“Ghem pona wai?”
Vernacular Imaginations in Contemporary Papua New Guinea Fiction

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ABSTRACT
Papua New Guinea (PNG) writing has faded into the background of Pacific literature after initially sparking off the late-colonial/early postcolonial ‘boom’ of the 1970s. This essay examines some of the dynamics behind this, based on the tension in the loosely networked regional literary formation between cosmopolitan, disaporic, and anglophone expression and ‘nativist’ vernacular culture. For many reasons, PNG has been more ‘vernacular’ than ‘cosmopolitan’, and writing continues to be centred on a few and on the national university where it all began. However, there are some signs of change. The essay surveys recent writing and focuses on work by Regis Stella and Steven Winduo.

‘VERNACULAR COSMOPOLITANISM’ has become a term popular among postcolonial critics for the appeal of its paradox to scholarly complexity and its implicit critique of the homogeneous liberal-humanist notion of the cosmopolitan associated with Kant, Goethe, and Europe’s Enlightenment project that in many of its forms excluded half of the world.¹ Postcolonial critique in general would assert that this other half of the world has always been cosmopolitan, but in ways that differ radically from the detached, individualized freedom of the First-World global flâneur.

¹ Note: Thanks to Dr Steven Winduo for thoughtful comments on a draft of this essay. Any failings of the final version remain, however, the author’s own.

A literal example of the vernacular cosmopolitan would be Bomma, the ‘house slave’ *(verna* in Latin) of a Malabar merchant who traded for his master between cities in India and Egypt, and whose existence has been tracked by Amitav Ghosh in *In an Antique Land*. Africans more brutally enslaved later in the West’s trade with the New World acquired a ‘cosmopolitan’ awareness of the transnational by force, and developed vernaculars that were unique hybrids created to cope with and record their experience of de- and reterritorialization, de- and rehumanizing, as we can see in the writing of Kamau Brathwaite, for example. The present-day IT worker is also moved around the globe, possessed of difference degrees of choice and well-being, with something more akin to the ideal cosmopolitan outlook of the Enlightenment, but still subject to forces of the global corporate labour market, and with different strategies of constructing community and the language with which to maintain it.

Across all these variants of history and individual experience, the connecting idea is that the cosmopolitan involves being able to shed parochial ties to clan, village, localized traditions, and idiom and move comfortably in urban spaces, liberal universalist mindsets and (whatever the actual language used) sharing a ‘language’ mutually comprehensible anywhere. It is an ideal that Paul Gilroy looks to in a decolonized world as “convivial culture.” Postcolonial critique, however, also points to power-relations behind such a general ideal, noting how it serves the interests of global capital, how it sets up a binary that discriminates against rural life and threatens to leach out particular local markers of culture and identity. Malini Johar Schueller, for example, admits the positive “movement away from the quagmire of micropolitics of radical theory of the 1960s” and the “bold step beyond the negation of postmodernism” that a cosmopolitan, world-systems outlook represents, but warns that “global theories can operate as colonizing forces” in which Western culture parades as universal and political memory is expunged in an overall

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4 Simon Gikandi, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (Summer 2001): 627–58.