

# SNEJA GUNEW: PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

## Introduction



Sneza "Sneja" Marina Gunew was born in December 1946 and arrived in Sydney in December 1950 as part of Australia's post war refugee resettlement program. Her father was Dimiter, of Bulgarian nationality, and her mother was Ursula, of West German background. Her younger brother was Marin. The family moved to Melbourne because of employment opportunities and also there were relatives living in St Albans. A second brother, Stefan, was later born in Melbourne.

Dimiter Stefanov Gunew was a research chemist and had obtained a position with ICI before the family had left Germany, which was unusual because much of Australia's immigration intake was for 'unskilled' labourers. He stayed with ICI for the rest of his working life, specialising in chromatography. He pioneered many procedures in high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) and ICI still hold many patents that he initiated.

Ursula "Ula" Gunew nee Zimmeramn was born in Berlin and was a medical laboratory technician and radiographer. When her skills became known by the refugee ship's medical staff on the journey to Australia she was asked to take on the pathology testing for the sick bay. In Australia she worked in the paramedic field of x-rays with the TB bureau before transferring to the newer field of electroencephalography in 1958. She became deputy head of the department at the Alfred Hospital before transferring to and becoming head of the unit at the Children's Hospital in Melbourne during the 1970s.

## Starting School

Sneja started her schooling in 1952 at the old St Albans Primary School and in 1956 transferred to the newly-built East Primary School, which was just around the corner from the family home. She started at the St Albans High School in 1958 and became the class librarian and one of the academic achievers. The following year she was on the magazine committee and later was the instigator of Prisoners of Education (POE) which were forerunners to her bigger achievements in the academic and literary fields.

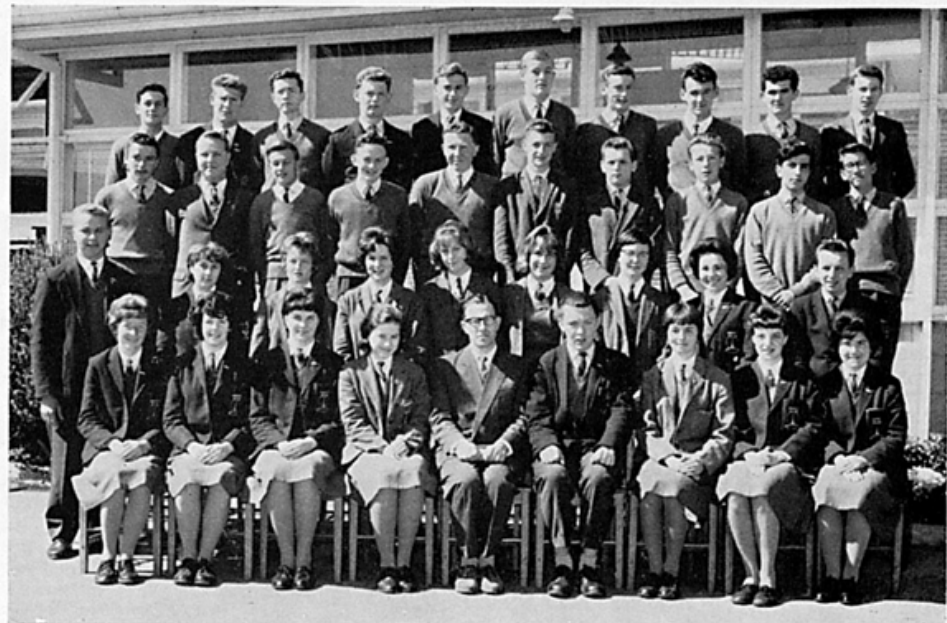
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**FORM 2B**  
**Front Row:** Rosemary Carson, Sandra Thomas, Renata Palakszt, Edith Janssen, Diana Bonnici.  
**Second Row:** Velga Zvaigzne, Yadzia Kubasiewicz, Danuta Petrovic, Eva Jableki, Lydia Denisow, Irene Pietrzak, Eve Richards, Sneja Gunew. **Third Row:** George Szwadiak, Kest Kulbys, Thrasos Caravatas, Victor Troszyi, Terry Duggan, Vincent Chomontowski, George Evangelidis, Geoffrey Jackson, Jesse Ruthowski. **Back Row:** Edmund Lacinski, Wladimir Bobko, David Pringle, Mykola Bowkum, Franz Van Leewen, Robert Coster, Donald Ross, Ryzard Checinski, Orest Denys.

Form 2B, 1958. Sneja Gunew is in the second row on the right.



**Form 5A**  
**Back Row:** T. Caravatas, M. Neskov, B. Bruhns, V. Troszczyi, J. Dasler, P. Becker, I. Sharp, L. Cameron, F. Richardt, R. Clifford. **Third Row:** J. V. Manic, K. Kulbys, B. Kokot, R. Chatterton, V. Bobko, B. Wale, C. Dunkley, M. Bowkun, C. Evangelidis, A. Laskowski. **Second Row:** B. Gerlinger, A. Kassar, J. Arnautovic, J. Iredale, J. Beynon, C. Dusting, H. Henschke, I. Dynak, R. Wiatr. **Front Row:** R. Andrews, E. Taylor, S. Demshychyn, S. Gunew, Mr. G. Straus, P. Tucker, N. Ostepeev, R. Keegan, R. Kiss.

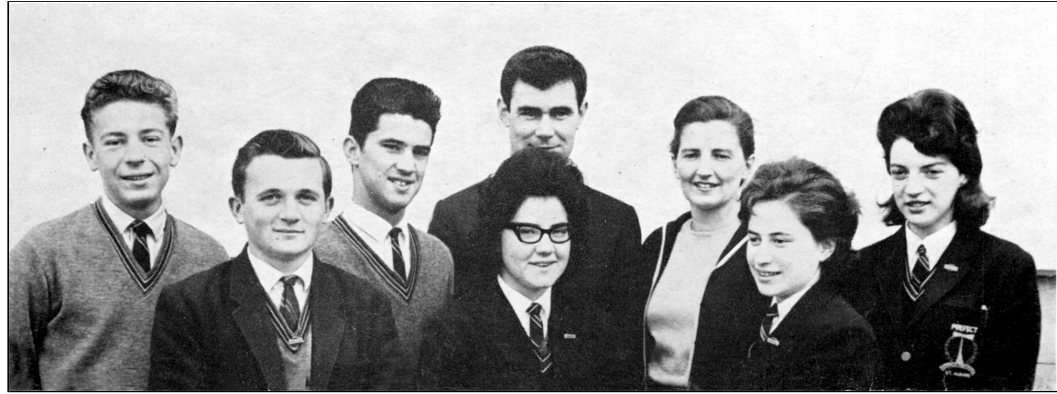
Form 5A, 1962. Hannelore Henschke and Sneja Gunew in second and front rows.

## Matriculation

Gunew sat for her Matriculation in 1963 at the age of sixteen and was credited with three first class honors, two second class honors, one pass, a Commonwealth scholarship and a teaching studentship. She was outperformed by only one other person that year, and that was Hannelore Henschke, whose multiple honors list was crowned by an Exhibition in German.

Sneja Gunew was depicted by her colleagues as being "The perfect example of the maxim that the genius and Scholarship and insanity are allied ... She writes philosophical poetry and can

often be seen playing 'pat-a-cake' with her philosopher comrades during boring lessons. She plans to become a novelist and proclaims that literature is her hobby."



M Bowkun, V Mahorin, G Castagna, R Kiss, Mr Conroy, Mrs Gliddon, S Gunew, R Keegan.

## University Training and Teaching

Sneja was educated at the Melbourne University and in 1968 was awarded her BA (Hons) in English and History; at this time she was registered as Sneja Marina Leonard but continued to use her own name in her professional career. She received an MA from Toronto (Canada) in 1970 and a PhD in English from Newcastle (NSW) in 1978. In 1971-72 she was a lecturer at Manchester Polytechnic (England) before returning to Australia and becoming a tutor at Newcastle (1972-77) and Melbourne University (1978-79), before being appointed lecturer (1979-84) and then senior lecturer (1986-90) at Deakin University. She was appointed Associate Professor at Deakin (1991-93) before moving to Canada and the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in the position of Professor. Between 2002 and 2007 she was the Director, Centre for Women's & Gender Studies, and was appointed Assoc. Principal, College for Interdisciplinary Studies in 2008.



While at Deakin University in 1981 she documented some local history through video interviews: "Reviewing The Migrant Story: Place – St Albans 3021." This included discussions with Hansi Foks, Tilo Bojadjeff and a couple of others. This would have to be the first serious attempt to document the experience of St Albans immigrants beyond the usual one-line generalisations.

She was a member of the Australia Council in the early nineties working on cultural policy development. From this experience she co-authored a book on Culture, Difference and the Arts (1994).

## Publications

At present she is Professor of English and Women's Studies at The University of British Columbia, Canada. She has written and co-edited numerous publications about women, feminism and multicultural issues, including:

- Culture, Difference and the Arts
- A Reader in Feminist Knowledge
- Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct
- Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms
- Telling Ways: Australian Women's Experimental Writing
- Displacements: Migrant Storytellers; Displacements 2: Multicultural Storytellers
- Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies
- Culture, Difference and the Arts

- Feminism and the Politics of Difference
- Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations
- A Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writers
- Beyond the Echo: Multicultural Women's Writing



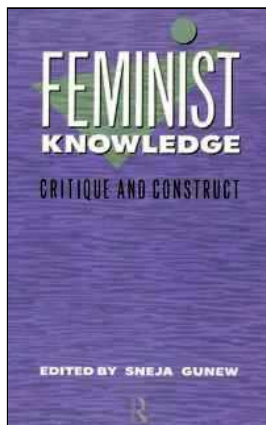
Sneja Gunew (second from right) at the Asia Pacific conference, 2009.



Sneja Gunew, Vernacular Cosmopolitanisms, Ailae Summer School, 2010.



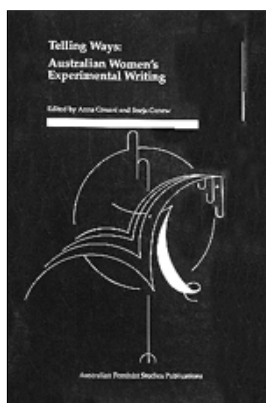
Sneja Gunew with husband Terence Greer. Vancouver, 1999.



## Comment

I was born in Germany and my mother was German and father was Bulgarian. I left Germany when I four and we migrated to Australia in 1952 and I spent in one way or another 30 years in Australia before moving to Canada for a more extended period and becoming a Canadian citizen.

In a world of globalization and flexible citizenship, but citizenship nonetheless, I think we have to find new ways of recognizing the contributions that people make in those kinds of serial positionings in different places. We have to recognise it and respect it and not fear it. I think we are again at that historical era where the fear of this is much more paramount than the respect. There are anxieties with us in every culture but they get projected onto different groups and different ideas. If universities have anything to contribute it is to fight that easy projection or essentialisation of other cultures and other people.

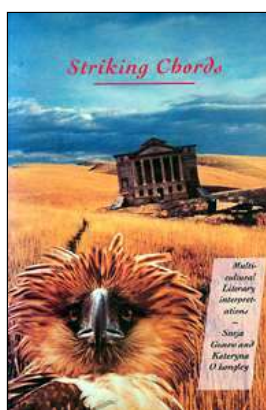
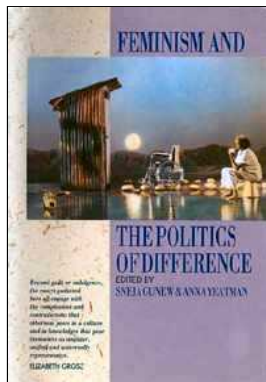
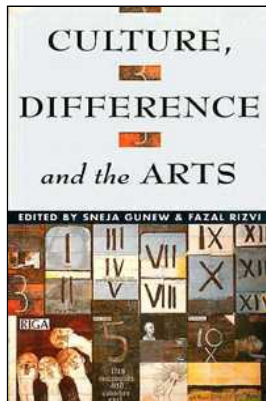
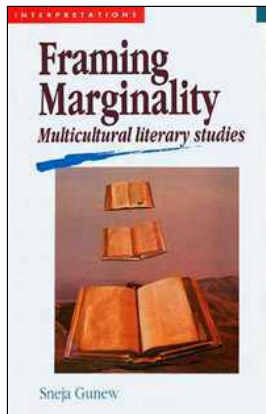


## Current Work

The goal of my research is to make people much more curious and open about what is going on in the world right now rather than taking refuge in the old categories and the old concepts. Multiculturalism used to be sometimes predicated on the idea that there were watertight cultures or heritages, but if we look around us today there is much more intermingling and mixing – there always has been but it's much more clear today. Mixtures are sometimes seen as contamination, impurity; something that is not quite right or authentic or something that has in some ways been a reminder of what was lost. We like to think it was more about what was gained.



It as very interesting growing up in Australia because as a precocious child my first language was German but I learnt English very quickly. Given my name, there was always the perception, even when I was at university, that English was not a language that I could master. There



were many interesting examples of this when I was growing and there were many other colleagues who were also children of migrants or, as they call us in Australia, we were from Non-English Speaking Background, and that where the acronym NESB comes from.

I started an academic career punctuated by going to England and Canada, and when I came back to Australia what was interesting about that I was always interested in things that we now call cultural studies. When I started tackling this research it was at Swinburne that was built on the model of the open university. It was a very inter-disciplinary university and specialised in producing the kind of course material that in those days was called distance education.

The other thing that happened was that we worked in course teams and people took two or three years putting together various disciplinary course materials. We were producing course materials for the beginnings of women's studies. This was in the eighties so it was the early days. One of the things we managed to do is that these course materials became books that were published and did quite well. We did that with the group and published the collection that we called Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct, which began with an essay by an Aboriginal academic women and this was unheard of in those days. There was another book called A Reader in Feminist Knowledge, which is still being used occasionally. What was interesting about that it brought together theorists who became important figures in international feminism.

But at the same time something else was happening and it was in a sense simultaneous. I was part of the women's movement in Australia and was part of the internationalisation of women's studies. But very early on when this was being consolidated I wrote an essay that was very controversial, called "Who's on Whose Margins?" This was a critique on what was already becoming mainstream feminism, and it was about all those other groups that were not being represented at that time.

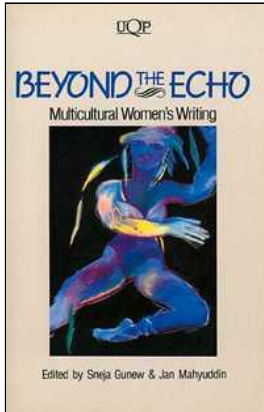
The history of Australian colonisation was slightly different from Canada because the main groups in Australia were from England and Ireland working class. Anglo Saxon and Irish working class groups were the radical fringe, so there was a great emphasis on class differences. Therefore, attempts to raise other issues at the time were not viewed favourably. But it started me on multicultural research because what I did in various ways was to set up the first bibliographies to begin collecting all the writings that were not in English. It led to all kinds of things but it meant I've had a history of multiculturalism for a very long time. Recently I had to write an encyclopedia entry of four pages on globalisation; it was meant to look at multiculturalism in a globalised context - very, very difficult.

What's interested me in my relationship with multiculturalism - and yes, in Australia we learnt for Canada - was that Canada was the first country to have a Multicultural Act. Australia never did have one. It was also the fact that Australia was much more a monolingual country than Canada, so it closed off a whole range of possibilities. What was interesting about multiculturalism is it came in different waves and there is a multiculturalism critique that has been extremely important; I notice it keeps getting re-politicised in different contexts. For a time, the Prime Minister of Australia banned the use of the word in any

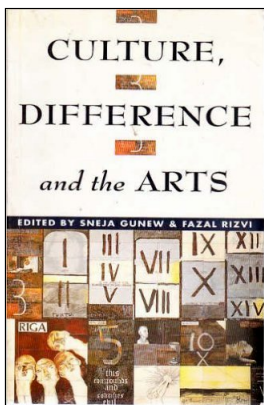


document. I was living in Canada by then but from the moment I heard it I thought: good, it's become politicised again.

Recently we have heard several national leaders telling us that multiculturalism has failed - people like Angela Merkel, Nicholas Sarkozy and David Cameron. The moment that happens you begin to look at it again, because it's in the name of multiculturalism that all sorts of things are being sidelined again. It's an interesting history to follow and its political resonance is very varied and there are many things that have been done in the name of multiculturalism that are not necessarily negative.

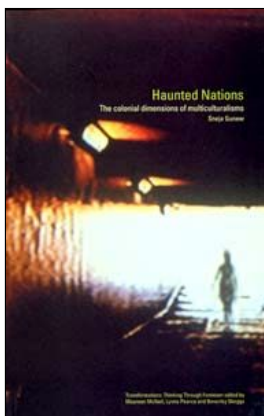


More recently in my research what I did when I came to Canada was that multiculturalism became something else. I came in 1993 and multiculturalism became transculturalism because multiculturalism meant globalisation and became a different area of study. In transculturalism there was very much that sense of looking at the ways knowledge is produced in all kinds of ways, including women's studies. There is an attempt to make knowledge production a much wider narrative to include groups whose knowledge is either excluded or demonised and to bring that into the academic world. That was bound up with what I was doing in women's studies - there's cultural feminism and those sort of issues and they won't go away.



I go back every year to Australia because I have family there and I still feel, by and large, there is much more awareness and self reflexivity about these issues in Canada than there is in Australia.

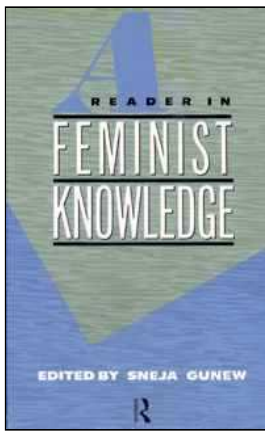
What I'm working on at the moment is something called vernacular cosmopolitanism, which is in a sense an attempt to revisit those issues of cultural differences by looking at the debate again, by looking at cosmopolitanism. The idea at the turn of the last century was that cosmopolitanism as world citizenship was usually associated with the privileged and the nobility. Round about the first and second world wars it was used as a term to denigrate Jews, with the idea of being a rootless cosmopolitan with no kind of allegiances anywhere.



What researchers and theorists have done over the last decade is revisit cosmopolitanism, to think about world or or global knowledge production in relation to the vernacular, in relation to the very local kinds of production of knowledge produced in other languages. It is an attempt to bring together two rather dissonant terms to raise those question of "whose knowledge". Whose knowledge are we perpetuating? Whose knowledge are we authorising?

It has been quite interesting bringing together multiculturalism and feminism.

[Information transcribed from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN3W2sZ1f3c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN3W2sZ1f3c)]



**Sneja Gunew**

<http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sgunew/>

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School photographs courtesy of Nick Szwed.

Family background courtesy of Marin Gunew

Book images and information by Terence Greer at <http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sgunew/>

Information about current work transcribed from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN3W2sZ1f3c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN3W2sZ1f3c) 20 July 2010 uploaded by UBCArts