

**Sneja Gunew. *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators*.  
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***Acoustic Resonances: Between Literacies and Literatures***

The editorial comments, when they came, all hinted vaguely at the artificiality of my language, its exaggerated tone, an English with which they could not identify in linguistic or any other terms. An impression that the issues which preoccupied me, which seemed of importance were totally outside local preoccupations, both in approach and essence.  
Antigone Kefala, *Towards a Language*

At the heart of Sneja Gunew's *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators* lies a critique of the 'monolingualism' that has shaped colonial, national, and globalising literary practices. While Gunew adapts notions of cosmopolitan and multicultural writing to frame her critique, along the way she provides engaging close readings of diasporic literatures coursing through, mainly, Australia and Canada—two countries she is intimately acquainted with, where her considerable research and pedagogical work are anchored.

In Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, Gunew made a significant contribution to the study of ethnic minority storytellers, literacies, and literatures. She was one of the first literary and cultural scholars in Australia to take seriously the benefits of bibliographical studies of writers and their work.<sup>1</sup> Building on this research, her *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies* appeared in the early 90s, providing refreshing terms of reference by which what she called at the time 'ethnic minority writing' could be studied in the context of Australian multiculturalism. Her subsequent *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (2004), written after her relocation to Canada, signaled her move away from privileging the nation-state as an organising category of literary and cultural studies.

Amidst these developments in her work, the multicultural has remained a staple theme, and in this recent book is nuanced by the prefix 'post.' Gunew is well aware that the term 'multicultural' sifts through a number of political, cultural, and intellectual circumstances and contexts, and hence cannot be stabilised as a substantive category of reference. By the same token, her 'post' suggests the possibility of the multicultural beyond nation-state enclosures, a multicultural that has shed assumptions of a White majoritarian standard by which the category of ethnic writers is institutionally inscribed,<sup>2</sup> subjectively embodied, and, to be sure, resisted.

The other central term of her book, 'neo-cosmopolitan,' is defined as 'vernacular' and 'peripheral.' Through close readings of a number of literary texts, Gunew revisits a past terrain of multicultural, ethnic minority, and diasporic literary production, mining their efforts to negotiate languages, place, distance, and styles of storytelling. This literature constitutes something like a 'molecular' (to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari) modality of cultural production that corrupts static notions of geographical and temporal boundaries, or else stock reservoirs of genre. Visiting such literature 'from below' (Gunew), through a prism of the 'future anterior' (3), has the benefit of avoiding what would amount to an epistemological repertoire of substantive spatial and temporal categories of reference.

Thus, neo-cosmopolitanism, as Gunew understands and applies it as a modality of literary and cultural research, foregrounds 'a blindness concerning many groups, histories, and geopolitical areas that were overlooked in the past and that need to be brought to the center of our cultural criticism so that we can engage more ethically and sustainably with global cultures and languages—including those at

risk' (3). Considering her evocation of Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the singular plural (Gunew 7), and more demonstratively her discussions of a variety of works of literature, one would have to imagine that neo-cosmopolitanism resonates through any number of centers and their localising and/or globalising imaginaries. Indeed, this is what Gunew means in her further reference to Gayatri Spivak's notion of the planetary: 'The discussion also questions traditional ways of conceptualizing space and time by evoking the planetary to set against the ubiquitous use of the global and by referring to deep or geological time (often associated with Indigeneity) as distinct from a linear colonial time that undergirds most national histories' (3).

In her discussions of particular works of literature, Gunew is attentive to the 'minoritarian interjections' (52), inchoate 'grammars of subjectivity' (66), or else (to mention another of her compelling terms) 'acoustic palimpsests' (107), by which emergent works of literature incorporate a certain scuffle with canonical forms of narrative. We could invoke Scott's *Benang, From the Heart*, concerning which all three of these notions can be applied to observe the 'multilingualism' of his novel. By this I mean that Gunew is not interested in restricting the term multilingualism to a mixture of what is maintained as a number of statically identifiable languages. For this would transpire as a mode of literary appreciation that underestimates the searching experimentation of writers and their work. Multilingualism, rather, points towards vernacular grammars steeped in the wonder, antagonism, implacable chiaroscuro of *literacies* taking place within and between languages, within and between aural resonances of speaking and writing. The notion, multilingualism, directs attention to informal circulations of storytelling as modalities of social exchange, and of emergent narrative styles exceeding conventional anachronic rhythms.

Gunew's provocative notion of the future anterior, wedded to a vernacular cosmopolitan, post-multicultural prism, provides an interesting tangent to the recent 'transnational' (Jacklin) turn in the study of literature in Australia. Her attention to the chiaroscuro of vernacular grammars, storytelling, literature and poetry, suggests a framework by which literature can be studied according to exchanges of literacy—an acoustic, aural literacy understood more broadly than simply a capacity to read and write. Scott's novel I mentioned above is an interesting example, concerning how his efforts to squeeze familial and extended community based exchanges of stories (vernacular literacies encompassing varying languages and modalities of storytelling) into a generic narrative form (literature) necessarily corrupts not only narrative form itself, but conventional distinctions between literacy and literature.

Brian Castro's first novel, *Birds of Passage* (1984), is steeped in a similar dynamic, with all its compulsive play on the translation of literacy into literature, or else literature into literacy, within languages (English, Chinese), and between languages (Chinese and English). Between the characters Seamus and Shan, literacy and literature take place as shifting temporal terrains of exchanges between self, other, and circumstance. This includes a nineteenth-century Chinese construed through a twentieth-century Chinese/English literacy.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most demonstrative exhibits of this interdependence and emergent sensibility of literacy and literature is R.A. Baggio's *The Shoe in My Cheese: An Immigrant Family Experience* (1989).<sup>4</sup> Baggio writes about the development of a peculiar 'hybrid language' (67–71) spoken in Werribee, Victoria. The language is a mix of Italian and English, and can be readily understood neither by newly arrived Italian migrants nor established Australians without an Italian background, but only by the small community in the area. Baggio refers to a number of words whose phonetic resonance—or 'acoustic palimpsest,' to evoke Gunew once more—makes it difficult to decide whether they originate in Italian or English. But my point here is that *The Shoe in My Cheese* transpires as a restless site of negotiating acoustic shifts between literacy and literature. To my mind, this is where Gunew's idea of a vernacular cosmopolitan research undertaking has much value. As she succinctly explains:

Vernacular cosmopolitanism encompasses everyday cosmopolitanism as well as a cosmopolitanism from below: a subaltern and peripheral cosmopolitanism that makes claims for the recognition of the cosmopolitan nature (interactions with globalization) that are [sic] associated with groups that have been marginalized by nationalist enterprises. (7)

Gunew draws her book to a close with a reference to the work of Antigone Kefala, whom she must have had in mind when characterising her notions of ‘minoritarian interjections’ and ‘grammars of subjectivity.’ Kefala’s literary work, as well as her comments on her relationship to her work, foreground a vernacular cosmopolitanism tuned into the manifold contextures by which literacies are productively entwined with literatures. As Kefala says in an interview: ‘The question of which language you write in is that I feel you have to live in a language to be able to write in it’ (Jenny Digby, 33). Kefala approaches this contextual interweaving of literacies and literatures in her self-reflective essay ‘Towards a Language’ (1988).<sup>5</sup>

In her conclusion, Gunew writes about a ‘critical methodology’ inspired by emergent ‘grammars’ of ‘much-needed transnational cultural literacies.’ Once the ‘neo-cosmopolitan’ is brought into proximity with the ‘post-multicultural,’ it becomes possible to reread cultural archives and practices of literacy/literature differently to epistemological repertoires steeped in notions of ‘multicultural writers,’ or ‘migrant writers.’

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See her faculty site for further information: <http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sgunew/>

<sup>2</sup> As an example, I mention what was called a ‘multicultural forum’ at the inaugural Sydney Writers Festival of 1998, when amidst writers with Lebanese, Vietnamese, Greek, and Indigenous backgrounds, writers with Anglo-Celtic backgrounds were not included. While the author readings were great, I sensed at the time that quite a few of us in the audience were caught up in a dynamic whereby we were to some extent constrained to pretend that we weren’t pretending our ethnic and Indigenous affiliations.

<sup>3</sup> Despite his Chinese background, Seamus neither speaks nor writes in Chinese, and has to learn the language so as to translate Shan’s century-old journal into English.

<sup>4</sup> I devoted a section of my doctoral thesis of 1998 to Baggio’s autobiographical novel. At the time, I wondered how many second generation (or first generation?—I’m never sure) migrants learnt their parents’ first language as an oral language, as an aural exchange of sound and sense, and, unlike their parents, are not ‘literate’ in those languages, couldn’t read or write. My point is that this phenomenon, shared by many families in Australia and other settler colonies, provides a basis by which to question conventional notions of literacy.

<sup>5</sup> I have discussed this elsewhere in terms of a ‘verbal chiaroscuro’ (Nikro).

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