

Jhumpa Lahiri on the Power of Translation at Montclair State

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Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri visits Montclair State University to present her latest Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories and discuss the topic of translation as both a creative and political practice.

The visit of [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) [2] at [Montclair State University](#) [3] on Monday November 18 was an enriching series of stimulating moments all centered on the topic of translation as both a creative and a political practice. Lahiri's statement that "Only translations can expand the literary horizon, open doors, and knock down walls" was the starting point for both a workshop and a public conversation; taken together, the two events reached over 400 people.

Focused on her recent endeavor, the Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories, which she edited (and in part translated), as a tribute to writers who have lived in more than one language. This is Lahiri's second visit on campus: she came four years ago, as part of the Inserra Chair cultural programs at MSU.

The afternoon workshop was an intimate opportunity to analyze the Penguin collection in depth, which brings a diverse palette of stories by both well- and lesser known Italian authors. Each story is prefaced by a brief yet very informative author biography, and woven together these biographies



offer a fascinating cultural chronology of Italian history in 20th century. "This is an irreducibly bilingual book," Lahiri stated, also referring to the book's version Italian published by Guanda with a different Avvertenza/Preface.

Over the course of the workshop, professors and students from a wide variety of departments (Translation, Writing, English, Justice Studies, International Studies, Music, Religion, Communication, Spanish, and Italian) developed comments and questions for Lahiri about the concept of translation based on their personal selection of stories from the book. Whether commenting on her own choices as a translator and writer, or on those of authors included in the collection such as Anna Maria Ortese, Primo Levi, Anna Banti, Leonardo Sciascia, Goffredo Parise, and Beppe Fenoglio, Lahiri emphasized the role of translation as a liberating, albeit challenging, experience, one that questions one's world while opening others.

Her own project as an editor defies clichéd representations of Italy, illustrating a complex tableau of events and experiences linked to a country often perceived solely as a tourist destination in the U.S. today.

In the evening event, Lahiri explained that after learning Italian, living in Italy for a while, and publishing in Italian, she has embraced translation as an activity to rethink herself as a person and a writer at a time in which valuing plurilingualism is more pressing than ever.

"Translation is an aesthetic and ethical and political stance," Lahiri said. "Aesthetic because it's an art, ethical because it has to do with our common humanity, and political because it is more than one way of understanding reality. It displaces the notion of one solution to anything - which is fascism. Translation completely cancels that out."

Lahiri shared incisive words about her relationship to another language like Italian which has brought a third dimension to her life, already characterized by two worlds, the American one in English and the Indian one in Bengali, thus defining "a space of free inquiry which combines humility and confidence at once." She defined translation through poignant expressions: "an act of channeling," "a form of reading," "an open-ended conversation," "the antidote to most things," and "a way to regenerate literature," which she hopes will inspire American authors to translate as part of their work.

Lahiri stepped into an even more personal sphere when she connected language learning to human relationships and suggested that "Italian as a new language for me has also allowed me to make new friends, and special ones, belonging to a community of people who have changed my life in profound and unique ways."

Like Lahiri who commented on how much Italian is absorbing English words, often for no reason besides an exotic attraction towards something foreign, students interviewed for an article on the campus publication *The Montclarion* remarked how Global English is creating a form of linguistic imperialism, at a time in which speaking different languages remains crucial in our world in order to improve the quality of business and political relations through mutual understanding.

Lahiri reminded everybody about the importance of learning a language: "What is amazing about language learning is no one can stop you from learning any language on earth," Lahiri said. "All you have to do is decide to learn it...and you can go as deep as you want, you can devote your whole life to it."

The "architect" of the one-day visit, Prof. Teresa Fiore (Inserra Chair), envisioned Lahiri's exchanges with professors, students and administrators throughout the day as the culmination of a multi-year initiative on translation: "The hope is to see this conversation continue in order to truly value the multi-lingual profile of our campus, and create further opportunities to work across disciplines in Translation from theater to film, literature, medical humanities, accessibility, etc., as part of the internationalization of the curriculum of our institution."

As CHSS Dean Peter Kingstone remarked, "Translation is about communicating meaning across the great divides that separate us whether cultural, gender, geographic or language," and added that at



Montclair State University, “a living breathing experiment of intercultural communications, we are trying to create a shared space. Despite our differences, we hear each other. We share meaning.”

The evening event attracted not just the campus community but also a large number of community members from the region, thanks to a collaboration with the [Montclair Literary Festival](#) [4] and the [Watchung Bookstore](#) [5], an independent entity in town. The signing of the books at the end of the event was a reminder of the love for literature, including foreign literature in translation, that powerful and courageous writers like Jhumpa Lahiri can still inspire at a time in which there is no reason to talk about the crisis of the humanities but just the new forms that the humanities are taking, including through translation.

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