
Steven G. Kellman, ed. *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 339p.

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Readers of this journal might remember a special issue of the *New Yorker* in June 1997 devoted to Indian literature; I recall a large number of colleagues in the English department in which I was a graduate student at that time, at Washington State University, reading the issue with great interest. Salman Rushdie had been asked to guest edit the issue, introducing and selecting texts by other contemporary Indian writers. In his introduction, “Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You!” Rushdie offered a provocative argument suggesting that in terms of prose writing Indian writers working in English—the language left behind by the British Empire—are currently producing more important work than what has been written in the other vernacular languages of India during the same time. For Rushdie, “Indo-Anglian literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books” (246). He suggests that Indian writers appropriate and bend the received English languages to process and articulate their very own Indian experiences.

This issue of language’s ability to function as both a site of oppression and resistance addresses the very concern of the book under review: Steven G. Kellman’s *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft*, in which Rushdie’s essay is reprinted. Kellman, a professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio, also author of *The Translingual Imagination*, presents a collection of essays and excerpts by prominent translingual writers from the past one hundred years who ponder issues related to writing in more than one language or in a language other than one’s primary language. The book does much more, however, than simply address writing; it contextualizes why and how we use and are used by language to make sense of our worlds. In that context, the book is a resounding success: it offers multiple perspectives and diverse arguments to complicate and enrich our understanding of language and language use.

The book is organized into four major sections, “Proclamations,” “Conversions,” “Between Languages,” and “Controversies.” Each section contains essays, excerpts from longer works, poetry, and interviews conducted by Kellman. The selection of writers is thorough, covering every continent, multiple languages, and many genres of writing. Kellman succinctly introduces translingual writing and follows with a short bio of each writer, references to the writer’s work, and a

synopsis of each writer's literary and intellectual achievements. Readers of the book will undoubtedly encounter many of their favorite writers (for example, in my case Rushdie, Gloria Anzaldua, Julia Alvarez, Chinua Achebe, and Elias Canetti), who speak to us not through their fiction but, refreshingly so, as intellectuals and thinkers. One will draw the conclusion from this collection of respected writers reflecting on their trans- and multilingual experiences that writing, and language, form active and malleable sites of struggle and meaning-making.

For instance, Ian Buruma's essay in the first section of the book attests to the notion that language marks a dynamic contestation. Buruma, born in the Netherlands, whose father is Dutch and whose mother, of German Jewish origin, now lives in England, argues that such contestation is intrinsic to languages because there is no such thing as a pure language in the first place. Language, and by extension writing, is part of a cultural terrain that works to include some of us, and to exclude others. Rather than see language as static and lifeless, Buruma reminds readers that language constantly produces effects and resists simple binaries. Thus, the rise of nationalism falsely suggests that people should speak only one language, and that multilingualism threatens to split up a nation; moreover, even though language is often used as a tool for subjugation, the conquered take it up, put it to their own uses, and thus enrich the language (an argument also proposed by Rushdie, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Hein Willemsse, and Andre Brink); and, finally, in order to know one's own culture, as Buruma puts it, "one must understand the world of others, and for that it helps to comprehend what they say" (21). In other words, without an understanding of the richness that multiple languages and multiple viewpoints bring to it, the conquering culture can be much more narrow than its margins.

Ilan Stavans, an essayist, memoirist, and fiction writer who was born in Mexico City to an exiled European-Jewish family and now lives in the US, defines himself through translanguaging and publishes in English and Spanish. In his autobiographical essay he writes, "to write is to make sense of confusion in and around. Didn't somebody already say this? Jean Genet, John Updike? I am a copy, an instant replay, a shadow, an impostor. Everything is an echo. To live is to plagiarize, to imitate, to steal" (122). These words resonate with many of the issues brought up in the rest of the book. Stavans points to the complex cultural and social conditions we all inhabit: we make sense of our worlds through writing, through language, yet we are forced to use systems of communication that we learn from the people and the culture around us. We echo others' images, and others' ways of seeing the world. Yet, we also make sense of our worlds in our own ways. Thus we steal, we take an inherited vocabulary and spin it into new uses. Senghor—born

in Senegal, studied in France and uses French as his language of expression—makes this point as well: “we, black writers, feel at least as free within French as within our mother tongues. More free, in truth, since Freedom is measured by the power of the tool: by the force of creation. . . . It is a question of expressing our authenticity as cultural hybrids, as men of the twentieth century” (41). No wonder, then, that when we speak of our languages we speak also about our sense of identity and belonging—Esmeralda Santiago, a Puerto Rican writer who writes in Spanish and English uses the phrase “anguished laugh” to convey this sense of language as expressing ourselves *and* experiencing pain through it. Keller’s book thus complicates notions of identity: for all the writers represented in the book identity is not fixed or immutable. It moves and changes. As the translingual writer Stavans puts it, “my idols, not surprisingly, are Spinoza and Kafka, two exiles in their own land who chose to switch languages in order to elevate themselves to a higher order, and who, relentlessly, investigated their own spirituality beyond the realm of orthodox religion and routine” (122).

Overall, the theme of language as being a tool for thinking beyond an established (linguistic) horizon prevails in this book. Thus, it would be an ideal companion for a variety of readers: readers who share the translingual experiences of the writers in the book, but also monolingual readers who would expand their understanding of what it means to navigate the world in more than one language or in a language other than English. For, the book as whole argues that language does not simply represent the world; it makes and remakes it.

The book can also be used as a lively complement to teaching. For instance, in courses concerned with poststructural theory, literacy, or composition theory the selections in Kellman’s book help to illustrate several theoretical concepts. One of them is the point that writing and language accompany every aspect of our being in the world, as Julia Alvarez argues in her beautiful recollection of learning English at the age of ten. Alvarez writes, “what has made me into a writer was coming to this country, all of a sudden losing a culture, a homeland, a language, a family” (69). And this insight we can all use: that writing happens because we search for meaning, and in this search, language helps us figure out, momentarily, fragments of meaning. ✱