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"Ghem pona wai?": vernacular imaginations in contemporary Papua New Guinea fiction

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, diasporic, 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.

Keywords

guinea, papua, contemporary, imaginations, vernacular, fiction, wai, ghem, pona

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

Paul Sharrad

'Vernacular cosmopolitanism' has become a term popular amongst 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, individualised freedom of the First-World global flaneur. 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*.² 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 re-territorialization, de- and re-humanizing, as we can see in the writing of Kamau Brathwaite, for example.³ 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

¹ Pnina Werbner, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *Theory Text Culture* 23.2--3 (2006): 496--98. Homi Bhabha, "Unsatisfied Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," in *Text and Nation: Cross Disciplinary Essays on Culture and National Identities*, ed. Laura García Moreno & Peter C Pfeiffer (Columbia SC: Camden House, 1996): 191--207.

² Amitav Ghosh. *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992).

³ [Edward] Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973); *Middle Passages* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992).

subject to forces of the global corporate labour market, and with different strategies of constructing community and the language with which to maintain it.⁴

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 decolonised world as "convivial culture".⁵ 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 "erasure of unevenness".⁶ Emily Apter likens literary one-worldism (a particular kind of cosmopolitan vision) to a machinery for absorbing difference into (American) global monoculture (Apter 2006).⁷

I want to draw attention to one literary site where the negotiations between vernacular and cosmopolitan, people and cities, tradition and modernity are of a uniquely 'uneven' kind. This is literary fiction produced in Papua New Guinea. Within the cosmopolitan space of Commonwealth Literature, where it first received critical attention, the production and study of Pacific

⁴ Simon Gikandi, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001): 627--58.

⁵ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Malini Johar Schueller, "Decolonizing Global Theories Today," *Interventions* 11.2 (2009): 236--37, 240, 248.

⁷ Emily Apter, "On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System," *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 365--89.

writing have been varied and marginal activities, and within that small circle, PNG writing has in the last decade been a tiny and sporadic phenomenon. Moreover, the fiction of its most consistent authors reveals a local focus that, while acknowledging global forces of the colonial past and international present and reacting against them, is markedly vernacular in voice and outlook. This is, ironically, partly due to writers' engagement with postcolonial literary theory, otherwise a cosmopolitan formation that works with but also moves to supersede nationalist-vernacular boundaries.

Commonwealth Literature as a field of academic study and the promotion of writing outside of the Euro-American canons, had its beginnings in the promotion of vernacular cultures under the global aegis of empire. Given the location of most scholarship in departments of English, emphasis fell on cultural difference expressed in English by people whose birth languages were usually something else. Studies sought to value vernacularizing creative transformations of English, but looked for shared dynamics of resistance to colonial discourse, framed by national structures that echoed colonial state systems. Early practitioners of postcolonial literary studies were informed (in amongst some Marxist ideals) by a 'cosmopolitan' vision of globally linked liberal democracies and self-determining rational middle-class citizens that was at odds with both reality and their own theoretical validation of local difference. In Bhabha's terms, the quest was for cosmopolitan variety, not actual vernacular difference,⁸ and the effect, according to some critics, has been the creation of a new canon of globally circulating texts written by Third World people who move comfortably from one major world city to another, texts that affirm in their melange of exotic differences a liberal cosmopolitan taste.⁹

By contrast, fiction in Papua New Guinea has continued to centre on anti-colonial feeling and localized post-independence unease that is connected to the nation if not actually nationalistic. Characters may be nomadic but mostly their movement is between village and the suburbs of Port Moresby and their mindset does not show a cosmopolitan reach. The consistent pattern of concerns in the

⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 32--38.

⁹ Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of a Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2001).

writing indicates that their authors, though they themselves may have travelled widely, are also largely vernacular in their focus. This is the case because of the rather insulated experience of emergence into nationhood in Papua New Guinea compared to other countries, and its ongoing struggle to generate national community from a disparate collection of social and language groups. It also stems from the way in which literary writing developed in the country, and I argue is due, too, to the selective adoption of one aspect of postcolonial theory (that of abrogation and counter-reconstruction) by the small group of academic writers dominating the fiction scene.

After the traumatic onslaught of foreigners and machinery in World War Two, New Guineans were subjected to a rapid process of decolonization that was a pressure-cooker course in Western ideas. In one generation, children were taken from subsistence agriculture in jungle villages fearful of their immediate neighbours through school and into modern trades in towns. A very few were sent to university where they were overtly groomed to become leaders of the nation-to-be. Under Australia's colonial administration there were strict limitations on permits for 'natives' to travel outside of the country and only three indigenes from PNG had graduated from Australian universities by 1963.¹⁰ At home they were faced with long-standing rivalries between predominantly rural ethnic groups and some 700 languages, all operating outside of print technology save for translations of the Bible. Politically, the curriculum focused on models of decolonization from around the world, mainly Africa, and included the rhetoric of the American Civil Rights era. The effect was to focus on building national unity by constructing a compendium of traditional cultures and defining a vernacular culture, expressed by Bernard Narakobi as 'The Melanesian Way'.¹¹ In a country lacking much of the infrastructure of the modern nation, the emphasis fell on economic development. Now, in an age of mobile phones and web blogs, national culture continues to be figured in terms of traditional oral and performance arts. Urban drift, unemployment and ethnic conflicts remain a challenge to social cohesion. International corporations, welcomed for their

¹⁰ Donald Denoon, *A Trial Separation: Australia and the Decolonisation of Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005): 44.

¹¹ Bernard Narakobi, *The Melanesian Way* (Boroko: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies/ Suva Institute of Pacific Studies, 1980).

promise of building the nation's economy, have proved so rapacious or tied up with local corruption that political rhetoric frequently turns on protecting the local against the world. In this context, print culture is required to unify and educate, but literature is not regarded as a high priority, and literature in English is a luxury for a few or simply a means to develop functional language skills. Film, TV and the web have taken over as primary means of entertainment outside of the oral communities in rural villages. Publishers and bookshops are very few and tied to higher education.

During the foundation years of PNG literary writing, to avoid producing inauthentic copies of white men amongst the elite few being groomed for national leadership, the University of Papua New Guinea decided to break with standard curricula, and in literature and language start with local knowledge and other colonial writing that would have some local resonance.¹² Ulli Beier, who had cut his pedagogical teeth in Nigeria developing theatre groups and literary magazines, began creative writing classes at UPNG, a series of poetry booklets, and two journals, one for the arts generally (*Gigibori*) and one more focused on literature (*Kovave*). He, his colleague Prithvindra Chakravarti, his students as editors, and their students as writers kept these going as the cultural flagship for a new national literature.¹³

Many very lively plays, poems and stories came out of this influential coterie, some of which are still taught in PNG schools today, and, with Beier's connections in Australia, the same group became the international face of Papua New Guinea writing. Some of the group also went on to become national leaders. There were some exceptions to the rule: Paulias Matane, not part of the university, was a teacher and later parliamentarian (ultimately Governor General). He wrote inspirational novels for young people, circulated both in print

¹² Ulli Beier, *Decolonising the Mind: The Impact of the University on Culture and Identity in Papua New Guinea, 1971-74* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005). Evelyn Ellerman, "Learning to be a Writer in Papua New Guinea," *History of Intellectual Culture* 8.1 (2008--9): 4--8. Paul Sharrad, "Out of Africa: Literary Globalization and the Winds of Change," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001): 717--28.

¹³ Beier, *Decolonising the Mind*. Ellerman, "Learning to be a Writer in Papua New Guinea": 13--14. Paul Sharrad, "A Map of the Papua New Guinea Short Story in English," *Bikmaus* 5.2 (1984): 1--16.

and as radio serials. Russell Soaba was at UPNG but did not align himself with Beier's political program, preferring to pursue an individual, existential view of the world and the artist's role.¹⁴ The Territory administration put out a magazine for schools, *Papua New Guinea Writing*, Goroka Teachers College produced plays and printed booklets of traditional stories, and missions often published stories, in particular, Kristen Press in Madang, which printed Russell Soaba's classic *Wanpis* in 1977. Whatever the source, writing, as Evelyn Ellerman notes, tended to concentrate on social problems and set pieces in praise of one's land.¹⁵ All were infused with an ethos of nation building.

The UPNG creative writing 'school' encouraged students to assert their own experience and avoid conventional literary models, while a major 'change agent' outside of UPNG (Glenn Bays at the Christian Training Centre in Madang) opted not to impose African teaching models but rather to let students write in their own way. Beier also strove to avoid white paternalism by giving his writing students a relatively free rein. The result, according to Bays was a blend of folksy "fact and feeling" focused either on folklore or semi-autobiographical accounts of psychic and social upheaval due to 'culture clash' with Western modernity.¹⁶ The end result was a literature of vernacular rather than cosmopolitan imagination that spoke for and to an audience not widely equipped to buy or read it.¹⁷

¹⁴ Chris Tiffin, "Interview with Russell Soaba," *SPAN* 8 (April 1979): 15. Ellerman, "Learning to be a Writer in Papua New Guinea": 12.

¹⁵ Ellerman, "Learning to be a Writer in Papua New Guinea": 10, n37.

¹⁶ Ellerman, "Literary Institution in Papua New Guinea" (PhD Thesis. U Alberta, 1984): 144--46.

¹⁷ An important marker of potential change can be found in the 2007 issue of the literary magazine *Savannah Flames*. For the first time in my reading of PNG stories, there is a child depicted with her head in a novel -- in Elsie Roroipe's "Time Will Tell": 31. Previous writing has rather self-conscious references to the university textbooks of the authors' alter egos; here the sign of a genuine reading culture can be seen. It is, however, but one reference in a sizeable body of writing, and in a society where books remain scarce outside of the classroom. In the same issue, Travertz Mabone suggests how literacy still seems unrelated to everyday rural life and even threatening: "I thought about writing/ but my mind wandered hunting.../ Soon I will be there/ armed with two spears/ and a mind without fear." ("Out on my Own": 74). Nonetheless, in nice irony, he has written his poem about avoiding writing.

Savannah Flames is indicative of the state of literary production in PNG. It comes out of the University of Papua New Guinea, and is normally edited by Steven Winduo. The 2007 issue is guest-edited by his lecturer colleague Regis Stella, and one of the more accomplished poems in it (Arnold Konawana's "Tubuga Bay", which begins, "Maiba, you are the parable of my life") is a tribute to the other literary figure on staff, Russell Soaba, who also contributes under a pen name.¹⁸ Material for the issue has been collected from national newspapers, but the bulk of it comes either from UPNG staff or their students past and present, making the literary scene a very small and very localized one.

Writing in Papua New Guinea, therefore, is a minority literature, in size and in most of the terms that Deleuze and Guattari set forth (writing in another, more widespread, language; writing on behalf of your community; writing out of a sense of embattlement). We can see its political, collective aspect in its nation-building agenda.¹⁹ In the 2007 *Savannah Flames*, Stella publishes his occasional address for the opening of the Melanesian Institute of Arts and Communications. There he sets up an agenda for art of "recovering cultural knowledges" (58) and reflecting cultural values so as to be "part and parcel of the network of relationships within a community". Postcolonial models inform his ideas such that art is part of a historical "rupturing" of cultural space by colonial intrusions that destroyed local practices and took the material culture off into museums.²⁰ It thereby carries a duty of care to the national soul to redeem the amnesia and loss induced by such disparagement and displacement of local life through reconnecting with pre-contact traditions. The artist in that context works for the collective good as a "craftsman" of social cohesion working in "technologies of indigenous people's memories" to restore self-respect to vernacular cultures by means of reconnecting with the "power and spiritual essence" invested traditionally in art-craft objects identifying local groups.²¹

¹⁸ Arnold Konawana, "Tubuga Bay," *Savannah Flames* 7 (2007): 80.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?" *Mississippi Review* 11.3 (1983): 16--17).

²⁰ Regis Stella and Aundo Aitau, "'Giving Voice to the Mute': The Arts as Repositories of Cultural Knowledge," *Savannah Flames* 7 (2007): 59, 63.

²¹ Stella, "'Giving Voice to the Mute': The Arts as Repositories of Cultural Knowledge": 60, 61.

PNG literature, however, differs from the Minor Literature model in that the deterritorialized major language that most writing occurs in is not connected to the outside world or to the local community in that same way that Kafka's Czech German connected with the old imperial spread in Europe. There is often a split between PNG vernacular (almost completely oral) and other languages, the 'vehicular' national language is split between English and Tok Pisin, with Motu as a regional lingua franca around the capital district as well. Writing in English operates primarily in educational institutions, government offices and top-level business and, especially for literary expression, is vehicular mainly in a national context rather than an international one: texts are few and do not travel far. English may be 'referential' as "the language of sense and culture that effects a cultural reterritorialization",²² but it is so for only a very few intellectuals working in the arts; otherwise it is merely a vehicle for material, functional exchange.

Owing to this disconnect between language, literature and lived experience, prose fiction is confined very much a classroom exercise and as a result relies on both direct personal experience ('write what you know') and the reading of approved literary texts. Thus a literary critic looking in from the outside experiences much of the published fiction as life-writing not quite processed into literary-imaginative mode, expressed through the filter of nineteenth-century English literary language or the kind of officialese that English in PNG usually serves to express. The story "A Courageous Accomplishment", for instance, deals with the less than extraordinary tasks of finding material for a school writing assignment and being asked by a pastor to give the children's address at church. Janet has had the latter request sprung on her and "glares at the telephone", erupting in the tones of a Victorian dowager: "Why? The very gall of that man. The nerve! The audacity! The shameless presumption!"²³ The same double-register determines an otherwise more convincingly localized story of fishing, teaching, and road accidents. Characters are modern, complex beings who move around the country and speak in English,

²² Deleuze & Guattari. "What is a Minor Literature?": 24

²³ Gertrude Tarpidik, "A Courageous Accomplishment," *Savannah Flames* 7 (2007): 34.

Tok Pisin and a number of regional languages, but the writing itself jumps from a world of localized reality and miracle-working Christian faith to the 'policy' language of government: "It is relatively important not to tarnish one's reputation by arriving late for work as lateness at work can lead to termination."²⁴ My point here is not to disparage the writing; a more practiced writer might find ways of rephrasing the examples provided, but in one sense they are characteristic representations of a general split consciousness in PNG fiction. It reflects a ratio of the vernacular to the cosmopolitan that is different from other work, even within the Pacific region. The 'outside' meets the 'inside' as national superimposed on personal, but the vehicle of national expression is not wholly integrated into private experience. The effect of this, coupled with the limited space of literary circulation, is to preserve a distinctive but restricted vernacular consciousness.

To these socio-linguistic factors we can add the local workings of institutions and literary theory. Given its Australian origins, *The Empire Writes Back* has been the text of most immediate impact amongst academic writers in PNG.²⁵ Although its interest in textual subversions and localizations of English aims to critique perpetuations of discursive power differentials under post-independence regimes as well as old colonial discourses, its recirculation of Fanon-era oppositional anti-colonialism served to underpin a tendency in the emergent Pacific nation to fixate on an underdog status and on the 'psyche in crisis' theme of the assimilated/ alienated native intellectual. Ideas of anti-colonialist resistance also reinforce the 1970s rhetoric in place amongst the new elite and fix attention on the need to counter outside influences on indigenous culture. So while postcolonial theory and its message of ongoing critique and subversion within and beyond national borders pushed the rest of the world towards a more globalized perspective, it led PNG writing to a continued vernacular focus that has left it on the literary critical margins of postcolonial studies.

²⁴ Monica Richards, "A Miraculous Recovery," *Savannah Flames* 7 (2007): 43.

²⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989).

Regis Stella has been the most productive novelist in recent times in Papua New Guinea, with *Gutsini Posa (Rough Seas)* appearing in 1999 followed by *Mata Sara (Crooked Eyes)* in 2010.²⁶ Stella was an influential teacher at the national university, and a keen postcolonial theorist, heavily influenced by *The Empire Writes Back* and its key sources, Fanon, Said and Bhabha. In fact, Stella's second novel has a Papua New Guinean travel to Australia where he experiences Fanon's 'primal scene' of a white child who bursts out crying in fear of his blackness.²⁷ His doctoral thesis was published as *Imagining the Other: The Representation of the Papua New Guinean Subject* in 2007.²⁸ He and his colleagues, Russell Soaba and Steven Winduo, all leading writers and promoters of writing, show a consistent fictive vision expressing the "mythic" aspect of Minor Literature²⁹ as a troubled existentialist crisis of localized constraints.

Stella's first novel, *Gutsini Posa (Rough Seas)*, deals with social and political unrest, firstly around Port Moresby with elements of the military planning a coup to get rid of political corruption, and secondly in a fictionalized Bougainville during the armed conflict between secessionists and national troops. The struggle in Torogegai is depicted as a fight to keep control of land: "Land is our lifeline, our identity" the guerrillas say, anticipating words from the author's own explication of indigenous culture in his critical study of PNG writing. Unlike that study, however, the characters in the novel go on to say, "Before you build a nation, you have to build your house first"; you need a stable base (51--52). Unfortunately such a foundation does not appear to exist in the protagonist's world.

Our hero Penagi seems to fit a typical male fictional type in New Guinea: he swings between self-lacerating despair and violent rage, the first mood seeking relief in women as mother/comforter and the second taking it out on them as whores (15, 27, 43), both states being 'managed' with regular bouts of drinking. His unstable psyche is fuelled by feelings of anti-colonial resentment

²⁶ Regis Tove Stella, *Gutsini Posa (Rough Seas)* (Suva: Mana, 1999); *Mata Sara (Crooked Eyes)* (Port Moresby: U of Papua New Guinea P, 2010). Page references to these novels are in the main text.

²⁷ Stella, *Mata Sara*: 105.

²⁸ Stella, *Imagining the Other: The Representation of the Papua New Guinean Subject* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P. Pacific Islands Monographs Series 20, 2007).

²⁹ Deleuze & Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?": 24.

("It was a remote-controlled war, caused by outsiders." 8). Penagi curses multinational corporations and corrupt national politicians as their pawns. He repeatedly berates himself for not becoming more involved in reformist activism or secessionist zeal, but wanders about feeling generally powerless, disillusioned and sorry for himself (55). His lack of steady resolve is also caused by lingering traditional belief in omens and sorcery. With perhaps a literary echo of Kama Kerpi's poems *Call of the Midnight Bird*, or Arthur Jawodimbari's story "The Bird Calls", Penagi is spooked at the start of the story by an ill-omened bird cry (8--9).³⁰ Having already lost his brother, he worries about his wounded father and it puts him on edge, spoiling his subsequent actions. His girlfriend chides him: "Oh, come off it! You should be the last person to believe in that. I didn't think you were that superstitious." (12). Nonetheless, he confesses to being scared stiff, and when he is able to make the trip home, he discovers that his father had indeed died.³¹

There's an element of the roman à clef in Stella's fiction that again turns a story that happens to be set in a recognisably local world into one imaginatively turned inwards around the 'national problem' and a coterie of very localized writers. Global connections are present: not only in critical references to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as forms of neo-imperialism (14, 21-2, 99), but also in literary allusions to writers such as Ngugi, García Márquez, Pramodya, Che Guevara and Ralph Ellison (23). These, however, are presented as part of the university syllabus to be read as tools of localized socio-political analysis. Stella invokes a regional literary style by borrowing from Epeli Hau'ofa's satiric allegories.³² Penagi's name means 'fight' or 'war' (69). Port Moresby becomes Port Kavakava (Motu for 'crazy') and the country is called

³⁰ Kama Kerpi, *Call of the Midnight Bird* (Port Moresby: UPNG, 1973). Arthur Jawodimbari, "The Bird Calls," in Albert Wendt (ed.), *Lali: A Pacific Anthology* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1980): 18--86.

³¹ He is not alone in this regard: the modern military man Captain Gawi finds that he is impotent, and his first thought is to try traditional "medicine men", his second to blame some woman for cursing him, and only then does he think he might be drinking too much or in need of a doctor (75). Penagi's mother sees sorcerers in her dreams and attributes it to a nephew's refusing to marry a woman he was sleeping with (130).

³² Epeli Hau'ofa, *Tales of the Tikongs* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1983); *Kisses in the Nederends* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987).

Koikoi ('untrue/ wrong'). His home is on Giaman Island (Tok Pisin for 'lies'). Hotel Luslain ('Hotel of the rootless') invokes Russel Soaba's disaffected 'lusman' characters from his novel *Wanpis*. The Prime Minister's offices are in Mauswara Building ('hot air' or 'bullshit'). Despite this intertextual reach, the narrative focus remains very much inward-looking.

The Epilogue to *Gutsini Posa* tells the story of the author discovering his father had died 1995 during the Bougainville conflict, and the book is a tribute to his memory, but it is also a critique of the position of PNG writers and of Stella himself as one of them. Penagi asks himself, rhetorically,

Where are the writers who prided themselves in combating colonialism?... Why aren't they taking up their pens and challenging the corruption, dishonesty and immorality that have wounded the nation? Why don't they come to the assistance of their people who are fast sinking into an abyss of misery? Or are they now part of the corrupt gang? Where the hell are the authors of 'The Unexpected Hawk', 'The Ungrateful Daughter'? The writer of 'The Good Woman of Konedobu', he heard was now a government minister. As for the fiery author of 'The Reluctant Flame', he had become a businessman in the islands. (56 original italics)

Unfortunately the ideas of revolution are as imported as capitalist structures, and the 'people' in whose name the novel's military coup is planned are not in a position to rise up as Marxist theory would have it (29). When they do rise up, it is as a chaotically spontaneous riot in response to land reform legislation and corruption (53). Penagi himself "is determined to fight for his people" and "form the critical conscience of a democracy" (32--33) but claims he is a helpless victim of fate (46) and refuses to face up to his allowing himself to become self-absorbed and cut off from friends and culture (48). He finds himself almost by accident at the head of a march and then in prison (56). There he starts composing protest songs, but his rage seems to fall apart in drunken tears (94--96). However, he does go back to Torogegai (Bougainville) and joins his brother in the guerrilla struggle. Rather suddenly he takes on Moses-like attributes, and encouraged by meeting up with his lost girlfriend Jamila again, declares that he sees amid the destruction "a new heaven and a new earth." (145).

Jamila is more hard-headed; she never declaims about politics (36) has left Penagi when she thinks he has deserted her (46) and trained as an agent to go to Torogevai on behalf of his army friends (57). There are two parts to this book: one a kind of picaresque existential crisis (Penagi), the other a mystery action adventure (coup leader Captain Gawi/Jamila). Will the revolution succeed? Will Gawi go over to the government? It is clear when Jamila arrives on Torogegei that she is playing a double role, but it is not clear exactly what that is. Nor is it evident that the two parts of the story will come into any satisfactory relation. It turns out that whatever else she was supposed to be doing, Jamila has been organizing local women into a militia that hunts down rapists and other abusers of human rights (138--39). This makes it somewhat improbable that she would go back to the unreliable Penagi, but the novel orchestrates volcanic eruptions and a tsunami to indicate social upheaval and to bring the lovers and the two plot lines together (145). Neither Penagi nor Jamila effect a national revolt; it is all a vernacular or private rebellion that fizzles out in contrived romance.

In Regis Stella's second novel, *Mata Sara (Crooked Eyes)*, we see young Papua New Guineans overseas. We even, near the end, find one travelling the world as a seaman on a container ship, having found the job on the internet. So a global perspective is a distinct possibility here. What emerges, however, is a sense of enclosure in which the national/ local shuts out the cosmopolitan. The book begins, like *Gutsini Posa*, with the male leaving his lover under a cloud. Perez heads off to Australia to do research and becomes the 'elder brother' to other Papua New Guinean students in a Sydney flat. In turn, he is looked after by Kate, a woman of mysterious background and suspect intentions.

The story operates at one level as a ghost story (there was a murder in their block of flats (16--17, 26--38) and a series of suspicions of being hexed. Kate is caught burying 'medicine' outside Uwegu's window (147) and both Uwegu and Perez experience night visits from an unknown succubus. Uwegu semi-jokingly warns Perez not to 'muck about' with Desimoni or he might 'do magic' on him (62). At another level it is a semi-comedic, sometimes salacious, study of overseas student life in Australia. Some of the unease attaching to the 'spooky' elements of the book is related to the group's sense of being under

constant surveillance due to their visible difference (2, 4, 9, 47, 96--97) and the unfamiliarity of surveillance cameras in a big city (74--75). The stares they get are the 'crooked eyes' of the title, though this image takes on other symbolic meanings and is also associated with PNG people who have a 'twisted' attitude to life. Within the largely implied thematic frame of seeking for a 'straight-eyed' approach to life, we find a nice portrayal of the students clustering together for mutual support, the exchange of stories about the dominant social group, difficulties of finding accommodation and food to one's taste, and so on. Realism shows the younger folk conning African students and blaming them for spreading AIDS (160--64), but also forming occasional alliances with other foreigners (Fijians, Muslim women) in solidarity against racist attacks by white youth.

The community of central characters, all of whom are troubled and often in conflict with each other, is held together by two things: shared national identity and mutual antipathy towards *dimdim* (white) perfidy. The novel is populated with racist *kiaps* (colonial patrol officers), paedophile anthropologists, lesbian lecturers, adulterous missionaries, rapacious foreign companies. Later in the book young people point out that intermarriage is now common, and a good thing, and that both white and brown have people born with 'crooked eyes' (226), but the weight of history in the story attributes crookedness firmly to outsiders. The effect is to suggest a reverse racist disapproval of cross-race relations: Uwegu complains of the snobbish attitudes of PNG women who marry Australians (88); Perez disapproves of a mixed-race couple on his bus, attributing cupidity to the younger woman and exploitation to the man (107). It is not all one-way though: in PNG villagers laugh about how local women would entice whites (223); in Australia the students do pick up international friends: Reimas has white Australian mates, Desimoni studies with an Indonesian, they are neighbours to the Indian, Gupta. Nonetheless, this openness to 'the outside' is only possible through maintenance of a tight if strained local community. The flat is "an island", a refuge, a surrogate PNG (112): "It's much better to be on our own than to have problems" (146).

For the solitary Perez, however, not even the flat provides the self-possessed calm he seeks. He laments "[his] unsettled self" (220), attributing it,

like his forerunner, Penagi, to a splitting of the psyche under pressure from external forces:

‘We were like actors in a movie, acting both our lives and other people’s lives.... In the end what is different is that some of us travellers will reach our destinations, while others will perish along the way because of their crooked eyes.’ (271)

In the end, Perez returns to PNG planning to write a book about how whites perceived PNG people when they first arrived (242). This is what Stella himself does in his own doctoral thesis. Elsewhere in the novel there are further parallels to the thesis: the daughter of Kate Nolan/Powell is called Naibusi, a key character in Randolph Stow’s novel *Visitants*; Jean Bedford’s novel about PNG is criticized, at the beginning there’s an acknowledgement of Trevor Shearston (another Australian who writes about PNG), and the jokes about lusty women in the Trobriands resonate with the myths of that area promulgated by Malinowski (64, 177). Here again, the breadth of reference ultimately comes back to a narrow preoccupation with the local scene of PNG and the national project of decolonization. The plot traces a circuit of intrication and denial: with the exception of the narrator, who is from another district, almost everyone turns out to be interrelated by a series of inter-racial liaisons and adoptions in the Milne Bay area. Whereas this could result in a story of lively multiplicity (one thinks here of John Kolia’s celebration of mixed-race life in *Close to the Village*),³³ it remains a tale of suspicions, and resentments that turns on itself.

Lest the reader conclude that all this can be explained as personal idiosyncrasy, I should point out that the writing by Stella’s colleagues, Russell Soaba and Steven Winduo reveal the same social landscape and disaffected, unstable characters. Winduo is well known as an academic keen to promote literacy in Papua New Guinea. He teaches ‘Writing, Editing and Publishing’, encouraging creative writing, and researches indigenous knowledge systems. Winduo has edited literary journals, published poetry, and recently put out a

³³ John Kolia, *Close to the Village* (Boroko: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1979).

book of stories (*The Unpainted Mask* 2010).³⁴ Like Stella, Winduo acknowledges Russell Soaba as a major source of inspiration (his book cites Soaba's poem "looking through these eyeholes"). In that tradition, male protagonists discuss loneliness (4), being "educated and confused", being moved around and rejected like an unpainted mask (7). Stories are permeated by the unspoken, an air of mystery that fails to cohere into something anyone can deal with (one narrator confesses to "trying to make sense of all those symbols that seem to stand for something I cannot understand" 45), or they speak of "deceptions, illusions, and afternoon nostalgia" (15). Violence this side of murder is an almost institutionalized norm (19), especially when it comes from men who appear to have no internal fortitude and lash out at women because they resent being at the mercy of external forces (22). As one character puts it, "We are nameless tokens in other people's hands. We don't make our own decisions." (79). Often there is a sense of grievance at colonial legacies, but equally there is a feeling that there is no one to blame except oneself but no alternatives on offer. There are moments of didactic intent -- such as feminist complaints against male chauvinism (60), and a story criticizing police abuse of power (71) -- but in general, narratives simply peter out or lurch to an arbitrary disappearance or death in echo of a "Beckettian drama [...] of watching the world go by" (36).

Although one important character does go overseas, for his mates getting entry to a hotel in the city is the goal in life (240) and the world is "tales from afar, beyond the blue ocean" (246). If you go there, you run the danger of being unmasked (266), which is both to be dangerously exposed, but also liberated "where you know where you are going" (268). When you go back, what you learn seems unrelated to your immediate surroundings and friends, but at home you are subject to rivalry and suspicion -- "Our society is a jealous society" (27, 237) - - and possibly as a result, to sorcery. It is the same kind of parochial enclosure that Stella's overseas students experience in *Mata Sara*. We can read both works as symptoms of a systemic confluence of vectors around vernacular consciousness.

³⁴ Steven Winduo, *The Unpainted Mask* (Port Moresby: U of Papua New Guinea P & Manui Publishers, 2010). Page references are given in the main text.

In the doctoral thesis already mentioned, Stella has produced a well-written study of colonial literary and legal discourses in Papua New Guinea and includes examples of how local writing has attempted to refute their prejudicial representations and replace them with indigenous perspectives. *Imagining the Other: the representation of the Papua New Guinean Subject* (2007) reminds us that the Pacific, and more importantly, Melanesia, was part of a globalizing imperialist machinery more commonly focussed on India and Africa, and that in the Pacific, attention concentrated on Western contacts with Polynesia. It serves as a supplement to the literary histories established by Subramani and Albert Wendt, continuing the story of righting the representational wrongs of colonialist texts and seeking a countervailing national culture.

The role of the writer as documenter of social ills keeps the focus very much on vernacular spaces, but without a 'cosmopolitan' angle of vision, the danger for the writer is that the status quo is reinscribed. Thus, the writer-prophet may present the evils of sexism, but if 'external' value systems such as Christianity or feminism are rejected in favour of an indigenist agenda, then there is only a masculinist sorcery-haunted culture from which to show characters' behaviour, and that is not a stable enough basis on which to build a new future.³⁵ The postcolonial project of reasserting indigenous cultural value seems to leave writers wanting to find something better than the cycles of sex, violence and abandonment in heterosexual relationships, but uncertain about where to find a viable basis on which to make the change.

³⁵ This dilemma is outlined by Raelene Ramsay in her study of Pacific women's writing — notably in relation to Kanak woman Déwé Gorodé: "Alongside the common trope of return to tradition or to pre-colonial law and signifying systems, Pacific writers have also adopted regional Oceanian paradigms including the ... Melanesian Way" (2). But the return is made difficult by the immersion of those calling for it in global consumerism and media systems. "The positive and unifying dual metaphors that currently dominate indigenous Pacific discourses are the return to the earth (recovery of roots in the land) and the criss-crossing of the Pacific 'sea of islands' in ancestral *waka* guided by the star-eyes of Oceanian gods. ... Nonetheless, a number of the modern Pacific voyager-poets represent themselves as simply washed up on the rocks" (2). "Indigenous Women Writers in the Pacific: Déwé Gorodé, Sia Figiel, Patricia Grace: Writing Violence as Counter Violence and the role of Local Context." *Postcolonial Text*. 7.1 (2012) 18 pages. <http://postcolonial.org>

Stella claims, "I argue that for Papua New Guinean writers, writing is a significant form of empowerment and self-validation. Writing is therefore a form of salvaging a fragmented cultural identity."³⁶ Here, the general national project is tellingly scaled down to one concerning the writer, even though the writer is supposedly acting on behalf of the national collective. It is at this level that the 'decolonising the mind' argument is most convincing, since it is the *writer* (and especially the writer in English) who is in need of self-reconstruction, having been moved through pursuing higher education from the village, from the vernacular, from orality, from the rituals that would affirm an identity of belonging to an adult world of family, clan, land. (Stella notes Michael Somare's insistence on going home to complete his own initiation ceremonies as an example.³⁷ In his essay on the arts mentioned earlier, Stella further claims that local practitioners do not indulge in "existential experience",³⁸ but a central theme in much Pacific writing is precisely the existential crisis of the artist in a largely materialist society.³⁹ Albert Wendt memorably combines Camus' Sisyphus with the Polynesian trickster demi-god Maui to create a figure for the modern Pacific writer, and in Papua New Guinea, Russell Soaba creates the existential type most influential in subsequent PNG writing: the disaffected *wanpis* whose integrity leaves him isolated and as vulnerable as a frog on the road.⁴⁰

Stella's *Imagining the Other* stages a strategic discourse of its own that is not totally convincing unless one considers the specific address of the general critique, and perhaps one that is ultimately disempowering to those few actually addressed. A claim that colonial discourse had destroyed indigenous culture and

³⁶ Stella, *Imagining the Other*: 11.

³⁷ *Imagining the Other*: 184.

³⁸ Stella, "'Giving Voice to the Mute': The Arts as Repositories of Cultural Knowledge": 61.

³⁹ William McGaw, "Russell Soaba's *Wanpis*: The Role of the Writer in Papua New Guinea," in Paul Sharrad (ed.), *Readings in Pacific Literature* (Wollongong: New Literatures Research Centre, 1994): 74--80. Russell Soaba, "Albert Wendt: Existential Writer," *Ondobondo* 3 (1983--4): 37--41.

⁴⁰ Albert Wendt, "In a Stone Castle in the South Seas," *Mana Review* 1.2 (1976): 27--32, and "Towards a New Oceania," in Paul Sharrad (ed.) *Readings in Pacific Literature* (Wollongong: New Literatures Research Centre, 1994): 9--19. Russell Soaba, *Wanpis* (Boroko: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1977).

self-respect based on novels that (apart from Stella) very few Papua New Guineans and few whites have read, limits the cogency of the counter-claim for the writer's need to redress a 'fatal impact' on behalf of the entire nation. The corrective project is primarily a literary one for literary scholars and some of their fellow elite. Stella consistently stresses the impact of colonial systems as dramatic rupture: "The indigenous discourse of place has been subsumed and erased by the dominant European model through the agency of powerful colonial discourse" (29, 46). Writing it as a brutal total shift in social experience is to give to that very small cohort of intellectuals/ artists a value that they need to feel they have in the process of building the nation. Arguably, it is a value the nation needs them to have, either as facilitators of literacy or as moral consciences (201), but like most humanities practitioners world-wide, they are constrained by the priority given to technology and economics, and this priority is much stronger in a country defining itself and globally defined as 'developing'.

The 'radical rupture' narrative has genuine validity in the Papua New Guinea context, and for most of Melanesia as well. Vincent Eri's novel *The Crocodile* shows the shock of war and the attempts by locals to account for the alien new and to combat feelings of inadequacy in relation to it via 'cargo cult' stories.⁴¹ These tell of how ancestral spirits were sending these goods to their people and how they had been intercepted by white men. The implications of this story could be counter-productive: either the white man had stronger magic than the ancestors, and therefore should be feared, or one needed to emulate white rituals in order to divert the flow of their goods to where they rightfully belonged. Assimilation was the end result, despite the revolutionary intent of the 'cargo' movement. Literary writers, co-opted onto the decolonizing project by, and on the terms of, those colonists managing the process under international pressure, might productively see themselves as appropriating 'white man's' knowledge in order to possess the power that could be turned against white domination, but could not avoid awareness of their own ambiguous position and how it removed them from their supposed constituency and involved them in double-binds.

⁴¹ Vincent Eri, *The Crocodile* (Milton, Queensland: Jacaranda, 1970).

To depict the history of colonialism, as Stella does in *Imagining the Other*, as one of “erasure” of local culture (46), is to deny the continuity, at many sites and of many modes, of the vernacular that he invokes as counter to such loss -- Banoni ideas of belonging to place (36-8), Kaluli terms and songs (45-6). The ‘fatal impact’ trope can be accounted for perhaps by the radical separation from village life that is the *sine qua non* of the national elite. This is intensified for the literary academic by a lack of redeeming material wealth (at once scorned by the moralizing writer as characterizing the greed of the neo-colonialist, and endemic to the traditional culture he seeks to resuscitate). A narrative of radical rupture expresses the feelings of the alienated artist/scholar and provides a comforting rhetoric of heroic rescue of the indigenous past for as yet unsung national hero-prophets.

My point is here to show how a particular application of postcolonial critical discourse might serve to push its exponent into an oppositional stance that finds indigenist nationalism to be the ‘logical’ solution to a specific local problem, but confronts the artist with social conditions that elude containment (inducing an uncomfortable shuttling between vernacular and cosmopolitan in which the former is at once inevitable, comforting and unsatisfying). In PNG the average person had no loyalties beyond the family and clan prior to Independence and after that still had little imaginative grasp of the nation as a whole. Stella quotes the early poet Apisai Enos: “land of a thousand faces and facets/ I hardly know you!” (33). In such circumstances, the vernacular literary project takes on the qualities outlined by Homi Bhabha: a process of trying to add together aspects of the nation that never add up to something approximating a whole — an ongoing series of shape-shifting juxtapositions that call the idea of wholeness into question.⁴²

⁴² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*: 155, 162—63. The same can be said for the dysfunctional urban world of somewhere like Lagos, where people also live “in a space where individual agency no longer produces expected results, and where dreams and utopias can no longer be realized” (Rita Nnodim, “City, Identity and Dystopia: Writing Lagos in Contemporary Nigerian Novels,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44.4 (2008): 322). There, though, the literary scene is more varied and the society is energised by global flows of people, goods and cultures. In contrast, the Pacific capital seems to be a backwater in which confusions and tensions are unrelieved by any vitality of change. This may be

Return to traditional 'vernacular' culture throws the modern novelistic self into a world of permeable boundaries. 'Inside' qualities such as autonomy and integrity are subject to the 'outside' vicissitudes of communal belonging: reputation, shame, public display of strength, and so on. This interactive communal self, part of the Melanesian 'big man' culture, is a self in motion, and in the context of the modernizing postcolonial nation, a self in motion in a society in change. So if a turn to the postcolonial sends people on a path to recover indigenous culture while inhabiting a modern society in flux, it plunges them into a Kafka-esque world of constant monitoring of one's self and one's companions, and an uneasy shifting communal tide. Stella hits upon the term "compartmentalization" (162, 168) to describe the ways PNG writers cope with multiple languages, multiple lifestyles, multiple epistemologies. In social flux or intellectual compartmentalization there can be no overall narrative like the *Bildungsroman* that accompanies a postcolonial desire or a national story of evolution to consolidated being. The vernacular story becomes one of constant starts and setbacks, but no ultimate arrival.⁴³ This makes PNG quintessentially postcolonial in the Bhabha sense, but leaves it marginalized in relation to more consolidated national, or more popular cosmopolitan, postcolonial writing.

All of the above may sound like a critical attack on the failings of a generation of writers. It is intended only as an attempt to describe and account for certain evident tendencies and motifs in a particular region. Stella makes much clearer the ground on which new PNG writers and scholars sit, enabling them to rework old materials and, without abandoning them, to construct new forms and visions. He sums up his thesis: "Papua New Guinea today is sailing in uncharted waters, and a prime concern of literary artists is to provide advice before it sinks.... One of the fundamental roles of the Papua New Guinean artist is that of visionary" (204). The problem here is that artists themselves are swimming in uncharted waters and may not be in a position to play prophet, may

related to the limited circle of academic writers attempting to find an ideal postcolonial vision to give meaning to their world.

⁴³ Outside of the university, folk narratives can take a more positive vernacular approach to this dynamic in the form of trickster tales. See Jenny Hughes, "The Chimbu Trickster Goes to the Seaside: Kurara Yagl i go long nambis," *CHAI* 1.1 (1988): 105--16.

in fact be loading themselves down with a weight of responsibility they cannot, perhaps do not need to, carry. On the other hand, Stella is correct: vision (not just critique or advice) is the contribution the writer can make, and dreaming alternative possibilities to the brutal real (not as escapist fancy, but as engaged imaginative exploration) may signal a way beyond into a more liberating vernacular cosmopolitanism. It is worth noting that a more popular fiction appears to be emerging (outside of the university, if still linked to it, and less informed by intellectual concerns). In novels such as Wiri Yakaipoko's *The Blue Logic* (2000) and Moses Maladina's *Tabu* (2003) we find a similar depiction of corrupt city society occurs, but set against a more open world of international politics, gun-running and drug smuggling, piano concerts in London, fashion business in Paris, and without any of the soul-searching angst of the protagonists of the scholar-writers.⁴⁴

I do not intend to set up a model in which cosmopolitanism is an ideal end point to a literary history beginning in the vernacular. I suspect that some postcolonial theory does hold tacitly to such a developmental narrative, and admit to some personal attraction to the 'citizen of the world' ideal as offering a vision of something better than nationalistic enclosures and conflicts, but here, the attempt is to sketch a literary problematic, and one that seems to foreclose on the cosmopolitan, while it is, willy nilly, plunged into the contradictions of modernity.⁴⁵ The title for this study is taken from Stella's taxonomy of Banoni terms for belonging to place: 'where is your hearth?': where do you sit, call home; where are your ancestors? (37). The phrase and his novel titles echo the practice in both Soaba and Winduo of using 'tok ples' vernacular to 'reterritorialize' English as New Guinean, even as the vernacular is itself deterritorialized in the process. The resultant textual mix expresses the restless hybrid world of Port Moresby and of the scholar-writer in Papua New Guinea.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wiri Yakaipoko, *The Blue Logic* (Port Moresby: U of Papua New Guinea P, 2000). Moses Maladina, *Tabu* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2003).

⁴⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*: 146, 231.

⁴⁶ This study is in part my personal tribute to Regis. He died in April 2012. His body returned to his village in Bougainville, reconnecting him with his vernacular and his ancestors. Now he himself becomes an ancestor figure for the next generation of a nation's creative and intellectual endeavour.

Of late, postcolonial literary critique has shifted from comparing the emergence of national cultures out of colonial pasts to inspecting the limitations of the nation and the implications of openness to global systems. To some extent this trend has continued the marginalization of writing from Melanesia, even within the field of Pacific literature. Papua New Guinea's ongoing concern with the nation, despite and because of the globalizing influx of commerce, and its ethnic and linguistic variety, means that its literary production will continue to be small and predominantly locally focussed, while the Polynesian communities either within settler colonial states or in diaspora, have access to better publication outlets, and are more amenable to current 'cosmopolitan' trends in scholarship. Nonetheless, the examples of Stella Winduo and their colleagues should show how a vernacular cosmopolitanism remains important to the study of postcolonial literatures. Emily Apter, in seeking to place "decentralized, polyphonic voices that are *mondiale* in address" into the cosmopolitan 'world republic of letters' suggests a non-hegemonic framework of looking not for similarities as the basis for comparison, but for those elements that are "untranslatable", site-specific: looking for "the effect of the noncarryover that carries over nonetheless" into "limning new cartographies of the present".⁴⁷ This seems to me a good argument for more attention to the particularity of Papua New Guinea writing as a postcolonial vernacular contribution to disturbing an over-easy cosmopolitan globality.

⁴⁷ Emily Apter, "Untranslatables: A World System," *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 583, 587, 597.

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