Students who have taken English classes with University of Hartford Assistant Professor Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien will vouch for her honesty and directness when it comes to tough issues like race, cultural identity, and politics. Her newly released book, Weird English, begins where her lectures leave off. Ch’ien introduces readers to a growing linguistic movement she has observed in recent years that she calls “weird English.”

The overall concept describes the controversial result of blending one or more languages with English to make a social, political, or cultural point. Without Ch’ien’s weird English classification, this phenomenon is generally relegated to the broad category of minority or what is often called “postcolonial” literature.

In her book, Ch’ien introduces a new literary theory that embraces the merging of many diverse cultures and languages. She complements her theory with examples from a multitude of authors and essayists, among them: Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, Arundhati Roy, Homi Bhabha, Junot Díaz, Derek Walcott, and Salman Rushdie.

According to Ch’ien, the authors discussed “have love affairs with language and their characters. They are loyal to their communities, yet strive for assimilation.” This pertains most clearly to Nabokov’s Lolita. While the novel is about a man’s pedophilic fantasies, Ch’ien argues that it is also about the author’s relationship to the English language.

In the chapter “Chinky Writing,” Ch’ien discusses Chinglish, the synthesis of Chinese and English, as an unofficial language that is, in some ways, a parody of English. While discussing Maxine Hong Kingston’s writing, Ch’ien praises Kingston’s desire “to evolve English” into an “open system” that does not discriminate between cultures.

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