

## “A Multilingual Life”: The Cosmopolitan and Globalectic Dimensions of Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Writings

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### Abstract

The new debates in cosmopolitanism over the last decade are the latest attempt to imagine a critical framework that is more culturally inclusive. These cosmopolitan discussions offer fertile possibilities for discovering new relevance in those multicultural or “ethnic” writings traditionally marginalised in national and transnational formations. Post-multicultural and post-ethnic writers can be given critical recognition as mediating figures that facilitate new relations between national cultures and the global or, in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s more felicitous term “globlectics.” The very elements that have been traditionally associated with their constitutive oppression, the belief that they are at home nowhere or in more than one place, could be rethought to constitute their greatest attribute – that they can navigate the structures of belonging in multiple ways, not least by challenging the complacent assumptions or self-evident universalisms that undergird many forms of both nationalism and globalisation. Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s texts will be analysed to show how she is an exemplary figure of the neo-cosmopolitan globalectic writer.

### Keywords

Cosmopolitan literature, transnational literature, globalectics, post-multiculturalism, post-ethnicity, World English

Globlectics is derived from the shape of the globe. On its surface, there is no one center; any point is equally a center.... Globlectics embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tensions, and motion. (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 8)

This moment of impasse between language and silence serves as an analogue for the presence of another language in a monolingual English-language text purporting to represent a multilingual life. (Lim, “Impossibility” 44)

Over a decade ago, just after the publication of her astonishing memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*, I wrote about Shirley Geok-lin Lim as a contemporary

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manifestation of the public intellectual as poet-pedagogue.<sup>2</sup> The essay was part of a study looking at the ways in which such rare figures dealt with the contradictions of being positioned as minoritarian public intellectuals. Through this composite figure I tried to convey the ways in which minoritarianism, as theorised by JanMohammed and Lloyd, and Avtar Brah amongst others, all influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's study of Kafka as a minoritarian writer in Czechoslovakia/Germany, was a difficult path to follow. In comparable ways Lim's memoir charted the linguistic and other contradictions in her role as pioneer in the establishment of Asian American writing, particularly women's writing, as well as being one of the first to theorise the emergent national literatures of Malaysia and Singapore. Lim's multi-faceted writing persona has accomplished this by working across many differing genres: literary criticism and her own creative writing that dealt with these issues in a different register, accompanied by the kind of institution building that produced the anthologies, special journal issues and critical handbooks (e.g. the MLA guide to Kingston's *The Women Warrior*). These last activities are crucial but often thankless tasks because while making an absence visible<sup>3</sup> they are also regularly attacked for the form these manifestations take. Lim's labours throughout are characterised by an acutely interrogative and critical perspective – all orthodoxies, everything, is questioned.

In this paper I would like to consider Lim's work within the context of the debates in the new cosmopolitanism that have arisen over the last decade or so to provide a humanistic response to the bleakness engendered by globalisation.<sup>4</sup> I am considering Lim as a cosmopolitan writer in spite of the fact that in the preface to her 1994 collection of essays she refers to "a cosmopolitanism that disavows local identities" (xii). The new cosmopolitanism is actually committed to weaving the local into the global – giving it a global legibility – and many of the elements central to the new debates have been present in Lim's work over several decades driven by her interest in scrutinising ecologies of belonging within frameworks of nationalism, transnationalism, globalisation and now neo-cosmopolitanism. To sketch the components of the last succinctly: unlike the old elitist cosmopolitanism that dealt with a type of privileged mobility, the new cosmopolitanism engages with the perspectives of those left out of triumphalist globalisation in which the world is constantly referred to as being connected in new ways – the most remote communities are represented as, in effect, virtual neighbourhoods. This may work in terms of the creation and reach of new markets but does not compute in terms of access to resources – far from it. To signal its newness, this cosmopolitanism is often bolstered by qualifying terms such as vernacular, abject, moral, ecological, armoured cosmopolitan etc. Having

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<sup>2</sup> Gunew, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Making an absence visible is an approach I developed in Gunew, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> See Gunew, 2013.

said that, there are still disputes about whether the terms really do generate new perspectives or whether they camouflage the recursive manifestations of the same old neoliberal structures.

The political scientist Ulrich Beck's "Cosmopolitan Manifesto" (1998) was intended to mobilise a concept of "world citizen" that transcended nation-states. Beck is often seen as one of the architects of these new debates in the context of risk management summarised by Claire Colebrook as "threats to this cosmopolitanism – resource depletion, rising sea levels, global heating, desertification, species extinction, viral apocalypse, violent fundamentalism, bio-weapons" (166). Clearly, the institutions associated with nation-states are by their very nature not able to manage all these so how might we imagine global institutions that are predicated on new alliances that can comprehensively involve the greatest number of participants to deal with these problems? Because of Beck's focus on Europe (albeit a redefined Europe) and his debt to Immanuel Kant, many critics see his position as being inherently Eurocentric, referring to universalist principles to covertly enshrine the old Euro-US hegemonies through this humanitarian appeal to maintaining world peace (this in spite of the fact that Beck alerts his readers to such dangers in the Manifesto). A more familiar North American manifestation of the new cosmopolitan debates may well be Kwame Anthony Appiah's essay "Case for Contamination" (2006) advocating an appreciation of global cultural mingling, later a book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.

### **Solidarity/Solitude**

While the concept of hospitality is central to these discussions, a contradiction that is at the heart of these debates is the fact that cosmopolitanism is structured in relation to the inescapable tensions between individuals and groups; to what degree is the individual prepared to submerge her interests in those of the group? In Jean-Luc Nancy's terms: "From one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity" (5). How one receives the stranger in the performance of hospitality, for example, depends very much on how the group situates itself as a geo-political entity. For example, critics of the West often create a reified version of the West defined by rampant individualism that is seen to be responsible for the ills associated with globalisation, the irresponsible expenditure and waste of resources – human and others. The tensions between individual and group are also consistently at the centre of Lim's work. For example, in the memoir, the narrator describes learning the English folksong of "The Jolly Miller" who cared for nobody etc.

The miller working alone had no analogue in the Malayan world. In Malacca everyone was surrounded by everyone else.... Caring was not a concept that signified.... Caring denoted a field of choice, of individual

voluntary action, that was foreign to family, the place of compulsory relations. (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 64)

Whereas on the one hand one was never alone, or one was not encouraged to seek a solitary life, on the other hand the narrator employs the term “compulsory relations” that suggest a stifling of individual desire and creativity. From her meditations on the alien concept of the jolly miller to her subsequent immigrant acknowledgements that “there are many ways in which America makes you feel an outsider” (199), or the recognition of the challenges involved in being an academic woman; all of these contradictions are only provisionally resolved. A poignant example is given in the memoir when the narrator looks back with a sense of guilt at having “abandoned” her community college students for a position in a research university:

Over and over again I wondered if my hours of intense teaching were helping or actively harming my students.... Were we setting up obstacles to lengthen their social dependency and lowly economic status and to justify our salaries and professional rank?... Is all written English formulaic, and is teaching English the teaching of a series of formulae.... Is an educated person a writing person? What does it mean to be a writing person?... We exhorted our tough ghetto students to express their feelings, but only in acceptable grammar. The contradictions were unbearable. (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 180-81)<sup>5</sup>

A characteristic of all her writing is the searing honesty with which Lim never lets her narrator off the hook in terms of representing the ethical dilemmas involved. There is also the example of the stand-off between her increasingly middle-class need to control her property rights and the desires of her tenement neighbours in Brooklyn, “It was my fault, not theirs. Their street was a public square; my street was a private loneliness” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 179).

Lim’s work also articulates an ambivalence concerning the role of the nation itself in terms of fostering progressive social relations, whether it concerns the post-independence politics of Malaysia and Singapore or of the US itself. In this respect, cosmopolitanism is often perceived as being part of post-nationalist developments, that is, proving (as in Beck’s manifesto) that the nation state is an outmoded model of governance. Fuelled by her experience of both Malaysia and Singapore, Lim’s approach partly resonates with long-term critics of cosmopolitanism (such as Tim Brennan) who maintain that the death of the

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<sup>5</sup> Minhao Zheng examines this section of the memoir to ask whether it means that “poor black and brown students are automatically denied access to English literature” (89) but I think this misses Lim’s point. Lim is arguing that the emphasis on teaching “correct” grammar etc. is actually an obstacle to the students’ access to this cultural trove as well as undermining their confidence in their own powers of expression.

nation has been too hastily invoked – that the nation remains a much-needed bulwark against the more rapacious and predatory incursions of global capitalism. In this account of the tensions between local and global, the nation counts as a version of the local. In the same continuum, Pheng Cheah (2006) reminds us that the nation signifies differently when it is one that is post-independence and in the process of decolonisation. Cheah also argues that in addressing global inequities cosmopolitan solidarity must connect with institutions situated within nation-states and these institutions include national literatures. In the background is Fanon's influential statement that "National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension" (247). In Cheah's words,

We can arrive at a more complex conception of the world if it is not referred back to an overarching teleological end of universal progress, but is seen as the effect of dynamic contestation from different sub-national, national and regional sites. (Cheah, "What is a World?" 145)

### **English Multilingualism**

One of the influential ways of thinking about institutions more broadly has been in the sense of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), within which literary cultures have their role to play. For example, what is at stake now in this global ISA we call English Literature? Much of Lim's work is concerned with this question over many sites. In general terms students are offered a kind of cultural history with a central homeland and satellites linked with the old imperial colonies – for example, Malaysian or Singaporean literature, as well as a management plan that is organised around periodisation and (sometimes) genres. But what about the fact that the core medium, English, has now become a global language that is to some degree un-tethered from history, spinning out of its initial imperial orbit? What are the implications of studying English literature now, or of studying writings in English (and are they the same)? English as a global language can never provide an inherently neutral mediation for national literatures because it is inevitably linked with its colonial history. For example, Aijaz Ahmad offers a somewhat bitter evaluation of the role English has played in the formation of Indian literature:

Meanwhile, it is in English more than any other language that the largest archive of translation has been assembled.... The difficulty is that it is the language least suitable for this role... because it is, among all the Indian languages, the most removed, in its structure and ambience, from all the other Indian languages.... This disability is proportionately greater the closer the original text is to the oral, the performative, the domestic, the customary, the assumed, the unsaid.... (250)

Or consider the following statement by Ashis Nandy that appears, somewhat dubiously, to make English and the West synonymous:

The West's centrality in any cultural dialogue in our times has been ensured by its dominance over the language in which dialogue among the non-Western cultures takes place.... All such dialogues today are mediated by the West as an unrecognized third participant. For each culture in Asia today, while trying to talk to another Asian culture, uses as its reference point not merely the West outside, but also its own version of an ahistorical, internalized West. (144)

Such slippages in terms of folding English into a supposedly monolingual "West" are often made in postcolonial criticism.<sup>6</sup>

Lim's work has a great deal to say about the role of English ranging from its aesthetic and affective appeal to its destructive effects on emergent post-independence national literatures (Ahmad and Nandy). On the one hand the narrator in the memoirs notes that, "Depriving us of Chinese or Malay or Hindi, British teachers reminded us nonetheless that English was only on loan, a borrowed tongue which we could only garble" (121). And simultaneously there is regret for not being able to be at ease in the language linked with her Chinese heritage:

I heard Hokkien as an infant and resisted it, because my mother did not speak it to me... calling into question the notion of a mother tongue tied to a racial origin. As a child of a Hokkien community, I should have felt that propulsive abrasive dialect in my genes. Instead, when I speak Hokkien, it is at the level of a five-year-old.... It remains at a more powerful level a language of exclusion, the speech act which disowns me in the very place of birth. (11)

On the other hand, in her first novel *Joss and Gold*, a complex reworking of elements present in the memoir,<sup>7</sup> there is an important discussion amongst some of the characters as to whether English should be jettisoned in the construction of the new Malaysian nation. The protagonist, Li An, a Chinese-Malaysian, considers what it would mean for her to embrace Malay as the national language:

What would happen if they all suddenly switched to Malay right now? How would she express herself? Like a halting six-year-old, groping for light in a darkened world? Her world was lit by language. The English ingested

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<sup>6</sup> One notes here that the inter-Asia cultural studies project (Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat) represents an attempt to decolonise the internalised process Ashis Nandy describes.

<sup>7</sup> Weishin Gui analyses this novel in terms of its radicalism but is somewhat hampered by the overarching project of fitting it into an Adornian framework.

through years of reading and talking now formed the delicate web of tissues in her brain. Giving up her language would be like undergoing a crippling operation on her brain. (56)

When a language invades one to the extent that it becomes the primary instrument for communication it would indeed extinguish a part of one's interiority to excise it. As I argue in this essay, Lim has made a virtue of the ways in which her work (and her person) have been marginalised by using those processes to interrogate the nature of the hegemonic and normative elements that authorise and govern such pedagogical and linguistic engineering. In a Derridean supplementary process, where the supplement functions to interrogate the very possibility of plenitude, she repeatedly reveals the parochialism and self-interest of such claims. Over the years her texts have been dubbed multicultural, postcolonial, diasporic, or Third World as a way of displacing their central relevance. With respect to the last, while Aijaz Ahmad has produced a thorough critique of Fredric Jameson's enormously influential essay that labels all Third World texts as national allegories, perhaps there is some advantage in considering Lim's work as forming part of a revised notion of world literatures that sees them as parables or allegories of a new cosmopolitanism that displaces the old universalisms associated with colonialism for a new sense of the world inflected by local details. As the narrator of Lim's memoir states, somewhat sardonically, "I listened to the chatter of Americans caught up in the great adventure of their culture.... The United States and I were too provincial for each other. I felt the intensity of our self-absorption" (159).

Central to the quest to flesh out a cosmopolitan framework for literary studies is to speculate whether it is the text, the writer or the reader who determines a cosmopolitan approach? In Lim's case one could argue that all three are involved. For example, Tim Brennan's analyses of cosmopolitanism consist of a scathing dismissal of neo-cosmopolitan debates as largely synonymous with a globalised Americanisation including the fetishisation of elite cosmopolitan-celebratory figures such as Salman Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh who have become the iconic representatives of so-called Third World cultures. Robert Spencer's *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (2011) is "interested less in cosmopolitan texts than in cosmopolitan readings" (7). Berthold Schoene's *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009) locates a cosmopolitan sensibility within the writer that allows them, "to open up and yield to the structuring of the world as she or he finds it, however bewildering, turbulent or self-contradictory" (16) and situates this within the context of "literature as a specialized set of ethical tools for cultural critique and creative world-formation" (32). In other words, the cosmopolitan author helps to produce a cosmopolitan reader. But by what processes does this come about? Neil Lazarus describes cosmopolitan writers as not just setting the scene but allowing us to

comprehend the “symbolic economy – or ‘structure of feeling’... to ground his readers in the novel’s *mise en scène* thereby making it possible for them to appreciate the full human implications of his story” (123-24). And certainly, the manner in which Lim’s writing conveys the globalectic centrality of the local in her writings is evidence for Lazarus’s claim.

However, we are back to the question of language and the ways in which English’s mediating monolingualism inherently affects these processes. But is English as rigidly monolingual as critics such as Ahmad and Nandy contend? In postcolonial studies there has been a lot of work that looks at the rise of “englishes,” a recognition of English creolisation that now has a robust existence, for example, in dialect and dub writings.<sup>8</sup> In *The Idea of English Ethnicity* Robert Young asserts that, “It is, finally, English itself... which holds the Anglo-Saxon world together fraternally in its impatient, perpetual circulations” (6). But what does this mean for those who are not part of the “Anglo-Saxon” diaspora but who are nonetheless “in” English, an English perpetually haunted by other languages as is the case with Lim’s many texts? Robert Young contends further that all Englishness is performative (3); but if Englishness is performative, then logic dictates that it is not only available to Anglo-Saxon diasporas but, arguably, to anyone. Young’s thesis resonates with Gauri Viswanathan’s important contribution to postcolonial studies, that English Literature came into being via colonialism – to form a covert ideological system (unlike overt missionary proselytising) that would produce those mimic subjects that allowed colonialism to flourish. It resonates as well with Homi Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry, a mimicry of the coloniser that undoes the coloniser’s undivided authority. In other words, colonialist ideology meant that taking on the “masquerade” of Englishness needed to be aspirationally available to anyone. However, within global English (clearly a key component within Englishness), the meanings attached to linguistically enunciative positions differ (I speak; I am spoken) as do the geopolitical positions from which one speaks English. Such meaning-making began early with England’s first colony – Ireland.

Someone once remarked that Synge wrote in Irish and English simultaneously. The English of this novel is inhabited from the inside by the tones and rhythms of Irish, so that from the viewpoint of Standard English its idiom is as persistently off-key as its realism... the spectral presence within them of a language other than English.... Being stranded between two tongues in this way was one reason Ireland proved so hospitable to modernism... typically the work of literal or internal émigrés, men and women caught on the hop between different cultures and languages.... (Eagleton 23-24)

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<sup>8</sup> I have written about English as a technology that structures certain kinds of subjectivity in chapter 3 of my book *Haunted Nations*.



Eagleton's comment reinforces Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of "minoritarianism" and language, in this instance in relation to a major language – English.<sup>9</sup> Such "minor" explorers of a major language are consistently characterised as having a heightened sensitivity to the linguistic components that would lend themselves so well to the evolution of Derridean deconstruction – those fertile and inescapable internal linguistic contradictions.

After Derrida, we have assimilated the fact that we are all strangers within language, any language. Whether this understanding is absorbed through the modernist writers characterised by Eagleton, or through the teachings of Wittgenstein, Saussure, Benveniste, or Derrida, we understand that the ability to take up a speaking position cannot be taken for granted and always involves a splitting (I speak; I am spoken). As Derrida argues, it certainly does not provide a stable foundation for identity, "No, an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures" (28). So then what does it mean to be asked to reside precariously in another language, a language that always comes freighted with historical (including ideological) baggage? Some of the answers depend on the prevailing "monolingualism" of the culture in question:

The monolingualism imposed by the other operates by relying upon that foundation, here, through a sovereignty whose presence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogeneous. This can be verified everywhere, everywhere this homo-hegemony remains at work in the culture, effacing the folds and flattening the text. (Derrida 39-40)

In attaining the status of a global language, English is phantasmatically attached to the assumption that it is the only language required: Umberto Eco's "perfect language" with its allusion to Paradise before the Fall and Babel. Communication (as in the womb) was once characterised by plenitude and required no effort. Thus it is *more* difficult to assert the legitimacy of other languages within postcolonial cultures that strenuously reiterate their monolingualism, such as Australia, than officially bilingual cultures such as Canada or multilingual nations such as Malaysia or Singapore. Lim's work persistently and consistently undoes the "homo-hegemony" that English offers as persistent illusion. In her essay "The Scarlet Brewer and the Voice of the Colonized," she describes the liberating effect on her fledgling poetic self in realising that even the English people had to learn English (5) and her later recognition that throughout the former colonies writers were "warping it into their own instruments" (5).

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<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari famously linked their study to Kafka's use of German.

Postcolonial studies are filled with contemplations of those approximations of the colonial tongue – patois, creole, pidgin – the terms proliferate and all indicate an inferior relationship to the “homo-hegemony” of the master-tongue. There is also the sense that they carry the subversive elements of secret codes that allowed the enslaved or oppressed to communicate with each other within earshot of the “masters.” But what happens when these groups, these diasporic communities, finally assert their rights to change or challenge authoritative versions of the master language? This is, for example, the basis for Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien’s lively study *Weird English* (or the assumption behind Dohra Ahmed’s anthology *Rotten English*). What happens when these new speakers and writers of English subtend it with other resonances (the acoustic element predominates)? Indeed, their authority or legitimation resides in the claim that these are embodied and oral, representing the everyday use of the language that clamours to be recorded.<sup>10</sup>

... weird-English writers denormalize English out of resistance to it, and form their own language by combining English with their original language. In immigrant communities where weird English is exclusively an oral phenomenon, pidgins and misspellings may have meant a lack of education or fluency. But for weird-English writers, the composition of weird English is an active way of *takin’ the community back*. (Ch’ien 6)

But while English is momentarily the leading global language, there are other aspirants. Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* organises world literature around the primacy of French. Cosmopolitanism deals with the world, worlding, and with Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of *mondialisation* explained by Berthold Schoene as “the creation of the world... it originates and stays rooted in the specific, unassimilable singularities of the local... *mondialisation* promotes cosmopolitan agency as non-directive ‘struggle’” (24). We are catapulted back to the oscillation between presence and absence at the heart of Derridean Deconstruction. Ironically, the proliferation of writing (the substitution for presence) helped to confirm the death of the sovereign subject – a limited form, as it turned out, of presence. There is a similar irony at work in Lim’s statement that:

My story as a writer is also that of a colonized education in which the essential processes of identity formation are ironically the very processes of

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<sup>10</sup> There is also the question of melancholic relations to the old language. Ch’ien refers to melancholia but one thinks as well of Anlin Cheng’s extended study (*The Melancholy of Race*) around the mechanisms of psychoanalytical melancholia and racialised grief. In relation to this paper, one might imagine the first language as remaining encrypted in the body and providing resistance to assimilation.

stripping the individual of Asian tradition and communal affiliation. (Lim, *Writing S.E./Asia in English* 25)

Arguably, Lim has spent her life in refashioning English as engendering many “englishes,” recreating a multilingualism out of its apparent monolingualism. While she may have had a colonial education it gave her the tools to question its ideological robustness and to deftly undo this ideology from within. Her cosmopolitan accomplishments resonate with Ngugi’s concept of globalectics because through her multi-faceted work we “read a text with the eyes of the world... see the world with the eyes of the text” (60). Her work undoes the notion of a unified identity and reveals that in any writing there is always the shadow of other languages and other selves.

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