to the outside world. Cantonese belongs as a colonial locality, as Partha Chatterjee wrote, the language belongs so fully to 'that inner domain of cultural identity,' that languages themselves become seen as zones of sovereignty, forever separating English and Cantonese as two types that must be kept pure (7).

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore, each have bilingual language policies, which has helped create a 'cross-roads syndrome,' wherein the collision of Asian and Western cultures has led to vast cultural hybridisation. Like Hong Kong, these states have reinvented English into a linguistic hybridity and a creative engagement that is too often dismissed as grammatically improper (Lim 1993, 11). The set standard of proper English writing sees English as pure utility, where every English language test racks up experience points to level up into a fuller cosmopolitan (and creative) person. Even in the Philippines, the third largest country of English speakers in the world, bilingual education has stressed the proper English that helps facilitate Filipino/a out-migrancy. Migrants are then marketed as well-equipped servants who can easily communicate in Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Middle East. Yet their expertise with English does not translate into creative power. Their participation as migrants in radio, television, film, literature, and music, is routinely made invisible or suppressed. As a cross-regional language, English has been contained from its urban patios ('Taglish') into 'communication English,' a set standard that denies creative dignity.

Bilingual Aesthetics

The first injunction as a writer of color looking to pen an anti-racist, de-imperialising pedagogy for creative writing, is to color this very essay a polemic against writing workshops, particularly of the MFA variety, known to produce 'homogenized, over-workshopped writing void of literary tradition and overly influenced by the mostly upper- and middle-class values and experiences of its students' (Simon).'[7] Junot Díaz (in)famously penned one of many diatribes against this white cultural programed writing when he wrote that the Cornell MFA was 'too white,' as in, it had no faculty of color, saw no problem in that, and seemed determined that writings about racial difference were also a sign of amateur writing.[8] 'In my workshop,' Díaz wrote, 'we never talked about race except on the rare occasion someone wanted to argue that 'race discussions' were exactly the discussion a serious writer should not be having.'

The trivialisation of all writing but the unaccented white male type travels in myriad forms across the Pacific. Whereas Díaz has sought to create an affirming environment for writers of color with the VONA (Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation) workshops, in Hong Kong the sanctum of subversive non-program writing was the now defunct MFA program at City University of Hong Kong, which once hosted Junot Díaz, as well as Shirley Lim and other marginalised writers like Madeleine Thien. The program touted itself as 'The only MFA with an Asian focus,' and featured international authors who taught through distance mentorship and intensive summer workshops (Díaz).[9]

My own writing program is the Creative and Professional Writing Program at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), where we teach creative writing as an undergraduate major. We are a government-funded undergraduate program, and bilingual, so we could perhaps call ourselves the only creative writing major with a Chinese and English bilingual focus. And indeed, we teach bilingualism as far more than a linguistic category. Our classes are in English and Chinese aesthetic theories, literary traditions, and approximately half of our classes are taught in Chinese, half in English.

Hong Kong Baptist University is not quite alone as a bilingual creative writing program. University of Texas at El Paso (UT-El Paso) touts its program as 'the first, and so far the only, creative writing enterprise in the U.S. to institute fully bilingual study.' As with HKBU, UT-El Paso sees bilingualism as an aesthetics that can also offer marginalised students a sense of belonging. Students don't need to mimic English tradition to write well. Arbitrary meanings toss back and forth as students compare linguistic concepts in dynamic environments, shifting the authority of the classroom from a 'dignified English' to a polyglossic disruption of true meaning that moves fluidly between languages and literary traditions.

Bilingual aesthetics, as Doris Sommer writes, responds to what teachers normally see as a 'melancholic overload' of one's language and identity (xv). In the typical Hong Kong English classroom, Chinese only disrupts a student's capabilities with English. Just as rap music only denigrates a dignified tongue. This is the monolithic condition the writer finds herself in, in which she must dismiss her own background as a throwaway past that only distracts her from true thinking. Multiplicity, failure, and the disruption of meaning through overload—these are the aesthetics of the bilingual writer. It's a better cure than the norm that for people of color means vilifying parts of ourselves.

Xu Xi, the founder of the CityU MFA, wrote that the best mentor-writer relationship is when writing students become more thoughtful and critical readers of their own work.[10] Becoming thoughtful for bilinguals means examining what it means to write in more than one language, mode, or creed, and it means recognising how our efforts to teach creative writing are often the same as convincing our students to pass as white. Think about it—are we not saving our 'A' grades specifically for those writers who could pass for a native-speaking English person from the United States or the U.K? We shake the keys, letting them into the world of English creativity (where Chinese is always copying, plagiarising), and convince them that their attempts with English can only seem simple and childlike.

How can we articulate the understanding of failure, multiplicity and 'overload' in the practice of creative writing? Perhaps this means teaching students to have a dialogue with English, even if it seems simple, childlike, flawed. Perhaps it means showing how our writing is so often the same childlike, unpolished play on words. This means giving

up a lot. It means revealing that the keys we hold to the English creative kingdom are fake, made from the gold crowns that once coalesced the god-like authority of an entire culture and people into a single entity. But by giving ourselves up, we can also help students discover a pleasure in language that cannot be owned.

Translation and Bilingual Aesthetics

Students often say that the most difficult part of writing in English is being unable to translate something from Chinese to English – a line, a metaphor, a symbol. My answer is usually, if its untranslatable then don't translate it. Give us the Chinese, and with it, its untranslatability. If this electronic leaflet on which I currently write is aimed at an argument, it's that we should consider treating bilingual Asian students as creative self-translators, who understand how language in its creative forms remains always untranslatable. What do I mean by *untranslatable*?

Vicente Rafael's recent book, *Motherless Tongues* (2016), follows modes of bilingual creativity across colonial contexts from the Philippines to the War on Terror. Against the dominating force of colonial English, Rafael exposes discourses that 'persistently defy direct annexation or conversion either within the same or across different languages and media,' which include 'poetry, jokes, dreams, magic, and other sorts of everyday verbal mythology' (loc 415). Free and literal translations become impossible. Form and content blend in ways that are inseparable from their cultural and linguistic context. Language becomes untranslatable, without definition or set value for exchange, and 'one is plunged into a sea of possible translations, making any single one a betrayal of the original' (loc 426). Aporia emerges within a linguistic shock where meaning collapses.

Bilingual students can face this linguistic aporia by writing boldly, playfully, and honestly about their own experience. The results, in my classes, are many creative writing pieces about being bilingual—about the failure to meet the high standards of proper colonial tongues that preach self-hate. A student of my Spring 2017 class on creative nonfiction, Jeff Chow Jung Sing, wrote this piece reflecting on his bilingualism:

> Perhaps becoming a fisherman
> j
> the fishhook deep under the open waters
> e
> a stomach full of raw fishes
> f f
> hooks on shoulders ready to fish again
>
> Or perhaps a sunchaser in China
> 重昇 is the combination of
> a thousand 千 miles 里
> and a rising 升 sun 日

The first stanza's image of fishhooks appears to imagine the 'overstuffed' condition of bilingual creative thought, made explicit in the code-switching of the second stanza. But the insertion of the student's name, first a 'j' then an 'e,' visualizes this multiplicity within the artist's own identity as the 'stomach full' doubly increases, 'ff.' Here the bilingual artist is a fisherman upon Rafael's 'sea of possible translations.' Not a hierarchical tower of babel with the mythical god 'English,' but an unfathomable water where language can both drag us down (make us sink or drown, as Lahiri wrote) and pull us up (in the hooks of Jeff Chow Jung Sing's 'j' and 'ff').

Self-Translation as Art

No amount of praise for the creativity of English can compensate for the fact that no matter how convincingly the grand English tradition is mimicked, bilingual writers are still continually translating their own creative work into English, even if the translation is immediate—without paper, pen, or pad. Self-translation, Eleftheria Tassiopoulos wrote, is a creative strategy that 'constitutes a problem for traditional literary boundaries,' as it blurs the line between 'the original' and 'the translation' (45). These students are what linguists might call a 'compound bilingual,' or someone who becomes bilingual through studies and repetitive practice, and whose knowledge of their second language is dependent always upon the first. Even if a student can speak English in a way indistinguishable from a native English speaker (and becomes a 'balanced bilingual'), she still is relying upon their native tongue to translate the English she hears, reads, and speaks. Even if we are able to train students to totally mimic the behavior of a native English speaker (and they pass a 'linguistic Turing test' to mimic white nativity), many linguists would argue that the 'original' English writing they produce on the page is still in translation. We have merely taught them to translate in their heads rather than on the paper.

The preoccupation with having students produce original and authentic writing in English is in fact an imaginary line in the sand that teaches colonial mimicry more than it does bold and new writing styles, and even worse, it is totally misguided. As linguist Karl C. Diller has argued, attempting to separate bilingual language learners into 'compound' (those who translate) and 'coordinate' (those who think originally in both languages) is not only faulty ('empty terms' he calls them), but misses out on the potentials of translation. Indeed, much of this separation relies on a questionable definition of what creativity really is, or in this case, what we are taught creativity isn't (translation, copying). Perhaps the single greatest scheme that rots the creative engine of students in Asia is the myth that Asian students copy, while American/European students are inspired. If our students appear to be copying it is because they have been trained to copy—not by their parents or their 'culture,' but by us, the educators who preach correct ('unaccented') grammar and British/American aesthetic styles. All writing that does not conform to these values are considered 'incorrect,' and thus, the only way forward is to copy us.

How ironic is it that Asian creativity is characterised by copying and plagiarisim, and yet, some of the most famous American creative artists living today – Kenneth Goldsmith, David Shields – are advocating for plagiarism as a creative art? When students self-translate, we seem disappointed that the text we receive is not 'the original' work, as if we are not always translating our own words into a more precise style (a process we usually call *revision*). In the same way we don't only see originality

when words are slathered onto a page in bursts of inspiration, so should we not let claims to originality keep us from encouraging students to produce self-translations where both the 'native tongue' work and the English work can be considered originals. When we ask bilingual students to write creatively in English, we are asking them to translate. And translation is a playful, bold practice that can spur creative energies. Creative language does not easily trace back to an answerable source, nor can we account for its travels ('travails'), who is its guest and who its host.[11] If the implicit goal of student self-translation is to totally mimic the aesthetic feelings of the original, we are already in the realm of the untranslatable.

Moving Forward

To translate is to interpret, to re-code, and to think critically about one's own writing. Even in the very act of writing in English, our students are already engaged in thinking about the cultural differences of their English and Chinese audiences, and if it takes a stream of footnotes to explain sections of a piece, then those footnotes should be provided, because that too takes creative thinking.

Proper English reigns in the classroom as Hollywood films reign in the theater as business phraseology reigns over mother tongues. But teaching in English need not be an authoritative practice. English writing can offer an aporia of meaning engaged in play, delight, and failure. The English tongue need not be the limit of translation, where English diffuses onto the colonial others as the word of God (of capital, of power, of creativity). The colonial routes of bilingualism are always in the colonial power's favor, but this hinges on the presumption that translation is done obediently, in respect to a sacred and immovable linguistic hierarchy, a tower of babel. When students attempt to climb that tower, they are merely reproducing what we instill as creative standards of English writing, and worse, they are taught that their ways of speaking English are annoying babble. But the babble of the streets is the sound of the masses having fun with language, as Nick Joaquin wrote, it is the sound of people who speak to 'express their lives, to express their times, and just for the fun of it.' [12] It is a language created for the joy of creation, to see what can be pulled from the sea of words.

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Endnotes

[1] Under the Article 9 of the Hong Kong Basic Law and the Official Languages Ordinance, English and Chinese are of equal status, and make up the official languages of the territory, even though only 3.5% speak English as their first language (CIA World Factbook)

[2] As Sommer writes, 'In principle bi-and multilingualism make similar mischief with meaning' (loc 96)

[3] 'Mistakes can brighten speech with a rise of laughter…or give the pleasure of a found poem' (Sommer loc 151)

[4] Lahiri writes that she has 'no real need to learn this language…I have only desire' (17)

[5] As Judith Mendoza has written, for bilinguals 'second languages remain estranged from our unconscious and our past, their cultural connotations often out of reach. Second languages remain 'foreign' despite a writer's full command of grammar, sentence structure or idiomatic expressions'

[6] Lim writes, 'I wondered why they were teaching us what they believed we who were not English could never possibly appreciate' (185)

[7] See Louis Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'

[8] Simon is paraphrasing Anis Shivani's arguments from his 2011 book *Against the Workshop: Provocations, Polemics, Controversies*

[9] For a fictionalized account of the presumptions of 'ethnic stories' in MFA workshops, see Nam Le's short story 'Love and Honor and Pity and Love and Compassion and Sacrifice' in *The Boat* (2008)

[10] The MFA program at City University of Hong Kong was discontinued in 2015 citing budgetary reasons.

[11] Xu Xi's interview is on the City U MFA website, along with other information about the program (http://www.english.cityu.edu.hk/mfa/faculty/xu-xi.jsp)

[12] Derrida

[13] As the Philippine Anglophone writer Nick Joaquin said of Taglish (Tagalog-English) (Rafael loc 1381)

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