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How a Small, Nondescript Writing Program Achieved Distinction University of Oregon's international emphasis attracts students and faculty members

By PETER MONAGHAN

EUGENE, ORE—If Garrett Hongo could distill his achievement here at the University of Oregon into a how-to book, he'd very likely have an academic best seller.

In nine years, Mr. Hongo and his colleagues have converted a small, nondescript graduate-level creative-writing program into one of the best in the country, and one of the most distinctive.

At a time when most college programs, of any kind, are satisfied to recruit no more than a few candidates from minority groups, Oregon's writing program has attracted many highly thought-of students and teachers of widely diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

What's more, the way Mr. Hongo and his colleagues have gone about it — almost entirely out of the national writing-program limelight — challenges and complicates some standard conceptions of the ethnic and racial diversity of modern America — and of how to reflect it in universities. Other programs might copy some of Oregon's approaches, but its idiosyncrasies would be hard to emulate.

Edward Hirsch, a poet who teaches writing at the University of Houston, says of the program not only that "it's terrifically strong," but also that "it's one of the few writing programs in America that seems really representative of America."

Of the 22 students in the two-year master-of-fine-arts program, more than half have a minority background — some of them more than one such background.

Mr. Hongo himself, a poet and memoirist who grew up in Hawaii and Los Angeles, is a fourth-generation Japanese-American. "It's a new world out there," he says. "I think we're just really acknowledging that."

Oregon's program is popular. Last year, 200 students applied for the six first-year slots in the fiction program, and well over 100 for the six poetry openings, all without advertising. Such a demand compares well to that for better-known writing programs. What's more, it is preferred by a strong group of applicants who elsewhere might be valued more for simply increasing minority enrollment.

Instructors at Oregon say they are, in fact, often unaware of applicants' ethnicity as admissions choices are made. And only a few students say the program's multi-ethnic mix — if they even knew about it — was more important to them than such factors as class size and the composition of the faculty.

The engine driving that diversity, it would appear, is the "vision statement" that Mr. Hongo, a professor of creative writing, devised after joining the program as director in 1989. "The statement," he says, "was about reimagining writing in English as international rather than Anglo-American." He was thinking, he says, of the emergence of transnational English-language writers — Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Derek Walcott — and of similarly varied new voices in American writing, too.

When he arrived at Oregon, Mr. Hongo was a recent finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. In 1987, he had won the prestigious Lamont Poetry Prize, from the Academy of American Poets, for his collection *The River of Heaven* (Knopf). The program, however, boasted only a regional draw, and permitted students to take many years to get through. The brief that administrators gave him was simple: Bring the program, then 30 years old, up to national standards. But he had an agenda of his own, too: "I wanted it to be distinct from every other writing program."

His rallying cry: "Excellence and diversity, and without compromise."

"What that meant to me was a national reputation, and varied representation in terms of class, ethnicity, and region."

Unexpectedly, though, his first two faculty hires were white.

One was clearly a coup: T.R. Hummer, an established poet who had been teaching at Middlebury College. (He now teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University.)

The other was Dorianne Laux. As a single mother, she had gone to college and begun publishing poetry. Mr. Hongo now calls her "the backbone" of the undergraduate writing program, in which the

enrollment runs to more than 700 each year, and which will soon offer a major.

His third hire was bold, too — Chang-Rae Lee, a young writer straight out of the MFA program itself. Mr. Hongo, who made the choice despite some grumbling about "hiring our own," cannot resist pointing out: "Everyone in the world knows Chang-Rae Lee now." Mr. Lee's first novel, *Native Speaker* (Putnam, 1995), won broad acclaim and the prestigious Hemingway Prize for a first novel. It was also the first Korean-American fiction from a major American publishing house (The Chronicle, April 7, 1995).

Choosing Mr. Lee was surprising for another reason as well. Discussion about the direction of the program had centered on class consciousness, but Mr. Lee had attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale University before working for a while as a Wall Street analyst.

"I was not a liberal's dream," Mr. Hongo says of his early recruits.

Tactically, though, he had hired young instructors, to whom students could readily relate. The renowned poet Philip Levine, a veteran teacher, has visited the program over the years. "I've been places where I thought creative-writing programs weren't worth a damn," he says, "because teachers were — it's an awful thing to say — a bit envious of the quality of imagination and resourcefulness in their students." Here, "it's just the reverse."

He praises Mr. Hongo's skill in creating a vital literary scene. On his visits here, Mr. Levine has found large audiences — and more. "There was an excitement in the audience that is unusual, that I associate with San Francisco and New York."

The program got a big break in 1991. Impressed by its nascent revival, Walter Kidd, an Oregon graduate, brain surgeon, and poetry enthusiast (who died later that year), donated \$1.5-million for scholarships and prizes. As a result, all of the MFA students receive enough financial assistance to cover their full tuition. The Kidd fund affords most of them an unusual first teaching opportunity: leading an undergraduate creative-writing class.

That, says Mr. Levine, spares Oregon from the two-tiered system common to many writing programs, where a few students are taken care of, "and the others wander around, walking into walls."

Here, he saw competition without rivalry: "There was a real camaraderie."

In writing, the support of peers is handy, but individuation is everything. In a campus courtyard during a break in a poetry workshop, Mr. Hongo points out graduate students and describes their ap-

proaches, styles, relationships to their ethnicity, and ways of writing about it — sometimes directly, sometimes metaphorically. He praises their ability to tackle a variety of styles, from the tried — sonnet forms and the like — to the experimental.

Felecia Caton Garcia, the daughter of a Chicano Los Angeleno and a white Missourian, grew up on a farm in vastly white eastern Missouri. She often animates figures from Chicano folklore in her efforts to "make dualities into a single identity."

As a Harvard undergraduate, Major Jackson was part of the Dark Room Collective, a group of black poets. He is "a damn brilliant poet," says Mr. Hongo, citing as an example "Hoops," a poem about leaving behind neighborhood friends to pursue a literary life.

Joshua Morse grew up Mormon, went to Nicaragua as an anthropology student, and writes about his family in Oregon — their trials and their faith. "He has a High-Church sense of sound," Mr. Hongo says. "He's writing very adventurous poems about his contacts with indigenous people in Nicaragua, his travels, his questions."

Forget about any potted "minority approach," says Mr. Hongo. His students use differing poetic forms. Their upbringings differ. "It's obvious how different they are!"

The fiction section tells the same story.

Like several other students of Asian and non-Asian heritage in the program, Sukhee Ryu came to Oregon partly to study with Mr. Lee. "I was interested in seeing what this Korean-American writer would have to say," she says.

Mr. Lee came to the United States when he was 3. Ms. Ryu moved to the Bronx from South Korea at 13. "I see myself as belonging to a different set of Korean-Americans in the U.S.," she says. "It was instructive for me to see there isn't some shared ideal or shared form of expression among Korean-American writers. There is shared empathy."

Mr. Lee deserves recognition, she says, not just for his novel, but because "he really opened up doors for other immigrant writers." She recalls her parents' saying: "Oh, look, Chang-Rae has been in the Korean newspaper in New York."

The concentration of writers of Asian heritage here — seven students and four teachers — has an instructive outcome, Mr. Lee says. It permits students to be writers first and "Asian-American" or "minority writers" a distant second.

Mr. Hongo agrees. "They're not 'exoticized,'" he says. When questions of identity arise, "they won't automatically be pigeonholed into some kind of P.C. or multicultural niche."

During his time as a student here, "I didn't feel I had to write about being an Asian in any explicit way," Mr. Lee says. "But I did feel that if I did write about those things, I would never be patently rejected or separated out — that, in fact, my work would get a full read and, I hoped, a full interrogation. They'd be reading my work not against a certain perceived Asian-American canon."

"We're not interested in canon building," says Mr. Hongo. "We're interested in building particular writers." That means telling students what traditions relate to their writing, and "not 'You should write like Amy Tan or Toni Morrison.'"

In his classes, Mr. Hongo is more likely to discuss John Keats, Rainer Maria Rilke, or Wallace Stevens than contemporary writers, Asian or otherwise. "One of the first things Chang-Rae Lee and I talked about was Percy Shelley."

Mr. Lee says that in his classes, "I focus on the things I think I should focus on — craft, narrative, and language. I talk about Raymond Carver and Flannery O'Connor and Richard Ford. But when a question comes up of a text or a workshop story that could benefit from discussion of race or ethnic consciousness, I'm the first to leap in there."

Of course, he says, writers write about what they know. But easy constructions of identity will not do, he tells his students. Sure, voices that reflect distinctive cultures remain marketable. However, Mr. Lee says, "the writers here are fairly savvy. They understand it's no longer the case that any person who wrote a lovely English sentence and who wasn't white is going to get noticed. There are so many books now from so-called ethnic writers."

Students differ on how to approach that challenge. "Some people take issue with the fact that Garrett [Hongo] is very traditional in terms of the literary canon," says Sonya Posmentier, a first-year poetry student. "I'm very comfortable with it. My suspicion is, he's traditional because he knows you have to know what the traditional Western canon is if you're going to bat up against it."

The daughter of parents of Indian and Eastern European-Jewish heritage, she grew up in a secular Jewish community in New York City. But Eugene, which has few Jews and fewer Indians, has brought her Indianness into high relief: "I'm much more conscious of it, in fact, than I ever have been." But professors didn't realize that she was of Asian heritage until she arrived.

At every turn, Oregon's program provides telling complications of ethnic identity. Take Peter Ho Davies, a short-story writer who was hired as an assistant professor of creative writing this academic

year. His first collection, *The Ugliest House in the World* (Houghton-Mifflin) was published to glowing notices last year.

Of Welsh and Chinese descent, he came to the United States 10 years ago for graduate school. Growing up in England, he says he didn't feel he had a right to claim his Welsh identity. The feeling became more acute when he published his book of stories, "because I hadn't written in Welsh."

It made him nervous to write in English about, say, mine strikes in north Wales, "the bedrock to the Welsh language."

His book displays a striking command of regional and cultural voices, Welsh and American. It also is very funny. One story, "Relief," which will be included in the forthcoming anthology *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, tells of a military officer whose incommensurable flatulence serves to underscore the pomposity of British colonial campaigns in 19th-century Africa.

No hint of Mr. Davies's Asian roots appears until the last two stories. In one, Communists in pre-independence Malaya meet in a theater that shows American movies; in the other, a Chinese grandfather drowns in the family's water jar.

The most recent addition to Oregon's creative-writing faculty is the poet Pimone Triplett, straight from her doctorate in Mr. Hirsch's program at Houston. Her first book, *Ruining the Picture* (Triquarterly Press), will appear in October. "She was the single best student I've had in maybe seven, eight, 10 years," says Mr. Levine, the poet, who taught her for a semester at Houston. She is partly of Thai heritage.

Barry Lopez, a writer of fiction and books on ecological subjects, and an old friend of Mr. Hongo's, believes that the Oregon program demonstrates a way forward in "education and justice and tolerance." He calls it "post-multicultural," and Mr. Hirsch and Mr. Levine agree.

"We don't live in a world anymore where we can point to someone and say, 'He's a this, she's a that,'" Mr. Lopez says. "Instead of staying stuck in multiculturalism, Garrett has moved beyond it." ●