

Writing Across Cultures: Kyoto as Mirror and Muse

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Associated Kyoto Program — Doshisha University — Fall 2026

Course Description

This course explores the rich creative potential as well as the arguable ethical boundaries of intercultural writing. Exploring readings that range from classical Japanese texts to contemporary fiction and hybrid memoirs, we will investigate how writers navigate cultural borders—whether writing within, across, or outside their own experience. Kyoto, with its richly-textured mixture of Japanese tradition and international presence, will serve as both inspiration and reflective lens, grounding our exploration of how imagination and empathy shape representations of place, self, and 'other'. Students will also engage in a limited number of field observations and writing exercises focusing on voice and place as they develop their own larger creative work.

Course Requirements

Participation & Field Reflections – 25%

Short Writing Assignments – 20%

Workshop & Feedback – 20%

Critical Reflection Essay – 15%

Final Portfolio – 20%

Course Structure & Workload Clarifications

- Weekly workload averages 3.5–4 hours outside class (reading, writing, reflection), though this can be further balanced against student available time and other responsibilities.
- Readings are specified by page count and estimated time.
- Workshops (Weeks 4, 6, 11) occur **fully in class**, and will draw upon 5–7 page creative pieces.
- Only four required Friday excursions are included; other weeks involve suggested short and independent local observations.

Course Readings

The complete course texts are listed below in order of appearance. All works are read in excerpt or selection except where noted; specific page ranges appear in the Weekly Schedule. Translations will be provided for works not originally written in English.

- David Mura, essays.
- Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman.”
- Kakuzō Okakura, *The Book of Tea*.
- Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*; *The Makioka Sisters*.
- Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*.
- Sayaka Murata, *Convenience Store Woman*.
- Virginia Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall.”
- Masuji Ibuse, *Black Rain*.
- Toni Morrison, “Recitatif.”
- Jenny Boully, *The Body: An Essay*.
- Kyoko Mori, *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*.
- Annie Dillard, “The Death of a Moth” and “How I Wrote the Moth Essay—and Why.”
- Jennifer Cody Epstein, *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment*.
- Alessandro Baricco, *Silk*.
- Shūsaku Endō, *Silence*; interview in *Jesuit Review*.
- Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.
- Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*.
- Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*.
- David Mitchell, *number9dream*.
- Haruki Murakami, “Sleep.”

Weekly Schedule

Week 1 – What Is Cross-Cultural Writing?

- Readings (~40 pp / ~2 hrs): David Mura essays (20 pp), Maxine Hong Kingston *No Name Woman* (15 pp), Okakura *The Book of Tea* (10 pp).
- Why: These works will help introduce us to questions about how cultural presentation is shaped by who is doing the telling: Kingston shows how inherited stories and cultural imagination shape a writer working between insider and outsider positions; Okakura shows how a Japanese writer explained local ideas to outsiders.
Prompt: Write a one-page scene from the perspective of an outsider observing a local custom. Then rewrite the same scene as if you were the insider explaining it.
- In-class: Discussion, close reading, writing exercise (outsider vs insider voice).
- Outside-class writing (1–2 pp / ~1 hr): Reflection on shifting audience.
- Fieldwork: Orientation walk (Doshisha + Kyoto Gosho, 2 hrs).

Week 2 – The Aesthetic Frame: Kyoto Through Tradition

- Readings (~70 pp / ~3 hrs): Okakura (20 pp), Tanizaki *In Praise of Shadows* (50 pp), *Pillow Book* selections (10 pp).
- Why: compares Japanese and Western ideas of beauty, and introduces fragmentary writing as a style students can try.

Prompt: Choose one sensory detail (light, shadow, scent, texture) from a Kyoto setting and describe it twice: once in lush, poetic language, and once in the simplest, plainest terms. Which feels more true?

- In-class: Compare Okakura vs Tanizaki; craft talk on fragment form.
- Outside-class writing: 3–4 observational fragments (~1 hr).
- Fieldwork (Required #1): Saihō-ji (Kokedera / Moss Temple, ~3 hrs). Focus: observation, attention, aesthetics, impermanence.

Week 3 – Ritual and Repetition: Alienation in the Familiar

- Readings (~163 pp / ~4 hrs, split over 2 sessions): Murata Convenience Store Woman.
- Why: shows how a person can feel like an outsider in their own society, and how routines can be used to tell a story.
Prompt: Write a half-page description of a daily routine (yours, or imagined). Use repetition to make the ordinary feel strange, unsettling, or meaningful.
- In-class: Discussion, close reading, writing exercise 'Routine as Revelation'.
- Outside-class writing (1–2 pp / ~1 hr): Journal entry on estranged routine.
- Fieldwork: Independent konbini observation (20 min).

Week 4 – Silence, Omission, and What's Left Unsaid

- Readings (~140 pp / ~3.5 hrs): Woolf 'The Mark on the Wall' (12 pp), Ibuse Black Rain excerpt (40 pp), Morrison Recitatif (25 pp).
- Why: These three readings show different ways writers leave things out or make meaning through silence: Ibuse tells Hiroshima stories as an insider, Woolf turns a single small observation into a study of consciousness and attention, and Morrison leaves race unstated to make readers face their own assumptions.
Prompt: Write a one-page dialogue where one character avoids telling the truth. Don't explain why — let the silence, pauses, or evasions suggest the meaning.
- In-class: Comparative discussion; craft talk on omission and silence; Workshop 1 (in class).
- Outside-class writing (~2 pp / ~1 hr): Revise scene emphasizing omission/ambiguity.
- Fieldwork: Optional journaling in quiet public space (20 min).

Week 5 – Kyoto in Fragments

- Readings (~50 pp / ~2 hrs): Bouilly The Body: An Essay (15 pp), Mori Polite Lies excerpts (20 pp), Dillard "The Death of a Moth" and "How I Wrote the Moth Essay—and Why" (15 pp).
- Why: Hybrid voices across cultures; fragments and close observation as form. Dillard's essay paired with her account of writing it shows revision and attention as visible craft.
Prompt: Write five short fragments (1–3 sentences each) capturing different moments you've noticed in Kyoto. Don't connect them — let the gaps speak.
- In-class: Craft talk; fragment writing exercise.
- Outside-class writing (~1–2 pp / ~1 hr): Expanded fragment reflection.
- Fieldwork: Independent Philosopher's Path observation (30 min).

Week 6 – Writing History, Writing the Other

- Readings (~120 pp / ~3 hrs): Epstein Gods of Heavenly Punishment (Chs. 1–5, 100 pp), Baricco Silk (excerpt, 20 pp).
- Why: Outsider fiction imagining Japan; how writers romanticize, exoticize, or imagine cultures they do not fully know — and the ethics of research and empathy that follow.
Prompt: Write a short scene set in a historical moment you didn't personally live through. Focus on sensory details — sights, sounds, smells — that could have been there, even if you don't know the facts.
- In-class: Discussion; Workshop 2 (in class).
- Outside-class writing (~2 pp / ~1 hr): Revise draft with historical voice.
- Fieldwork: Optional history museum visit (30 min).

Week 7 – Sacred Spaces and Silent Histories

- Readings (~25 pp / ~1 hr): Endō interview in Jesuit Review.
- Why: Endō on faith, silence, positionality.
Prompt: Visit (or imagine) a sacred space. Write a half-page description focusing not on what is happening, but on what is not happening — the silences, absences, or unseen presences.
- In-class: Observational writing; group discussion.
- Outside-class writing (~1–2 pp / ~1 hr): 'Silence as Evidence' scene.
- Fieldwork (Required #2): Kyoto Museum for World Peace (~3 hrs).

Week 8 – Witness and Betrayal

- Readings (~100 pp / ~2.5 hrs): Endō Silence (Chs. 1–5).
- Why: Japanese novelist depicting European missionaries; empathy across faith/culture.
Prompt: Write a scene in which a character's deepest belief is tested by another person. Let the conflict unfold through dialogue and gesture rather than explanation.
- In-class: Close reading; film clip from Scorsese's Silence; writing exercise on conviction.
- Outside-class writing (~1 pp / ~1 hr): Short reflection on faith and translation.
- Fieldwork: None.

Week 9 – Apostasy and Empathy

- Readings (~125 pp / ~3 hrs): Endō Silence (finish, 100 pp), Rhys Wide Sargasso Sea (excerpt, 25 pp).
- Why: Insider and outsider perspectives on cultural encounter; how writers give voice to the silenced or colonized other.
Prompt: Write a short scene at a cultural border (a meal, a meeting, a marketplace) where two people misunderstand each other. Show the miscommunication without explaining it directly.
- In-class: Comparative discussion; border-encounter writing exercise.
- Outside-class writing (~2 pp / ~1 hr): Expanded border encounter.
- Fieldwork: Optional shrine/temple observation (20 min).

Week 10 – Hybridity and Identity

- Readings (~120 pp / ~3 hrs): Ozeki Tale for the Time Being excerpts (80 pp), Shamsie Home Fire (excerpt, 40 pp).
- Why: explores what happens when stories migrate — how writers use doubled voices and outsider perspectives to carry identity across cultures.
Prompt: Write about the same event from two different perspectives: one from inside, one from outside. Let the two accounts contradict each other.
- In-class: Craft talk on hybrid identity; writing exercise in split-voice narration.
- Outside-class writing (~1–2 pp / ~1 hr): Expanded split-voice draft.
- Fieldwork: Suggested independent Nara visit (Tōdai-ji, Kasuga Taisha, Nara Park).

Week 11 – Domestic Borders

- Readings (~80 pp / ~2.5 hrs): Tanizaki Makioka Sisters excerpts (60 pp), Epstein Gods selections (20 pp).
- Why: shows how traditions and gender roles shape everyday life, and how outsiders write about them.
Prompt: Write a scene built around a family or group ritual (a meal, a greeting, a ceremony). Show how power, gender, or authority is expressed through the ritual itself.
- In-class: Viewing Leonie clips; Workshop 3 (in class).
- Outside-class writing (~2 pp / ~1 hr): Ritual-focused scene.
- Fieldwork (Required #3): Kitano Tenmangū Tenjin-san Market, or Tō-ji Kōbō-san Market depending on calendar (~3 hrs). Focus: storytelling through objects, character sketches, material culture, field journaling.

Week 12 – Dreaming Place

- Readings (~110 pp / ~3 hrs): Mitchell number9dream (excerpt, 90 pp), Murakami “Sleep” (20 pp).
- Why: uses dreamlike, speculative, and surreal writing to explore memory and place, blurring the boundary between what happened and what was imagined.
Prompt: Write a short piece that mixes reality and dream. Start with a real memory or observation, then let it slip into surreal or impossible imagery.
- In-class: Craft talk on dream logic; memory-myth exercise.
- Outside-class writing (~1–2 pp / ~1 hr): Expanded memory-myth scene.
- Fieldwork (Required #4): Kamogawa River + Demachiyana observation excursion (~3 hrs). Focus: contemporary Kyoto, place writing, observational notebooks, public life.

Week 13 – Final Presentations & Portfolio Workshop

- Readings: No new readings.
- In-class: Final portfolio presentations; peer feedback; reflection.
- Assignments: Final Portfolio (one Kyoto-based piece + one intercultural voice piece), Critical Reflection Essay (3–5 pp).
- Fieldwork: Independent site revisit for closing reflection (30–45 min).

Summary of Revisions

Writing Across Cultures: Kyoto as Mirror and Muse

In response to the Committee's feedback, I have revised the syllabus to clarify expectations, reduce workload, and make the role of each text and assignment more specific. Below are the major changes:

1. Workload & Reading Scope

- Each week now includes page counts and estimated reading times.
- Weekly homework is capped at 3.5–4 hours outside class (reading + writing).
- Writing assignments are short (1–2 pages), building toward three in-class workshops and a final portfolio.

2. Workshops

- Workshops are now clearly defined as in-class only, with drafts (5–7 pages) circulated beforehand.
- This ensures no extra outside scheduling is required.

3. Role of Texts

- Every reading has a plain-language “Why” explanation to show what it contributes (stylistic model, thematic focus, cultural/historical context).
- I added creative writing prompts for each week to demonstrate exactly how readings will be put into practice.

4. Field Trips

- Reduced from many possible outings to four required Friday trips:
 1. Saihō-ji (Kokedera / Moss Temple)
 2. Kyoto Museum for World Peace
 3. Kitano Tenmangū Tenjin-san Market (or Tō-ji Kōbō-san Market, depending on calendar)
 4. Kamogawa River + Demachiyana-gi observation excursion
- Required excursions are now aligned with the course's identity as a creative-writing course, emphasizing observation, material culture, and place writing.
- Suggested independent excursions (not required): Fushimi sake district, Nara, Gion, Philosopher's Path, and a local temple or shrine of the student's choice.
- Other weeks use short local observations (15–30 minutes) instead of group excursions.

5. Thematic Refinement

- Week 4 reframed as “Silence, Omission, and What's Left Unsaid” to connect Woolf, Ibuse, and Morrison through the shared theme of ambiguity and omission.

- Balance across the course is now clearer: Japanese writers on Japan, diaspora voices, Westerners writing Japan, and global expatriate perspectives.