

Thanks in part to a generous grant from the Center for Foreign Languages, an independent paper for my senior seminar in Literary Studies turned into a fascinating research project that in turn became a truly unexpected opportunity: a chance to attend the 2010 annual conference of the American Comparative Literature Association, hosted this past spring by Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Vancouver is consistently rated as one of the most livable cities in the world; this comfortable reputation, though, masks a breathtaking assortment of peoples and cultures living together in the wet, temperate climate of the Pacific Northwest. Over half of the population is made up of ethnic non-Caucasians, and nearly as many residents have a mother tongue in a language other than English. From the snatches of Arabic and Japanese heard in the shops beneath my hotel room downtown on Robson Street to the good-natured Polish repairmen who barged in by accident one afternoon, the city's vibrant mosaic was apparent even at its edges.

With the help and encouragement of Profs. Gail Newman and Christopher Nugent, and many other friends and colleagues at Williams, I had arrived in Vancouver to present an essay to the ACLA about translation; reading ancient Chinese poetry in modern English, I was trying to understand the movement of literary and cultural space that was taking place in these transposed works. The setting could not have been more appropriate: a brief jaunt through the city center offered as much food for thought as an afternoon spent trading ideas with fellow scholars and writers. Under the conference's theme of "Encountering World Literature," we were documenting the ever-growing connectivity between cultures and ideas across the globe, while outside people from a thousand different backgrounds lived this connectivity through their everyday interactions.

As it turns out, I had to travel a continent away from Williams College to fully grasp what I had been learning here. Whether in service of commerce, of letters, or in simple conversation, translation in all its many forms is becoming a fact of life. Nowhere is this future better represented than in Vancouver, a city where the full impact of words like "multiculturalism" or "diversity" can be viscerally felt. Even while so far away from the College, however, I was reminded of the lessons that I had learned at my academic home, and the inherent value that the demands of the "real world" give to our efforts here, either through seemingly esoteric scholastic pursuits or through the array of personal experiences and points of view that our community of Ephs brings together.

We're often told that a liberal arts education teaches us how to think, but entering that "real world" as a graduate, I'm realizing how a Williams education also teaches us how to live, or at least live with awareness. My studies in literature were an indelible part of my time at the College, but seeing the themes that we discussed in seminar together reflected in life outside the classroom has made me understand education as a journey, not a destination, with teaching moments in the most unexpected places. I look forward to a life full of translation.