

POST-MULTICULTURAL WRITERS AS NEO- COSMOPOLITAN MEDIATORS



Sneja Gunew



"Sneja Gunew reads post-multicultural literatures to examine the lives of those who risk an escape across razor-wired borders or who live in conditions of colonial occupation: the neo-cosmopolitans. Her questions shatter the familiarity of global English and unsettle the complacency of those who read and think within its hallucinated universality."

—Margery Fee, Professor of English, University of British Columbia, Canada

"It is minoritarian authors in their marginalized status who put into crisis the major concepts of national culture and globalization: this incisive yet capacious argument about cosmopolitanism is pursued here through an astonishing range of writings, from the northern to the southern hemisphere. Sneja Gunew's book is one with which all future transnational literary studies will have to reckon."

—Rey Chow, author of *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience*

"Sneja Gunew takes us on a compelling elliptical tour of neo-cosmopolitan writers who force attention on alternative understandings of spatialities and temporalities that are urgently needed. This book will be of interest to social and cultural theorists who refuse to accept the 'anti-multicultural' politics that reject any recognition of differences that matter."

—Anne-Marie Fortier, Professor, Sociology Department, Lancaster University, UK

The guiding principle of *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-cosmopolitan Mediators* is the need to move beyond the monolingual paradigm within Anglophone literary studies. Using Francois Lyotard's concept of 'post' as the 'future anterior', Sneja Gunew sets up a concept of post-multiculturalism that salvages the elements within multiculturalism forgotten in its contemporary denigration. Gunew links this discussion to debates in neo-cosmopolitanism over the last decade, creating a framework for re-evaluating post-multicultural and Indigenous writers in settler colonies such as Canada and Australia. Gunew links these writers with transnational writers across diasporas from Eastern Europe, South-East Asia, China and India to construct a new framework for literary and cultural studies.

Sneja Gunew is professor emerita of English and women's and gender studies at the University of British Columbia, Canada. She has published widely on multicultural, postcolonial and feminist critical theory, and is the author of *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies* (1994) and *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (2004), among several other coauthored and coedited books.

Anthem Studies in Australian Literature and Culture publishes quality, innovative research that advances contemporary scholarship on Australian literature conceived historically, thematically and/or conceptually.

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Written over the past decade, this book represents the ways in which I process the key questions that have animated all my work: how to render more complex the monolithic cultural entities that national cultures are always threatening to become. It also represents my further engagement with the differences and similarities I found in moving from an Australian to a Canadian context 23 years ago.

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Introduction

THE WORLD AT HOME: POST-MULTICULTURAL WRITERS AS NEO-COSMOPOLITAN MEDIATORS

Elite cosmopolitan literary intellectuals are not the only cosmopolitans in a globalizing world. (Werbner 2012, 12)

Once again, around the world we witness and endure traumatic displacements where citizens are transformed into refugees and asylum seekers on a massive scale. In terms of the global rhetoric that defined the beginning of the millennium, Europe (which symbolically includes North America and Australia) has become a focus for those seeking asylum. And yet what we see are those on the edges of Europe (those who aspired to become part of the economic European Union) create razor-wired barriers that keep out the refugees from countries torn by conflicts often created by European attempts to structure the globe in ways that would best facilitate transnational capitalism. For someone who recalls growing up in Australia alongside Hungarian refugees in the 1950s, the recent developments in Hungary and elsewhere in relation to closing borders to refugees are difficult to comprehend. As we move further into the twenty-first century, West and non-West are congealing once again into monumental phantasmatic binaries. An even more disheartening sign is that the “non-West” appears increasingly to be synonymous with Islam—an unexpected outcome of Edward Said’s analysis of “orientalism” that was initially such an enabling interpretive lens. In the face of these developments, the debates in neo-cosmopolitanism over the past 15 years constitute recent attempts to imagine a new critical framework that is more culturally inclusive and to think in “planetary” rather than “global” terms. Here is Gayatri Spivak on this distinction: “The globe is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank. No one lives there; and we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe” (2012, 339).

What might it mean to assume an approach in which citizens of and in the world include all its parts? To unpack this last statement, the underlying concern is: what might it mean to consider everyone as having these rights? Due to various histories of imperialism and their latest incarnation in a globalization fueled by capitalism, as well as the structures of diverse nationalisms, this is a complex question to address. Furthermore, how might literary and cultural studies be situated in relation to these concerns as part of a pedagogical project? As Walter Dignolo reminds us, “Cosmopolitanism [...] is not something that is just happening. Someone has to make it happen” (2012, 86). One way to narrow the analytical task is to ask whether a seminar on neo-cosmopolitan literature would differ from one on world literature and how a reimagined post-multiculturalism might relate to either.

The Argument

But let me pause here and state that this book is emphatically not a comprehensive account of post-multicultural writing or writers. My examples are just that—eclectic choices rather than an attempt to be comprehensive—and while I engage with critics in both Canada and Australia, there is no attempt to be comprehensive in either context. The idea is to put into conversation these two contexts of critical analysis that share much as well as differing in illuminating ways: both Australia and Canada are grappling with their histories of colonial invasion, as well as with their recognition that they are shaped by many waves of discrepant migrations, including these most recent waves of asylum seekers who have been processed rather differently in Canada than in Australia (Perera 2015).

A remark by one of the anonymous reviewers of a draft of this book is completely accurate—that my arguments are rendered elliptically. It captures my approach perfectly and is due to my aversion to the lecturing mode that typically presents answers rather than questions. Therefore, my 45 years of teaching have evolved another pedagogical rhetoric and method that I have fumblingly termed a “stammering pedagogy” and “pedagogy as estrangement,” amongst others. All are meant to convey the idea of rendering in print multiple or parallax perspectives—providing listeners and readers with a number of points of view that are often inherently irreconcilable. The idea is to encourage an engagement that allows the listener/reader to think through and arrive at their own (provisional) point of view. But I am also responding to the reviewers’ frustrations, so here is an attempt to explain and clarify my approach and to unpack some of the major concepts I employ and the reasons for doing so.

This book's guiding principle is that we need to move beyond the (often unacknowledged) monolingual paradigm (an assumed model) that dominates Anglophone literary studies, particularly within settler colonies such as Australia. Using Lyotard's concept of "post" as the "future anterior" (back to the future), this book sets up a concept of post-multiculturalism that goes back to salvage elements that have been forgotten in multiculturalism's contemporary denigration—most notably the element of multilingualism. I attach this discussion to debates in neo-cosmopolitanism over the past decade to create a framework for re-evaluating post-multicultural and Indigenous writers in settler colonies such as Canada and Australia. I link these writers with transnational writers across diasporas from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, China and India to suggest a new framework for literary and cultural studies.

This book provides an overview of concepts in the field of literary and cultural neo-cosmopolitanism (peripheral cosmopolitanism or cosmopolitanism from below) and demonstrates their usefulness in re-interpreting notions of the spatial and the temporal to create a new cultural politics and ethics that speak to our challenging times. The neo-cosmopolitan debates have shown that while we are more aware of being connected than ever, this understanding is accompanied by 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. The discussion also questions traditional ways of conceptualizing space and time by invoking 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. In a wide-ranging (and highly eclectic) study of world literature, I juxtapose Christos Tsiolkas, Brian Castro, Ouyang Yu, Yasmine Gooneratne, Maxine Béneba Clarke, Antigone Kefala and Kim Scott from Australia with Canadian writers such as Shani Mootoo, Anita Rau Badami, Ann Marie Fleming, Kyo Maclear and Tomson Highway and connect them to "other" Europeans such as Dubravka Ugresic and Herta Müller (a recent Nobel prizewinner whose writings straddle Rumania and Germany) and Fiona Tan (a visual artist based in Amsterdam). This book analyzes diaspora texts by Xiaolu Guo, Ruyan Xu and Wang Gang from China within neo-imperial globalization where global English often functions as metonym for Western values. By introducing the acoustic "noise" of multilingualism (accents within writing) to the constitutive instability within monolingual English studies, I attempt to show that within global English, diverse forms of "englishes" provide routes to more robust recognition of the significance of other languages that create pluralized perspectives on our social relations in the world.

One of the palpable ways in which I try to unsettle critical reading is to insert the voices of other critics directly. Instead of always summarizing their arguments, I use quotations to emphasize the idea of critical analysis as a dialogue—more akin to a play script than the homogenized critical texts with which we are all too familiar and that we train our students to produce. It is true that such a method is akin to stones in a stream—I know because colleagues have often alerted me to this stylistic “fault.” This lack of flow is deliberate.

At the center of this attempt to defamiliarize the reader, I question the familiarity of global English itself. For example, Brian Castro points out in an interview published in 2011 that “not everything is in English. We just make this assumption, well, Anglos make this assumption that the masterpieces of the world will automatically be translated into English. It doesn’t hold true, because there are huge masterpieces out there that English speakers will not ever access because they can’t speak that language” (Castro in Brun 2011, 32). It is also useful to recall the point Deleuze and Guattari made in *A Thousand Plateaus* that: “There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language that at times advances along a broad front, and at times swoops down on diverse centers simultaneously” (1987/2003, 101).

Analyzing the neo-cosmopolitan debates of the past 15 years, it is clear that there is a discipline-based struggle around who “owns” these new definitions of cosmopolitanism in the sense of providing its salient critical categories and definitions. Emanating in the first instance from political science, philosophy, sociology, legal studies and anthropology, neo-cosmopolitanism does not appear to have been consistently engaged by literary and cultural studies, at least not in a comprehensive manner.¹ Conspicuous exceptions are Tim Brennan, who has been highly critical of the neo-cosmopolitan debates and has identified them as largely synonymous with a global Americanization, including the fetishization of elite cosmo-celebratory figures such as Salman Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh as designated representatives of all so-called Third World cultures. There was also the 2002 collection *Cosmopolitanism* (based on a special issue of *Public Culture*) in which Walter D. Mignolo spoke of critical cosmopolitanism in relation to border politics (2002), which has an urgent relevance again today. In addition, there is the generative mediation provided by Pheng Cheah, whose coediting with Bruce Robbins of the landmark text *Cosmopolitics* was a pioneering map of the terrain and whose more recent forays into redefinitions of world literature are shaping current attempts to situate literary studies more solidly in the neo-cosmopolitan debates.² Bishnupriya Ghosh’s analysis of the contemporary Indian novel that identifies fourth-generation writers in English as “cosmopolitical writers [who] render India ‘communicable’ to a global audience” (2004, 50) and Berthold Schoene’s study, based on the philosophical categories of Jean-Luc Nancy, of a new cosmopolitan novel exemplified by writers

such as Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell represent other contemporary directions. Robert Spencer's juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism and postcolonialism that emphasizes a cosmopolitan reading rather than identifying cosmopolitan texts resonates with this book as well. As Spencer puts it, "'Cosmopolitan criticism' is the name I give to a literary critical approach which is alert to the ways in which postcolonial texts make available for scrutiny both the nature of colonial violence *and* the latency and desirability of cosmopolitan alternatives" (2011, 7). The domain of "transcultural" literature, identified by mostly German scholars, overlaps with this last area.³

My own book continues my work over three decades (Gunew 1994, 2004), analyzing the ways in which diasporic, immigrant, multicultural and ethnic minority writers are situated in a kind of cordon sanitaire around settler-colonial national cultural formations. The conditions under which they gain visibility are often the very ones that appear to consign them to the margins in perpetuity with the exception of a few token figures (often interchangeable) who tend to function as emblematic of neoliberal cultural tolerance. In response to this dynamic, the thesis in this book is a simple one: if we engage seriously with the terms offered by the debates in neo-cosmopolitanism, such writers would be given critical recognition as mediating figures that facilitate new relations between national cultures and the global or, in the more felicitous term suggested by Spivak, Gilroy and Cheah, the *planetary*. The very elements that have been traditionally deployed to illustrate their constitutive suffering and oppression (the "migrant condition"; *migritude*¹), the belief that they are at home nowhere or in more than one place (and thus constitutively disloyal and "unpatriotic"), could be rethought to comprise their greatest attribute—that they can navigate the structures of belonging in numerous ways, not least by putting into question the complacent assumptions or self-evident universalisms that undergird many forms of both nationalism and globalization. As Gerard Delanty puts it, "Despite the western genealogy of the word cosmopolitanism, the term is used today in a 'post-western' register of meaning. In this sense it is 'post-western' orientation that is located neither on the national nor global level, but at the interface of the local and the global. [...] Taken together, these dimensions and characteristics of cosmopolitanism suggest a broad definition of cosmopolitanism as a condition of openness to the world and entailing self and societal transformation in light of the encounter with the Other" (2012, 41).

In the struggles around who establishes the rules of engagement with neo-cosmopolitanism, the late Ulrich Beck is credited with reviving the cosmopolitan debates within political theory under the broad category of risk management. As he puts it in an essay published with Eugene Grande, "It has become a commonplace that national institutions alone are unable to cope

with the challenges of regulating global capitalism and responding to new global risks. [...] It is no less obvious that there is no global state or international organization capable of regulating global capital and risk [...] in industrial society. Instead, we can observe a complex reconstitution of political authority, with which to organize the mechanisms of global economic regulation, risk management and control in ways characterized by new forms of political interdependence” (2010, 410).

As they go on to point out, we live in a world of global relations where the risks that threaten the planet (the urgency to address international human rights, global warming etc.) cannot be contained by nation-state boundaries. In other words, we are faced at every turn with the realization that we are interconnected in ways that go beyond the old notions of internationalism but that these forces have unpredictable implications. As Gerard Delanty phrases it, “The world may be becoming more and more globally linked by powerful global forces, but this does not make the world more cosmopolitan” (2009, 2). The rise of new communication technologies and social networking has also fueled our awareness of being connected differently. Beck and others have rooted their version of cosmopolitanism in Immanuel Kant’s ideas, and as many have pointed out, his work is inescapably Eurocentric.⁵ Indeed Beck’s enterprise is closely aligned with setting up a model for cosmopolitanism that speaks implicitly and explicitly to the travails of the European Union. When cosmopolitanism’s roots are linked to earlier antecedents in the Stoics, other possibilities open up (Nussbaum 2010). For example, some commentators identify the *nomos* (the law) with an etymological split that depends on whether one puts the accent on the first or second syllable. In the first (*nómos*), it relates to the sedentary and the propertied, and in the second (*nomós*), to the nomadic (Vardoulakis 2008). The considerable tensions between the two are addressed later in this study. Part of the problem with and the reason for the resistance to cosmopolitanism is that its discourse is often governed by a rhetoric of universalism (and includes supposedly indisputable terms such as *universal human rights*) and by groups (such as Beck’s European model) that attempt to usurp the place of the universal. But as Ernesto Laclau reminds us, “If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary contents; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representations” (2003, 367).

For example, Beck’s linkage of cosmopolitanism to a European universalism appears immediately un-cosmopolitan to Mignolo and others who see universalism as the antithesis of what the new cosmopolitanism is trying to construct. Mignolo is among many who try to qualify cosmopolitanism to clarify a particular ethical context: “How then does de-colonial cosmopolitanism