

POETRY AND OTHER ENGLISHES

by David Buuck and Juliana Spahr

A literature that is self-aware of and concerned with the material and aesthetic uses of language emerged in the early twentieth century with modernism. It is no coincidence that this was also a period of unusual amounts of human mobility, a time when large numbers of languages and cultural traditions brushed up against one another.

Additionally, decolonization struggles throughout the second half of the century brought pressure to bear upon colonial languages and educational systems, and repeatedly highlighted the artist's vexed relation to colonial, local and anticolonial traditions.

Although this is perhaps a cartoon version of modernity, as a result it could be argued that there are two trajectories in English literary practice—one that uses conventional English and one that uses variant Englishes or mixes English with other languages. In this second tradition, the focus of this cluster, we are including writing that is written in local versions of English—such as pidgins, patois, and creoles—that develop as English expands across the globe, as well as various avant-garde forms that contest normative English usages and syntaxes. One of the reductive arguments that is often made about these literatures is that they are too site-specific, too localized, and/or too formally experimental to register on the terrain of “world literature;” i.e., these literatures don't travel well. We feel, however, that one of the most interesting international literary tendencies of the last half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first

has been the turn by writers from diverse locations to write in local, divergent, and variant Englishes, a turn that helps emphasize the particularities and politics of place. We think of the poetries featured here as modeling a sort of necessary vernacular cosmopolitanism, as rising out of struggle between dominant, monocultural forms of globalization and the sometimes conservative parochialisms of the local. How these writers negotiate these struggles suggest for us new questions and avenues for thinking—in and through language, as political and aesthetic sites for contestation as well as theorization—the global in a more complex and fluid way.

The writers in this cluster do not form literary schools as we traditionally think of them. They do not share reading series, nor do they necessarily publish in the same journals. They might not even know each other's work. And they certainly don't write in the same version of English; there is no easily identifiable counter-canon or set of prescriptions for "empire-strikes-back-ism." The vernacular cosmopolitan poet, if we can use such a term, instead tends to see poetry as a crucial part of larger popular resistance to colonialism and neoliberal globalization. The vernacular cosmopolitan poet refuses to play the role of Native Informant, instead producing texts that challenge Western expectations of transparency, exoticism and recognizable otherness. The use of patois, pidgin, slang, and multi-lingualism, and other formal disruptions reveals a clear grounding in deeply embedded (yet always evolving) cultural practices that cannot be easily subsumed into a bland version of liberal multiculturalism writ global. In other words, such work tends to highlight the materiality of language and form, rather than merely a content-based representational politics. The vernacular cosmopolitan poet often embraces formal

innovation, reclaiming as local and politically useful what often gets called avant-garde and useless in both Western literary critical and conservative nativist debates..

Although limited in scope, we have tried in this brief forum to present a wide geographic range of poets who are writing in variant Englishes from multiple locations. In the Pacific basin, for instance, Teresia Teiawa (Kirabati), Ku‘ualoha Ho‘omanawanui (Hawai‘i), Lee Tonouchi (Hawai‘i), and Emelihter Kihleng (Pohnpei) interrogate the cultural and political ramifications of hybrid languages and identities against the backdrop of contestatory relations to land and place. From the Caribbean, Lesana Sekou (St. Martin) and m. NourbeSe Adams-Philip (Tobago) chart African and Afro-Caribbean subjects over long histories of oppression, all the while articulating roots and routes of identification across broader struggles. Similarly, Benjamin Zephaniah and Deborah Richards both investigate the issues of race and identity in the fraught terrain of “black Britain,” where minority and immigrant cultures clash with the increasingly regressive politics of the U.K. From another perspective, Tom Leonard and Rob MacKenzie foreground the complicated linguistic and political struggles within Scotland. Lesego Rampolokeng and Ike Mbonene Muila fuse local traditions such as praise poetry and Black Consciousness protest writing with Afro-diasporic forms such as dub and hip-hop to create new performance poetics with multi-linguistic innovations that use and abuse the colonial, ethnic, and “street-slang” languages of post-apartheid South Africa. Within the North American empire, U.S. poets Myung Mi Kim and Rodrigo Toscano use avant-garde techniques to unpack issues of embodied labor, gender, and ethnicity within the

context of globalization, while Montreal-based Erin Moure fuses multiple languages and discourses so as to disrupt the dominance of English in North America.

We certainly do not wish to propose this limited collection as representative of all oppositional poetry movements active today, or even of all variant English poetries. We also should acknowledge here that we recognize language politics as endlessly complicated and that the turn to variant Englishes can have both progressive and conservative valences, depending on context. Our goal is to point to work that challenges the conventional separation between avant-garde and local poetries, and to suggest that translocal perspectives might be of benefit when reading poetries in other Englishes. Working in, through, and against multiple traditions and locations, the poets in this cluster suggest alternative ways of thinking about globalization, about how it shapes both literary politics and aesthetics in more complex ways than is often acknowledged.

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