
Steven G. Kellman. *Switching languages: translingual authors reflect on their craft*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London, 2003. 339 pp.

Steven G. Kellman, professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and author of *The Translingual Imagination* and *The Self-Begetting Novel*, is also the editor of the book *Switching Languages: Translingual Authors Reflect on their Craft*. Kellman defines *translingual writers* as “those who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one.” Similarly, he uses the term *ambilinguals* to refer to “writers fluent and accomplished in more than one language.” In the Preface, Kellman mentions several motives or reasons for translingualism and states that “migration is a powerful motive”, as in the case of Clarice Lispector from Brazil and Tomas Straussler from Czechoslovakia.

This anthology brings together 30 different works by various authors who have excelled in writing in more than one language. Kellman has included writers from

all over the world, including Africa, Latin America, North America, China and Europe. As he explains, none of the works is more than a century old because even though “switching languages has a long antiquity, the business has been particularly brisk in recent years.” There are both long and short texts by these writers, including poems, essays, autobiographical pieces and the *Manifesto de Prago* (1996), which speaks of the artificial language Esperanto. Authors such as Julia Alvarez, Rosario Ferré, Ha Jin, and others share their points of view and experiences with regard to switching languages.

In the first section called “Proclamations”, the authors reflect upon the general ideas of translingualism, why they learned a different language and the idea of finding a universal language. It is interesting to note here how different authors view certain languages as having the potential to become a universal tongue. For example, Ian Buruma, in his essay “Road to Babel” refers to English as a *lingua franca*. Then, the “*Manifesto de Prago*” introduces Esperanto as a potential candidate for a universal language. Leopold Senghor thinks French is a rich language with an international audience, and could become the lan-

guage of what he refers to as the “civilization of the universal”.

“Conversion”, the second section, includes interviews, autobiographies and essays. Here, all the authors share a common experience: their initiation into English as children. For them, English represents a new tongue, and America a new home. In addition, they use the word “love” to express their experience in learning this new language. Mary Antin, for example, converted from Yiddish to English and found great satisfaction learning it, especially when her professor published a short essay she wrote about snow. Julia Alvarez found a way of combining her native tongue, Spanish, with English to create *Spanglish*, a variety of both languages that represents her identity as a “Chicana”. Ha Jin also seems to think along these same lines, when he says in his interview that “English has always gotten its vitality from alien sources”.

In the third section, “Between Languages”, the authors reflect upon their experiences using two languages, whether it is Spanish and English, Yiddish and Hebrew, or French and English. Authors such as Ilan Stavans cannot abandon either of his two languages because each one allows him to express himself in different ways. Furthermore,

Stavans considers himself as an author with a hybrid identity, explaining that he “must find happiness in a divided self”. Puerto Rican author Esmeralda Santiago says that for her, translanguaging is like having two different voices and styles.

“Controversies” is subdivided into two sections: Africa and India. In this section, authors like André Brink re-introduce the reader to the term *ambilingual*. This author, for example, says he is ambilingual because he uses both his Afrikaans language and English. However, as most of the other authors in this section explain, his usage of English must be such that it bears the weight of being an Afrikaans. Gabriel Okara, like Julia Alvarez referring to Spanglish, mentions that his English is redesigned to express his Afrikaans experiences and this creates a new variation of English by combining both languages.

The last two sections, “Deprivations” and “Resistance” are very similar in that the authors in both seem to convey negative experiences in translanguaging. Here, the authors have not found the same pleasure in writing or speaking a different language as that found by the authors in previous sections, particularly those in “Conversions”. In “Resistance”, for example, the authors do not em-

brace the foreign languages as their own, but rather see themselves as speaking the language of the other. They feel foreign to it and therefore cannot find satisfaction in using it. They return to their mother tongue in order to find their roots and re-define their identities.

In the section of “Deprivations,” the authors also touch upon the political aspects of their translanguing experiences as immigrants in a dominant country. In her article, Gerda Lerner, from Vienna, tries to define her identity by reflecting upon her language and in doing so she realizes there are both costs and gains of learning a new language. Lerner sees the process of learning a new language as a necessity when entering the United States where English became her “meal ticket”. Arthur Koestler,

from Budapest, also discusses the costs of switching languages, particularly in terms of the psychological problems one faces. For him, the adoption of a new language involves acquiring “not only a new medium of communication but a new cultural background”.

An anthology like this runs the risk of being overly complicated and confusing because of the variety of authors, periods and writing styles. However, all of the pieces in this book are reader-friendly and can be understood by a wide ranging audience, from college students to experts in the field of linguistics. In addition, the readings in each section successfully give a comprehensive definition to the title of the book, *Switching Languages*.

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