Framing Marginality
Distinguishing the Textual Politics of the Marginal Voice

don yoo tel dem troowth
dai dozn belif yoo

(IIO)

The putative center welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order better to exclude the margin. And it is the center that offers the official explanation; or, the center is defined and reproduced by the explanation that it can express . . . By pointing attention to feminist marginality, I have been attempting not to win the center for ourselves, but to point to the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations.

(Gayatri Spivak)

1 Metamarginalia

Margins and frames are ambiguous in their manner of registering power relations in textual terms. This ambiguity has not always been recognised. As well as offering traditional sanctuary to the powerless, margins are also places of authority and coercion. For example, they are the spaces where teachers annotate student texts and, conversely, feel undermined in their authority when a student does not leave them sufficient room to comment. In other words, it is possible not to allow the margin to speak, at least momentarily. With reference to Spivak's terms, the centre and margin have usually been organised according to the following economy. First, "What does the margin want?" (as though there were always only one margin). And secondly, "What does the centre want?" (as though the only desire the margin could have would be to claim the centre).

The traditional schema of difference, derived from Saussure, in which a term gains meaning by being contrasted with what it is not, has particular implications for the marginal. The following has been the prevailing narrative: by the very method in which it has been constructed and positioned, the marginal has always constructed the centre; the centre speaks by virtue of the marginal. That there should be a marginal allows the centre to explain itself. The textual productions of marginal minorities exist to confirm hegemonic textualities. And these minority writings have been in general homogenised as the area of plurality, disruption, non-
and interrogation of the role of gender within traditions of representation. By “women” (discursively speaking) I mean those who construct their own subject-positions by foregrounding those elements which signal female difference within a specific culture. By “migrants” I mean those who construct their subject-positions in terms of those who have had to renegotiate an entry into the symbolic. “Migrants” are those whose initial socialisation has taken place in a language and culture other than the hegemonic one, so that when they enter a new culture they are repositioned as children renegotiating language and the entry into the symbolic. Migrant writing registers a reading and interrogation of the nexus between culture and nationalism. Central to the subject-positions of both women and migrants is the authority provided by the personal voice. I am not saying that this authority exists in some unproblematic or essentialist way, but merely that it is invoked in much of the writing which is labelled marginal. The politics of the marginal is grounded on the personal, and this incorporates problematic aspects to which I shall return.

On the whole I will be referring to those Australian migrant writers who write in English or whose work has been translated and disseminated to the wider public. I will not confine myself to those first-person cris de coeur which are usually seen as comprising the writings of the politically marginalised. In particular I want to stress that while these migrant writings inevitably address or interact with non-literary hegemonic discourses, they also react intertextually with the dominant “literary.” Although my textual objects are in a sense migrant writings in Australia, I will not be speaking migrant in any primary, empirical manner in this paper. But I will be attempting to examine the conditions under which it becomes possible to clear a space in which to speak migrant, in other words, the conditions which make those reading formations possible. How are culture and nationalism constructed from a vantage point outside the centre?

The following schema, in very general terms, comprises a critical history of the “marginal voice,” indicating along the way its most problematic aspects:

- What are some of the claims that have been made for the marginal in its relation to the centre; and importantly, how have these been represented?
- What authority to speak has the marginal been given?
- What may be said about culture and the marginal?
- To what extent can one specify the differences within the marginal in relation to women and migrant writings?

II Traditional Claims for the Marginal

Speaking in general terms (which necessitates conflating quite a few theories), the margin constitutes the place of transgression, which in turn
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subverts hegemonic discourses. As an illustrative case I turn to Kristeva's theories, since their genealogy conveniently includes Bakhtin (and Rabelais), Lacan, and of course Freud; that is to say, it represents a convergence of Marxism and psychoanalysis, combined with a particular kind of French feminism. A cautionary note must be sounded here: whenever we encounter what would appear to be the determinism of the first two discursive practices (Marxism and psychoanalysis), it may be as well to recall that particularly in relation to the third — feminism — the descriptive is not necessarily the prescriptive. Take for the moment Kristeva's notions of the symbolic and the semiotic (133). The semiotic is the territory of the pre-symbolic, the place of the archaic mother, of intonation, rhythm, laughter and drives which erupt on occasions into the symbolic (133-34); and this in turn is the place of the law of the father, post-castration, language: "Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (136). The semiotic erupts in the form of jokes, slips of the tongue and so on. It is subject to its own organisational principles, such as (significantly) those of repetition. What may strike one immediately is that there are potential problems here with a notion of subversion which is based on the manner in which the two principles (the semiotic and the symbolic) support and indeed construct each other. This problem arose at a recent conference in Australia, where the discussion of the semiotic as transgressive took the more Bakhtinian form of the carnival performed on the church steps in the Middle Ages. As Juliet Mitchell pointed out on that occasion, the church steps were precisely the location where the carnival could safely be licensed and circumscribed. Another version of this debate is that the anarchist is perceived as the reverse or demonic Other of the bourgeois (we are getting into Manicheanism here). In other words, what are the political implications of the fact that the symbolic produces or constructs the semiotic? To what extent can the semiotic be considered subversive? Furthermore, what are the implications for feminists of the fact that the archaic mother — recently reincarnated, one fears, in the new Mariolatry movement of Eastern Europe, though one needs to distinguish here between Orthodox and Catholic practice — is the territory of the pre-linguistic (woman effectively silenced once more) and of the familiar mother-child dyad?

But I need perhaps to heed my own advice here concerning the prescriptive and the descriptive, for it is only in the semiotic (speaking spatially) that we can hope to locate an alternative to the symbolic. That this place is hardly free of the symbolic should not surprise, much less deter us. Although Kristeva's thesis has been debated at length with respect to feminism, to what extent might it be relevant to another marginal group, migrants? It has become a trope of migrant writing, at least in Australia, that in shifting language and culture the migrant is placed once more in the position of the child. This child is required to renegotiate an entry into the symbolic — needs to go once more through a form of the mirror stage, in which a putative subject is reflected by the gaze of the new host culture, and is quite other to any previous unified subject. In one sense, then, the
“migrant condition” may be described as the existence at a more self-conscious level of at least two so-called unified selves. Or, put another way, it consists of having an augmented awareness of the eruption of the semiotic into the symbolic:

To put it bluntly, I speak in French and about literature because of Yalta. I mean that because of Yalta, I was obliged to marry in order to have a French passport and to work in France; moreover, because of Yalta I wanted to “marry” the violence that has tormented me ever since, has dissolved identity and cells, coveted recognition and haunted my nights and my tranquility, caused hatred to well within what is usually called love, in short, has raked me to death. Consequently, as you may have noticed, I have no “I” any more, no imaginary, if you wish; everything escapes or comes together in theory, or politics, or activism. Patently, the “migrant condition” undermines the notion of a unified subject, a transcendental ego. What might the implications be of this further or renewed unfolding of the psychoanalytic scenario? Who, symbolically speaking, are the parents in this renegotiation?

Marginalised as powerless, migrants are assigned a very limited space from which to speak. Constructed in the first instance in official documents as essentialist subjects, migrants are arranged in fictions which accord with the interests of dominant power groups on the one hand, and on the other with the migrants’ own limited perceptions of which parts of themselves are assets in this new territory. Thus migrants are not assigned a place from which to challenge the status quo, nor are they left with sufficient subject selves (positions) to be able to do so. On the other hand, the place they occupy (the frame) is certainly vulnerable to recuperation for those who wish to challenge on behalf of migrants the activities of the hegemonic centre. To frame is also to be framed. The combination (or rather, metonymic displacement) of migrants/children operates also with respect to women and children. Shulamith Firestone, for example, charts the way in which women and children are similarly constructed in terms of oppression. Indeed, that women are children in this metonymic displacement is seen as justification for their oppression. The further metonymy of migrants and women also functions in a revealing fashion. That migrants write of themselves as being positioned as women is another trope of migrant writing which functions differently for “male” and “female” writing (those terms are under erasure, of course). Thus the country itself becomes feminised; the country becomes (again in metonymic terms) the woman’s body, which operates as a battlefield where dominant white Australian males contend with migrant males.

I have noted similarities in my studies of black writing in America, where again what appears to be at stake is whether or not white males have “emasculated” black males. Bell Hooks argues it is far more the case that black women have been made “masculine” according to the prevailing codes of gender difference; that is, their labour is not organised in gender terms (they are forced to work as men), but in addition their bodies are
exploited and colonised in traditional fashion. What I would add — and I
have developed this argument in another context — is that once again we
are dealing (in terms of figurative language) with male narcissism:
“woman” becomes the all-purpose metonymic term for the “Other,” which
in turn reassures the male that everything “Other” is defined by its
difference from the male. Translating this into feminist terms, to be “not
male” is not all there is in being “woman.” The deconstructive pivot which
one might choose to uncover or interrogate these contradictory codes of
signification is the migrant woman writer (or, in another place, the black
woman writer). But for the moment, let us return to Kristeva and her
semitic/symbolic equation.

Not surprisingly, whenever there is a binary equation of any kind,
what we discover in regular revelation is the absent third place from which
this dichotomy is surveyed. This corresponds to the marginal frame, or
rather (and often) to its recuperation. Here in that third place is where
ultimate authority resides: the critic, the analyst (the liberal pluralist?).
Kristeva has indeed named “a” third place (though whether you think it is
the place of the analyst/critic is subject to debate), and it is that of the
“abject”:

Essentially different from the ‘uncanny’ and also more violent,
abjection is constructed through the non-recognition of what is
close to it: nothing is familiar to it, not even a shadow of mem-
ories . . . What [the child] has swallowed in the place of maternal
love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without words for
the word of the father; it is of this that he tries to purge himself,
tirelessly . . .

This is to say that there are existences which are not sustained
by any desire, in that desire is always a desire for objects. Such
existences are founded on exclusion. They are clearly distinguished
from those understood in terms of neurosis or psychosis which are
articulated by negation and its modalities, transgression, dénega-
tion and foreclosure.

Of the abject one asks “Where?” instead of “Who?” Being the place of the
outcast and wanderer, it is certainly at some level relevant to the semiotics
of the migrant. Whether it is relevant to “woman” I’m not sure. It is also the
territory of jouissance. Given the recent avalanche of academic writing on
“pleasure,” we may wish to return to this repressed later. For myself, I am
haunted by a Baudrillard footnote: “Desire, reinvented everywhere, is only
the referential of political despair.”

III What Authority to Speak Has the Marginal Been Given?

So far, and quite deliberately, I have not been distinguishing
meticulously between the marginal as it relates to women and as it relates
to migrants, and I shall continue not to for the time being. What I would
like to touch on now once more is the role which the personal voice plays in
relation to the marginal: in other words, the function of so-called personal testimony, which is traditionally privileged as the place where “truth” speaks. What have been marketed in the last few years as women’s writing (and to a lesser extent migrant writing) have been overwhelmingly those texts which invoke so-called personal experience, and which utilise the first-person mode. Why have they sold well? What’s in it for dominant ideologies? An alibi guaranteeing liberalism, patronage, recuperation: also a detailed guide on how to take over or domesticate marginal interrogations. An example of this is John Berger and Jean Mohr’s A Seventh Man (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). Emerging from that book is a representative oppressed Gastarbeiter, who, for immediate strategic reasons, has his use: legislature and welfare. But that process of homogenisation is also palpably part of the experience of oppression in the marginal situation (the assembly-line, the documentary file, the cypher).

There are two major areas where the first person operates: oral history and autobiographical or semi-autobiographical fiction. This is an unsatisfactory distinction, but we’ll retain it for the moment. In oral history and/or documentaries the first person operates as the minimal justification for being authorised to speak (people were indeed overheard coming out of Woody Allen’s film Zelig applauding the fact that a historical injustice of omission had been set right). The first person—that most opaque fiction — still functions (rhetorically alive and well) as the window to the soul. With women’s writing there are further analogies with truth as the icon of the naked woman (or unaccommodated man: sic), or the textual striptease. This (finally) is the “real” story about woman’s sexuality (as distinct from their desire, which is not at issue). As long as the textual is sexual, sales are guaranteed. Here “woman” is constructed as forever private, forever the lack upon which male desire is predicated. Analogies may be drawn to some degree with the migrant, thrown (in figurative terms) naked on new shores. But (unlike woman) the migrant success story involves movement from the private to the public, rather than representing the private in the public. In capitalist countries this testimony bears witness to the success of bourgeois individualism and private enterprise. It is a favourite fairy-tale, what A.P. Foulkes might call a “capitalist integration myth.”

What the first-person mode also does when it is not celebrating migrant success stories is to construct the migrant as problem — the reverse side of the success story: those who have suffered elsewhere and now, here, need to be nursed back to health. The host country/culture is produced as refuge, as promised land, as utopia. Within it, the migrant (by her/his own testimony) is visible primarily as a social problem until s/he is “assimilated,” that is, becomes the “same.” And indeed this was crystal clear within the confines of the dominant set of discourses which operated until a few years ago around the concepts of “healthy assimilation.” Assimilation precludes difference and therefore meaning. In the new discursive formation of “multiculturalism” (which operates here too) that personal voice becomes representative of something else: the “richness” of the cultural heritage, the many layers of cultural conditioning
which comprise the host culture. Thus we have ethnic dress, cuisine, and music; and "ethnic" becomes indeed the preferred term. The term "migrant," on the other hand, immediately suggests Gastarbeiter, whereas in "ethnic" the migrant is returned as rhythm, intonation (reminiscent of Kristeva's descriptions of the semiotic), and carnival — in the sense of spectacle, that ghost of the exotic so usefully analysed by Edward Said in his study of Orientalism (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

But to backtrack a little, the naïve text of oral history focuses on sociological content in the main. Such documents are the basis upon which institutional reforms are made on behalf of the migrant. (How many self-consciously identified migrant voices speak within institutions? Not many in Australia.) Thus we have the migrant as problem, a litany: in schools (should community languages be taught?); in the asylum (many patients have migrant backgrounds); in old people's homes (many old migrants end up in mental institutions when they revert to their first language and no one can understand them). The migrant becomes a case-study whose discourse is received as diseased, abnormal, and needing to be cured at the level of linguistic competence at the very least. It is an automatic response that when people hear the term "migrant writing" they pose questions regarding competence. Or alternatively, the best one can hope is for migrant texts to be situated as "naïve art" which may be reread by some Picasso. In this formation they are the reservoir of raw energy from which the established artist draws new inspiration; and here we move again into the area of spectacle. "Multiculturalism" functions as that excess from which ever new variations on a unified culture may be played.21

IV Culture and the Marginal

And here, finally, we begin to examine "differences" within the marginal, using as test cases the writing of migrants and of women. For the moment let us consider that whereas women problematise gender categories, migrants put into question the convergence of culture and nationalism. I stress that combination because women too address the issue of culture, but focus on different aspects of the conditions of inclusion and exclusion, of private and public. This is an old debate within feminism: that when women's culture is constructed in a separatist sense, it lands women once again with the essential and determinist politics of the body as biological construct.22 Analogously, with respect to migrants, how might a culture best construct its own difference in relation to adjoining cultures? As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, there exists a tradition of Australian cultural discourse which situates itself in relation to British culture, constructed in turn in two dominant ways: as a homogenised entity (usually referred to as "English" culture), or as split in terms of its difference from itself (that is, between the Anglo and the Celtie).23 The latter is useful for Australia when it traces its own genealogy from those Irish dissidents who were exported to Australia at various stages. In this tradition Australia is founded upon the political rejects — or alternatively, the political martyrs — of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.
In Australia now there is increasingly another set of discursive practices, in which the national-culture genealogy is traced rather to Old Europe. This is where the contradictory specificities of migrants are usefully recuperated in multiculturalism. They are generalised as constituting living proof that Old Europe is already a strand woven into (that is, assimilated in non-contradictory ways) Australia’s national culture. Here it is not “migrant” but “ethnic” which dominates: not the Gastarbeiter typified by the inner-city graffiti of “Wogs turn cogs,” but 0/28, the multicultural and multi-linguistic television channel (with subtitles) which services Melbourne and Sydney, and which mediates uneasily between that particular binary opposition. I have compared at greater length this construction of “multiculturalism” with Edward Said’s study of “orientalism,” where the Orient becomes the “theatre” for Europe, the surplus. So too with “ethnicity” in Australia. Since I cannot show you excerpts from 0/28, let me instead quote from two Australian reviewers of the dual-language book of poetry by the Greek Australian poet, Dimitris Tsouloumas. First, two extracts from a review by Geoffrey Lehmann in The Sydney Morning Herald (16 July 1983):

Tsouloumas is not an easy poet. His poems are characterised by multiple viewpoints and deliberate surprises. The shifts are not always clearly sign-posted. Part of the pleasure for the reader is in deciphering, in stepping back from the polychromatic mosaic and seeing form emerge out of chips of colour.

To read this book is a rewarding experience. Many standard English dictionaries have a Greek alphabet as an appendix, and with a bit of labour a Greek illiterate, such as this reviewer, can puzzle out some of the Greek text to get an aroma of the original.


The longest poem in the collection, ‘The Sick Barber’, is also one of the most accessible. It is, I believe, a major poem in its own right — and it reads so beautifully and powerfully in the English version that it makes me for one feel that it would be worth learning modern Greek simply to be able to read it in the original.

It is not surprising then that even the simplest of Tsouloumas’s poems should have a complexity of feeling and an historical resonance that are to be found rarely in the bulk of the poetry written and published in Australia today. Beside the focused intensity and tautness of these poems much contemporary Australian verse inevitably looks either thin, flabby or trivial.

Third, Malcolm Bradbury in The Guardian (8 September 1983), commenting on Salman Rushdie’s novels, Midnight’s Children and Shame:

[Midnight’s Children’s] power of illuminating the English language with the metaphors, myths and sheer loquacities of Indian writing, made it a remarkable intervention.
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It was part of a striking reinvigoration of the serious British novel, except the word "British" became irrelevant. Its author Salman Rushdie was one — the most brilliant — of a group of writers whose polyglottism of language and style seemed to be transforming everything and like *Shame, Midnight's Children* was written by one of life's anti-gravity exiles, floating upwards from history.

Just add a pinch of multiculturalism, and you too can put the goodness back into an exhausted monolingualism and monoculturalism. This is how it seems to those at the centre. But what about the migrants themselves? To be heard and seen, even if that facilitates recuperation, is nonetheless preferable to being completely invisible. Even better, if it is possible to subvert expectations, and to set up alternative reading formations which in turn appropriate existing discursive formations concerning migrants. Migrants as characters have long appeared in traditional Australian texts, and there is also the set of institutionally based discursive practices to which I referred earlier. Migrant writing at any level registers a reading of these practices. In all sorts of ways migrant writers operating now subvert and parody those expectations. Here let me add that neither for women nor migrants should we denigrate the importance of personal history. As I indicated earlier, homogenising the oppressed is a dominant aspect of the process of oppression. Nonetheless, the passage from personal to political is by no means transparent or unproblematic.

V Differences within the Marginal

Speaking generally, the effect of having migrant writing posing questions from its own particular marginality is akin to feminism's success in marking all gender categories. Just as the masculine no longer operates as an unmarked universal, so in that conjunction of culture and nationalism there will no longer be unmarked, unified (or totalising) orthodoxies. Thus it will be seen as perverse to speak of a unified Australian culture. Instead, Australian culture will be perceived as a collective of cultural and national particularities, each trailing a history and a practice. In turn, it might be possible to situate quite precisely the national and cultural contradictions in the following (I quote from a review by Nicholas De Jongh of Sheridan's *The Duenna*, which appeared in *The Guardian* on 7 November 1983):

The pleasure lies in seeing Mr Peacock deceived by his daughter Louisa, who abandons the family home when told her love for Antonio is forbidden, leaving her duenna in her place. The fellow chosen for Louisa, the height of stupid vulgarity who prepares to slobber over the veiled duenna, is the comic centrepiece of the evening.

In the original the vulgarian was a Portuguese Jew, but nowadays such radical pointing would go amiss, and Mulcahy and Dunlop have suitably converted him into Ted Melsaae, an Australian of
Barry McKenzie proportions wearing a checked jacket, lots of gold rings, a kipper tie and maroon trousers.

"Culture" itself is usefully defined by Raymond Williams as "the signifying system through which . . . a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored."\(^{28}\) Included within the culture-nationalism nexus, issues of race will of necessity be foregrounded. For example, work is currently being done at long last on the difference posed by Aboriginal cultures in relation to those of white Australians and to non-white Australians such as the Chinese. Having read Homi K. Bhabha’s brilliant analysis of the discourse of colonialism, I would like to refer to his categories at this point in order to clarify the relations of Aboriginal and migrant cultures to the hegemonic white Anglo-Celtic culture. Strictly speaking, Aboriginal cultures correspond to his colonised culture, whereas migrant cultures are akin to the subject-in-process (if one retains the psychoanalytic model) on the way to becoming a “unified” subject, socialised in national-cultural terms, but functioning of course and necessarily as a constant reminder of the impossibility of ever achieving that transcendent state. At the same time, migrant cultures mediate in the area of racial discrimination between the colonisers and the colonised; that is, between Aboriginal and white Australia. And here the emphasis falls not on Bhabha’s notion (via Fanon) of the fetishising of skin as the primary signifier of cultural and racial difference — not, that is, on the "look" — but on the ear, the ghosts of foreign tongues, presence in a different figure.\(^{29}\)

Third, and taking my departure again from Bhabha, there are presentiments of yet further heterogeneity:

The difference of other cultures is other than the excess of signification, the différence of the trace or trajectory of desire. These are theoretical strategies that may be necessary to combat ‘ethnocentrism’ but they cannot, of themselves, unreconstructed, represent that otherness . . . Anti-colonialist discourse requires an alternative set of questions, techniques and strategies in order to construct it.\(^{30}\)

The analogy with women is clear. Once again, my point is that woman is not only "not-male": migrant is not only that which is "not-Australian." But how may one indeed escape from that structuralist binary opposition?

It is quite indefensible, for example, to speak as I have been doing of migrant voices in an undifferentiated way. There are very specific migrant groups within Australia whose material histories differ enormously both in relation to dominant Anglo-Australia and in their relations to each other. And it is in this area of heterogeneity — in that particular politics of difference — that personal testimony becomes crucial, although as I’ve indicated it needs to be handled with care so that it escapes the constraints delineated earlier.\(^{31}\) In other words, it needs to be read not just for sociological content but in terms of signification, for its linguistic contradictions.
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Fourth, there is the matter of a proliferation of ways of reading. In the particular area of reception theory or reader-response on which I have been working, the nature of the reading process is seen as being traversed by gender as well as by race, class, and age. For example,

don yoo tel dem troowth
dai dozn belif yoo

has the brevity of a slogan, of graffiti, a protest perhaps at the level of form. Let us examine it first in terms of minimal or zero-degree subject-positions. The narrator speaks with the familiar tone (weary? bitter?) of the oppressed everywhere, but claims the existence of “truth” as a discursive possibility. What would speaking the truth accomplish? If “they” by definition do not believe the truth, what does it matter whether or not one speaks it? What the poem proclaims is the last resort or illusion of the oppressed: the withholding of information. It is an exercise in negative power, power through absence. The implied author writes in a phonetic dialect whose specificity indicates inner-city Greeks in Melbourne. The zero-degree addressee is of at least two kinds. First, other members of that group, invoked in masonic solidarity: “we” are united against “them,” who will by definition never understand us. Secondly, those others for whom the phonetically transcribed dialect needs to be spelt out: a “you” close to the “dem” of the poem. In this latter group the poem becomes more of a challenge: will “you” have enough liberal guilt to acknowledge this “we”? Does the double negative indicate a positive? Will telling the truth precipitate belief? (It occurred to me too that in this second “you” there might well be included a racist element which believes that all wogs are liars.) It is a classic disjunction between those who have truth but are silenced, and those who don’t have truth and do the silencing. Alternatively, between those who speak the truth (which is about not speaking the truth), and those who can never hear the truth and are thus the oppressors. As far as gender is concerned, the narrator is unspecific, and so is the implied author; but the “you” may well be seen as varying in degrees of complexity, depending on which end of the gender spectrum it is perched.

My second example is Ania Walwicz’s “Australia”:

leep when you walk. Too hot to think. You big awful. You don't match me. You burnt out. You too big sky. You make me a dot in
the nowhere. You laugh with your big healthy. You want everyone
to be the same. You're dumb. You do like anybody else. You
engaged Doreen. You big cow. You average average. Cold day at
school playing around at lunchtime. Running around for nothing.
You never accept me. For your own. You always ask me where I'm
from. You always ask me. You tell me I look strange. Different.
You don't adopt me. You laugh at the way I speak. You think
you're better than me. You don't like me. You don't have any
interest in another country. Idiot centre of your own self. You think
the rest of the world walks around without shoes or electric
light. You don't go anywhere. You stay at home. You like one
another. You go crazy on Saturday night. You get drunk. You don't
like me and you don't like women. You put your arm around men in
bars. You're rough. I can't speak to you. You burly burly. You're
just silly to me. You big man. Poor with all your money. You ugly
furniture. You ugly house. Relaxed in your summer stuper. All
year. Never fully awake. Dull at school. Wait for other people to tell
you what to do. Follow the leader. Can't imagine. Work horse.
Thick legs. You go to work in the morning. You shiver on a tram.32

Here the implied author plays with and subverts stereotypes of linguistic
incompetence by using minimalist language which is nonetheless eloquent.
The narrator begins with an avalanche of prejudices familiar to the
migrant community but not usually expressed outside it; hence the shock
value for certain readers. The attack appears to be related causally at a
later stage to parental rejection (this is what I meant earlier: the family
romance of psychoanalysis is not far away). The object of the attack —
the "you" of the poem — moves in quite complex ways from the land itself,
which subsequently becomes displaced metonymically by the stereotypes
of "ocker" existence, particularly when it is constructed against the
difference of European cosmopolitanism. The gender of the "you" shifts
constantly, particularly at "you engaged Doreen. You big cow." The
charge of rejection moves from the personal to the cultural ("You think the
rest of the world walks around without shoes or electric light"), just as the
attack itself does; that is, it assumes in turn a cultural arrogance from
which to attack Australian hedonism, putative homosexuality and so on.
The gender of the "I" is not clear. The statement, "You don't like me and
you don't like women," could signify that conflation of oppression (women
and migrants) explored earlier. It is the last sentence which shifts the
register: "You shiver on a tram." It expresses both pity (a solidarity of
outcasts) and a plea for compassion.

In concluding, let me quote from a third review of the Tsaloumas
volume, which appears to me to construct Australian hegemonic cultural-
nationalism as the "other" of migrant heterogeneity:

To look at the Greek versions and not understand them is to be
mystified at two removes; not only is the language indecipherable
but the very letters are alien, and for the literate reader the effect of looking at a pointed character and not even knowing what sound it represents is almost vertiginous. It's like being a pre-literate child again, aware that the marks mean noises but unable to decipher the code, and wistful and a bit resentful about your own ignorance.33

For readers from non-English backgrounds, there is a moment of ambivalent satisfaction in recognising their own marginality reconstructed as the dominant term in the above, which defines in this instance the Anglo-ethnic as the “pre-literate child.” But the moment is fleeting, because neither for women nor for migrants is there any lasting political advantage in merely reversing the old oppositions.

Deakin University Sneja Gunew


24 Gunew, "Migrant Women Writers."


26 In addition to government papers and edicts relating to immigration, there are films made to develop "tolerance" towards migrants, particularly in the years after the second World War. See my two video films, available from Deakin University: *Re-Viewing the Migrant Story: Time* (1982) and *Re-Viewing the Migrant Story: Place* (St. Albans, 1982) (1983).


30 Bhabha, "Difference . . . ." pp. 197-98.

31 See for example the schema set out in Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, pp. 97-98, footnote 74.


33 Kerryn Goldsworthy, "Deciphering the Greek Experience," *The Age* (Melbourne), 15 October 1983, p. 15.