Vernaculars in an Age of World Literatures, edited by Christina Kullberg and David Watson

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In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on the role and visibility of smaller languages and their literatures in various domains. Indeed, in exemplifying burgeoning scholarly attention on literary production in less widely-spoken, minority, or historically disfavoured languages and dialects, the book reviewed here examines these demotic tongues through a global lens, locating analyses of their literary and sociocultural realities within the sphere of broader theoretical discussions.

Vernaculars in an Age of World Literatures forms part of a quartet of interlinked volumes which comprise the Open Access series Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures. The series is edited by scholars based in Sweden who represent disciplines ranging from intellectual history to comparative literature and modern languages. Accordingly, the present volume opens with a general introduction, by Stefan Helgesson, Christina Kullberg, Paul Tenngart, and Helena Wulff, which is the same for all four books in the series. It takes Franco Moretti’s problematisation of world literature as a springboard, before presenting an overview of well-
known aspects relating to global systems and the circulation of literary texts. By outlining the broad focus of the series in qualitative and interpretive terms, it centres on the ‘cosmopolitan-vernacular dynamic’, thus aiming to offer a methodological exploration of ‘the resonances and connection between widely diverse literary texts and cultures’ (xi). In this regard, the authors note ‘that the vernacular is always plural: not limited to language alone but comprising various types of expressions, material objects, people, and environments’ (xx).

Subtitled ‘Theorizing the vernacular’, the volume introduction, by Christina Kullberg and David Watson, highlights that rather than being a victim of the global rise of English, the ‘vernacular can and does intervene productively in the shaping of world literature as an aesthetic strategy, in terms of a mode of reading, and as a global network of texts’ (4). Their analysis traces the semantic origins of the term, examining the vernacularisation process through historical and linguistic prisms to underline its role in the formation of ethnolinguistic and national identities. This is counterpointed by an exploration of ‘vernacular mobilities in the diaspora and post-colony’ (14), drawing attention to its intersection with wider language policies, as well as with economic and socio-political disadvantage, before ideas for reconsidering the vernacular are offered.

In Chapter 1, ‘Contextualizing the vernacular: Signposts from African languages, writing, and literature’, Moradewun Adejunmobi surveys the role of the vernacular in the African context. This includes discussions of its linkage with the concept of the mother tongue, comparisons with colonial languages, relevant nationalist movements, as well as the adoption of (competing) standardised orthographies. Observing that African literature represents an ‘expansive domain of vernacularity’ (38) in geographical terms, Adejunmobi also highlights that—given that many African languages are not widely spoken and disseminated—isues of circulation and translation can also arise. As an example of the mixing of the vernacular and the global, the glocal phenomenon of Afrobeats (a distinctive West African musical genre which brings together different cultural influences) is presented, typifying the dichotomy between the local and the non-local in the African milieu.

The second chapter moves to the Iberian peninsula, where Christian Claesson profiles three of the languages of Spain (Basque, Catalan, and Galician) under Francisco Franco’s repressive dictatorship (1939-1975). In outlining the historical situation of linguistic minorities in the Spanish context, as well as noting the short-lived autonomy before the Spanish Civil War enjoyed by the areas where these languages were spoken, Claesson highlights how officially sanctioned monolingualism was enforced to ensure the primacy of Castilian. In the Catalan case, the language was initially banned from all areas of public life, thus becoming relegated exclusively to the private sphere. However, it was subsequently permitted in certain university contexts. As for Basque, it too was proscribed at first; however, in time relevant schooling was piloted and the 1960s saw the creation of a unified linguistic standard. With Galician, known as an ancient language of poetry and culture, attention centres on the important role of the Galician diaspora and the emergence of the standardised language. As such, Claesson underscores the heterogenous nature of the three case studies, also noting how the dictatorship changed its policies over time towards greater accommodation, as well as highlighting that the three languages actually acquired significant safeguards during the last years of the regime.

In Chapter 3, the writer and scholar S. Shankar provides an overview of the translations of Yaathum Oorey, Yaavarum Kelir, a Tamil poem/song written in the early part of the first millennium CE. The text is presented first in Tamil, accompanied by two English translations by well-known translators (the first by George Hart and Hank Heifetz, and the second by A. K. Ramanujan). Emphasising the contrast between the ‘vernacular’ (Tamil) and the ‘transnational’ (English), Shankar interprets each translation through cosmopolitan, political/philosophical, and ecocritical lenses. An ecocritical perspective is also adopted by Kullberg in the fourth chapter, which analyses Caribbean poetry—specifically from the Lesser Antilles—in the aftermath of the devastating hurricanes of 2017. Through examining the works of Richard Georges, Lasana M. Sekou, and Celia A. Sorhaindo (from the British Virgin Islands, St Martin, and Dominica respectively), Kullberg situates Caribbean writers
within the framework of eco-criticism and world literature, depicting how the sounds of natural disasters have been reflected in these poetic works.

Chapter 5 remains in the Americas, with anthropologists Richard and Sally Price outlining the evolving vernacular of the Saamaka Maroons in Suriname. Informed by their extensive fieldwork in the area, the Prices outline the creolised origins of the Saamakatongo language and their culture through the prism of ‘First-Time’, the founding event of the Saamaka people in the eighteenth century which retains, through oral history, significant influence in the modern age. The continued survival and evolution of the language is profiled against the background of Suriname’s complex cultural identity, as well as societal changes involving increased urbanisation and the growing uptake of social media, where the vernacular serves as a mirror of a changing society.

The sixth chapter, by Lena Rydholm, provides a panoramic overview of cosmopolitanism and vernacularism in Chinese literature from ancient times to the present. In first underlining the contrast between Classical Chinese and the demotic *baihua*, she notes how perceptions altered after the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth movement, using the example of Lao She’s 1933 work *Cat Country* which employs not only the Beijing vernacular, but also the invented language of ‘Felinese’.

The Finnish-Estonian author Aino Kallas (1878-1956) is the focus of Chapter 7, where Katarina Leppänen examines themes of gender, ethnicity, and class in Kallas’s oeuvre. With Kallas’s literary activity centring on the peoples around the Gulf of Finland (then part of the Russian Empire), the region is situated within its linguistic and cultural context, especially against the backdrop of growing national awareness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Noting that attempts to Russify the area not only failed to supplant the dominant languages of German and Swedish as well as local vernaculars, the presence of Estonian in Kallas’s work not only provides a literary portrayal of daily life, but also offers historical and linguistic authenticity.

Returning to the Caribbean, David Watson’s chapter ‘Specters of the vernacular: Neoliberalism, world literature, and Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings*’ zooms in on the various types of vernaculars present in this Man Booker Prize-winning novel. As such, it frames the vernacular within the rise of a neoliberal aesthetic. Politics also underlines the ninth chapter, ‘Vernacular imagination and exophone reconfiguration in Francophone Chinese diasporic literature’. Here, Shuangyi Li explores the role of the vernacular through the prism of Chinese first-generation migrants writing in French, analysing a range of works to demonstrate its interlinkage with political and revolutionary contexts.

Subtitled ‘Instead of an afterword’, the final contribution to the volume is by the eminent literary scholar Galin Tihanov. In encapsulating the wealth of thematic material contained in the volume, he begins with Dante’s adoption of the vernacular, moving towards C. P. Cavafy and the interplay between *katharevousa* and the demotic in Modern Greek poetry, before ending with Witold Gombrowicz, whose uniquely idiosyncratic Polish represents ‘a language that has not yet been codified’ (257).

In bringing together portraits of the vernacular through case studies from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and South America, the volume certainly lives up to its broad and ambitious scope. It opens up new impressions and discussions relating to the enduring role of the vernacular from literary, anthropological, and historical perspectives, and therefore will be appealing not only to literary scholars, but also to all interested in the intersection of minority languages and cultures, postcolonial studies, and the role of language in society. Amid the worldwide omnipresence of English, as well as other dominant extraliterary factors relating to global publishing and circulation, the scholarship contained in *Vernaculars in an Age of World Literatures* clearly demonstrates that the vernacular remains relevant and important for literary and cultural studies in the twenty-first century.