A Hub, a Network, an Archive: 55 Years of International Writers in Iowa City

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Curated by Nataša Ďurovičová and Lisa Gardinier
IWP hired me in the summer of 2001, a couple of weeks before 9/11. At that time, we four staffers—new director Christopher Merrill included—shared two tiny offices in the English-Philosophy Building, one of them basically filled to the brim with filing cabinets (packed with what eventually became the contents of the International Writing Program Records in Special Collections). The meeting with the writers in residence on the morning of 9/11 is hard to forget. The near-physical human shock, and then the reverb of the attacks on cultural politics, on globalization, on internationalism as a whole, and the place of the U.S. in it – all this was projected on the faces of these 20-some writers. And that sense, of the writers as seismic meters of what’s happening in the world, is what makes every new residency a kind of gift, or rather, an extended Thanksgiving. For ten weeks we get to sit around the table with talented, non-conformist, informed writers from all over the world for face-to-face conversations about anything that matters at the moment.

I came to the job via a long-standing research interest in translation and multilingualism in cinema—basically, in the many histories of dubbing and subtitling that made sound cinema paradoxically both national and international—and that dovetailed
quite well with the courses in comparative literature, cinema, and translation taught on
campus. So alongside editing IWP’s just-started journal 91st Meridian (Iowa City being at
91° 31’ 48.6012” W) and managing its first stand-alone website (designed with Modei Akyea),
I also got to keep my hand in academic work, especially given IWP’s ongoing affiliation with
the MFA in Literary Translation.

What this exhibit hopes to do is to draw a sketch of a unique program on the UI
campus—among the oldest literary residencies in the world, if not the oldest, which has
brought over 1,600 international writers to Iowa City since its founding in 1967. We want
to present it both as it has spun outward, into its environments—the city, the region, the
country—and how it has adapted internally, as an institution.

But “institution” is such an abstract, dry term. The exhibit also hopes to give you, the
visitor, a sense of the individuals involved, those who have attended it as well as those who
have worked to keep it successful—and sometimes simply alive.

Considering the amazing size of IWP-related holdings in the University of Iowa
Libraries, the amount of historic documentation stored in Special Collections & Archives, and
the two decades-plus of administrative materials in digital form, so far generally not available
as open-source, another ten objects could have been chosen for each item that made it into
the show. As literary and political historians in the U.S., Europe, and Asia are now beginning
to work on research topics for which IWP is relevant, the challenge, which the exhibit hopes
to make visible, is to gain an understanding of the program’s overall history and functioning
rather than merely cherry-picking one or two documents from the vast amount of material.

One such thread is that of translation. Along this theme, the exhibit includes a brochure
featuring “foreign” writers at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the early 1960s, the many volumes
of world poetry in translation (often from “minor” languages) the program made possible, a
glimpse of the digital learning courses IWP has recently offered in Spanish and Arabic, and
some background about the establishment of a Literary Translation MFA program at UI. Itself
unique, that successful program is this year spinning off into the undergraduate minor of
Translation for Global Literacy.

The concept of UI as a “Writing University” was first proposed around 2000, in the
wake of IWP’s “crisis-and-recovery.” It was then-president Mary Sue Coleman’s attempt to
bring together the many extant writing units and activities on campus, and to underscore the
university’s overall writing culture. In that sense, IWP was a local catalyst even as it has kept
UI’s literary arts linked up to an international scale. And what the program continues to do
is to bring to Iowa’s inland shores the sea of world literatures in which every fledgling writer
inevitably floats.

Finally, Paul Engle’s name may tower in any history of writing at Iowa, but an exhibit
about the IWP must especially highlight the vital role and accomplishments of his partner
and collaborator: the program’s co-founder, novelist, essayist, translator, and administrator,
professor emeritus Hualing Nieh Engle. Her combination of grit, talent, boldness, range of
knowledge, professionalism, and her amazing laughter—which can still be heard even in her
97th year—has been something of a lodestar, for me personally and for the program at large.

Nataša Ďurovičová
Senior Editor, International Writing Program
Adjunct faculty, MFA Literary Translation
I spent a lot of the first year or so of the pandemic with Paul Engle. Or, rather, his archival ghost. When our proposal for this exhibit was approved in early 2020, I planned on starting archival research that summer. Thankfully the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic didn’t delay preparation by much. Special Collections reopened for the Fall 2020 semester with limited appointments. While most of my coworkers were still entirely working from home, I was coming in two to four afternoons per week that academic year to look through the Paul Engle Papers (msc 514) and then the International Writing Program Records (RG06.0012.009) and a few archival tangents as they presented themselves. I spent more time with Paul than most living people that year. Given that I stayed safe, and so did my loved ones, not too bad.

In all seriousness: the 55-year history of IWP, and Paul’s career leading up to its founding, is well documented in those two archival collections. The Engle Papers are 48 boxes, of which

Lisa visiting Biblioteca Central at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City.
approximately half are from 1964 and after, as Paul’s interests were increasingly international. Though Hualing Nieh Engle took over as director of IWP in 1977, Paul stayed heavily involved as a consultant, with the two of them co-signing a lot of external correspondence. His archives capture much of Hualing’s directorship before both fully retired in 1988. Unfortunately, that means that Hualing’s leadership is largely viewed through the lens of Paul’s papers.

The IWP Records collection overlaps with the Engle Papers, especially in the Participant Files, a mix of fascinating correspondence and banal administrative paperwork around getting the writers from around the world to Iowa City. The Administrative Files are still mostly unprocessed, in much the same state as transferred from the basement of Shambaugh House, IWP’s headquarters.

Sometime in 2008, around the time that Iowa City was declared a UNESCO City of Literature, the librarians covering international literatures for the University of Iowa Libraries decided to collect works by and about IWP residents to the extent possible, and to identify what was already held in the collection. As of July 2022, we had around 18,000 books identified as such, some of which are the only copy in the U.S. Importantly, most of those are available for circulation and constitute a major contribution of the UI Libraries to the national collection available between libraries. Writers often bring us copies of their publications when they arrive for the residency, and we work with a network of international booksellers to continue growing that collection.

IWP is probably one of the top producers of digital material at the University of Iowa. In any given fall residency, there are writing samples for each writer, videos of readings at Shambaugh House and Prairie Lights, videos and the essays from the Friday panels at the Iowa City Public Library, the On the Map interview series, and sundry other productions. It is a lot to capture, and barely hints at the internal documentation that will comprise a future archive of the inner workings of a major international literary arts program in the 21st century. IWP’s audiovisual collection—in a variety of formats from the 1960s through the 1990s!—was an early digital project in collaboration with the UI Libraries and the School of Library and Information Science.

Which is all to say, if this exhibit piques your curiosity, please know that this is truly the tip of the iceberg. We could have wallpapered the Gallery in IWP memorabilia like an Enlightenment-era cabinet of curiosities and written a companion book and still left stories untold and voices unheard. Paul is a loud voice in this story (as I understand he was in life, too), but our hope is that you will walk away from this exhibit having also heard from many other important individuals in IWP’s history.

Lisa Gardinier
Curator, International Literature
University of Iowa Libraries
Beyond the Writers’ Workshop


   From Nataša: In a Paul Engle memo from 1968, he writes roughly that the work of African American and Native American writers stands so completely apart from “normative” US literature that they, in this regard, fit better in an international than in a national literary cohort. IWP did indeed have two such participants around the time the memo was written; one Indigenous writer, Simon J. Ortíz of Acoma Pueblo heritage, still teaches creative writing at Arizona State University.

4. “Programming Young European Writers at University of Iowa Workshop” cable from the U.S. Department of State, 1964. Paul Engle Papers [msc 514], Special Collections & Archives.

   From Lisa: The Paul Engle Papers and the International Writing Program Records contain a large number of a peculiar format of correspondence: the State Department cable. Typically used to communicate between embassies and State Department offices, IWP received hundreds and thousands of messages from State in this medium. Embassies would confirm and update the status of their nominations for residencies, including detailed profiles, such as the one on display for Cho Chang-whan in 1986, which can be seen in the “Fall 1986: Welcome to Iowa City!” section of this exhibit. While certainly not the juiciest contents of the WikiLeaks release of over 250,000 State Department cables in 2010, searches for Paul Engle and Iowa return many results.
Beginnings


The Politics of Funding


10. Letter from Paul Engle to Dr. Eun Sik Yang, 1984. International Writing Program Records [RG06.0012.009], Special Collections & Archives.

“A Community of Imagination”


From Lisa: Fernando del Paso came to Iowa City after publishing a volume of poetry and his first novel, José Trigo. He was one of the early residents who stayed for an extended period, about two years, while working on what would become his second novel, Palinuro de México. Before dedicating himself to writing full-time, he worked in advertising, and put those skills to use for a fledgling International Writing Program before he left in 1971, designing a mock-up of a brochure. It is unclear if he designed the black and green logo, which was in use in 1970, but Paul Engle reported to university administration that del Paso and Nelson Arietti, the husband of Venezuelan writer Antonieta Madrid, had created professional-quality promotional materials for IWP, saving a significant amount of money.


**The Engle Legacy**


18. Memo from Fred Woodard to Peter Nazareth, 1989. International Writing Program Records [RG06.0012.009], Special Collections & Archives.

**Gozo Yoshimasu**


**Minae Mizumura**


*From Nataša: Originally titled *The Fall of Japanese Language in the Age of English* (my emphasis), this monograph by the entirely cosmopolitan, Yale-trained Japanese novelist Minae Mizumura describes her first weeks in Iowa City as a testing ground for the overwhelming dominance of English in the international literary context. This then becomes a starting point for her vigorous defense for the preservation of specifically Japanese literary traditions and institutions. Mizumura's novelistic voice elevates her crushing personal experience to one non-Anglophone writers everywhere understand only too well—and one American students, who are always assigned this chapter in our classes, often find illuminating, too.*

**Takako Arai**


A Selection of Broadsides


Fall 1986: Welcome to Iowa City!

30. IWP orientation packet, 1986. International Writing Program Records [RG06.0012.009], Special Collections & Archives.


**Making Books in Iowa City: Tomaž Šalamun’s *Snow***

*From Lisa: This collection of items is an unusually detailed look at the production of a 1971 chapbook of Tomaž Šalamun’s poetry translated to English. What typically survives in archives are the various drafts of literary texts and translations, but this is about the production of the actual book, as published by Allan Kornblum and Toothpaste Press. Besides the translation draft of “King of birds”—from the Paul Engle Papers and seemingly rejected for another purpose—we have the design and layout of the chapbook, and preparations for and response to its distribution and promotion.*


42. Cover mock-up for *Snow*, including request for a custom stencil, n.d. Toothpaste/Coffee House Press Records [msc 461], Special Collections & Archives.


45. List of people to whom the finished book should be sent, n.d. Toothpaste/Coffee House Press Records [msc 461], Special Collections & Archives.

José Donoso

47. Letter from José Donoso to Paul Engle, 1965. Paul Engle Papers [msc 514], Special Collections & Archives.

48. José Donoso’s notebook while in Iowa City, 1965. José Donoso Papers [msc 340], Special Collections & Archives.

From Lisa: José Donoso kept detailed notebooks throughout his career. The notebooks are usually labelled with where he was living at the time. This notebook was started in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and its last entries are from Iowa City after he arrived in the summer of 1965 to teach in the Writers’ Workshop. He frequently started drafts in his notebooks, later incorporated into longer drafts, or worked out ideas for characters and journaled about frustrations with his writing process. The notebooks contain evidence that they were frequently the most convenient paper he had at hand for jotting down notes. The covers here are heavily doodled and have cocktail recipes. Was he preparing for a party and asking for an easy cocktail to serve guests? Had he just been to a party and enjoyed the drink he was served so much that he asked for the recipe? This notebook also contains a list of books rewritten and renumbered several times, in a way that might correspond to planning for a semester.


Luisa Valenzuela


Pilar Quintana


A New Idea: A Translation Workshop

55. SUI Staff Magazine, October 1964. Paul Engle Papers [msc 514], Special Collections & Archives.


57. Mimeograph, program draft for “First International Poetry Reading” with handwritten edits by Paul Engle. Paul Engle Papers [msc 514], Special Collections & Archives.


61. ALTA conference program, 1989. International Writing Program Records [RG06.0012.009], Special Collections & Archives.

Translation as a Hub


From Nataša: Translator Kathleen Archer began working with Manuel Becerra on his poems in IWP’s International Translation Workshop. After his return to Mexico, the two completed the manuscript, which also became the core of Kathleen’s thesis for her MFA in Literary Translation degree. Subsequently, she and Manuel collaborated with a book designer at the Center for the Book to craft this “aleatory” form, in which the order of the original and the “secondary” English-language version of the poems are somewhat downplayed. The manuscript was published by Song Bridge Project, a small Iowa City-based press led by MFA Literary Translation alum William Blair, specializing in Latin American poetry. Put together, this is another instance of the “centripetal” way in which non-Anglophone poetry has, over the decades, found its way into contemporary American literature through the “handmade” gateway of Iowa’s small presses and book art.

63. Christopher Merrill. Twenty-Five Translations of A Fairy Tale. Edited by Laura Wang. Translated by Armen of Armenia (Armenian), Marie Silkeberg (Swedish), Mookie Katigbak-Lacuesta (Tagalog), Yao Feng (Chinese), Anas Atakora (French), Aki Salmela (Finnish), Yael Neeman (Hebrew), Villeda & Margarita Mateo Palmer (Spanish), Rochelle Potkar (English), Chung Wenyin (Chinese), Anete Kruuismägi (Estonian), Byambaa Sakhnya (Mongolian), Nisah Haron (Malay), Antônio Xerxenesky (Portuguese), Raed Anis Al-Jishi (Arabic), Birgül Oğuz (Turkish), Kim EuGene (Korean), Teresa Präauer (German), Cheng Ching-Hang (Chinese), Kirill Timurovich Azernyi (Russian), El Jones (English), Michael Mendis (Sinhala), Guzel Begim (Uzbek), Homeira Qaderi (Persian), Johanna Aitchison (English). Iowa City: International Writing Program, 2015. On loan from the International Writing Program. [Also available: University of Iowa Libraries: PS3563.E74519 T93 2015]


**Networks of Collegiality**


68. “Shadow” by Xi Chuan. Translated by Inara Cedrins (English) and Anastasēs Vistōnitēs (Greek). Printed in 2008. On loan from Nataša Šurovičová. Also available in Special Collections & Archives: x-Collection Broadside [FOLIO PL2862.I1215 Y55 2008]


70. Alan Hayes and Christopher Merrill, eds. *Town Stitched by River: Irish Writers at the International Writing Program*. Dublin: Dublin UNESCO City of Literature; International Writing Program at the University of Iowa; Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature, 1985. On loan from the International Writing Program.

**Book Wings**

*From Nataša: In the era of Zoom teaching, the BookWings experiment may appear less revolutionary, but a decade ago live action and interaction on two theater stages synchronized across two continents was the very embodiment of IWP’s informal watchword “only connect.” Especially as what audiences were invited to watch wasn’t just a technological feat but also a real-time comparison of the different ways remote theater artists solved very similar literary challenges. A new medium for artistic communication, one could argue.*
Six 10-minute plays were commissioned by the Book Wings collaborative bilingual theatre initiative from distinguished young playwrights in China and the United States on the central theme of “contact.” These harrowing, controversial, and wildly comic plays were staged collaboratively using digital videoconferencing technology to link the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre and the University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts on March 12, 2013. The photo accompanying the items in this display case is from the play I Am an Eagle Hen by Xu Yaqun: “A visionary hen flies the coop in search of a better life. But there’s a price to pay for her non-conformity.”

Cities of Literature: A Network

“A Proposal from the Writing Community in Iowa City, Iowa, USA.” Duplicate of the box in which Iowa City’s application to become a UNESCO City of Literature was sent in 2008. On loan from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature.


Program from UNESCO City of Literature designation celebration event, 2008. On loan from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature.


Facsimile of the UNESCO City of Literature application for Baghdad. The city was designated in 2015.

Iowa City in a World of Books

In 55 years of hosting international writers, Iowa City features much more prominently than a typical small Midwestern city in foreign publications. Many have written travelogues and literary memoirs focusing on their time here; others have used Iowa City as a setting, some very clearly, and sometimes more obscured. The items here are a selection of the dozens of examples.


Portraits

The large black and white portraits seen in the Gallery were created by local photographer Thomas Langdon. On display is a small sampling of his work: 10 portraits printed for this exhibition on fabric. Having photographed over 200 International Writing Program participants since 2002, Langdon says of his work: “It is the writer that provides the portrait. I am simply there to respond briefly with my camera and the existing light.”
Check out the LibGuide for *A Hub, a Network, an Archive* to find videos, additional resources, and a bibliography of the books on display in the front window.