

“The Constructiveness and Dialogic Energy of the ‘Postcolonial Imagination’”: In Conversation with Bill Ashcroft

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Bill Ashcroft is an eminent postcolonial critic and theorist. His co-authored book, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), was the first text to theoretically and systematically examine the discursive formations of the postcolonial experience. While the field of postcolonial studies and literature has expanded since then, overlapping with other areas of study, as discussed in the interview below, his early works, such as *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995) along with *The Empire Writes Back*, were groundbreaking texts that provided nuanced ways of reading and engaging with the complexities of postcoloniality.

Ashcroft is author and co-author of twenty-books, including *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001), *On Postcolonial Futures* (2001), *Caliban’s Voice* (2008), *Intimate Horizons* (2009) and *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016), several of which have been translated into multiple languages. Beginning his career as a lecturer at the School of English, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia in 1988, he is currently Emeritus Professor at the same school, having held visiting positions in both Hong Kong and Cologne, among other places.

In the following interview conducted over email in September 2019, Ashcroft discusses his early years as an academic, the genesis of *The Empire Writes Back*, his thoughts on Australian literature, his current book project on “transnation”, and the future of postcolonial studies.

Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview, Bill. Most people know you for your work in postcolonial theory and literature, beginning with your seminal work *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). However, I am sure that before this book, you would have been working on other areas of research. Can you tell us a little bit about the early days of your academic career and the work you did?

I began my career as an Australianist and literary theorist. My Masters degree was on the Australian poet Francis Webb, which became the book *The Gimbals of Unease*. The theoretical explorations of my doctorate were driven

by my interest in philosophy and brought together the concepts of phenomenology and the language philosophy of Wittgenstein. It was the fascination with language that led to my interest in postcolonial literatures and in particular I began to investigate the ways in which African writers appropriated the language of the colonizer and transformed it to become a vehicle of self-representation and a voice that could be heard globally.

How was *The Empire Writes Back* an influential project for its time? Tell us about the genesis of this book.

By the 1980s it was clear that there was a need for a book that married the concerns of Commonwealth literature with contemporary theory. The Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies (ACLALS) was formed in the 1960s and its strength was a vital concern for writers in the colonies and former colonies. But Commonwealth was a term that needed to be superseded, as was its New Critical approach to literary criticism. I knew Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin and it was at an AULLA (Australasian Universities Languages and Literature Association) that we agreed that this was a book sorely needed in contemporary English studies. We began to plan the book and entered an exciting phase in which we would literally write parts of the book together. I would sit at the computer and the others would fire ideas at me. It was a stimulating time but it took nine years before the book finally came out.

There is a persistent myth that Edward Said initiated postcolonial studies, when in fact he only ever used the term once. Said is better credited with initiating colonial discourse theory which was an antecedent of postcolonial studies. It was only then that Bhabha and Spivak took on the term. Of course, Said's work in *Orientalism* on the representation of Europe's others is foundational, as is Frantz Fanon's, and in particular Said's work is important for his emphasis on the link between culture and imperialism and for his theory of worldliness. Although I have written a book on Said I had not read his work when *The Empire Writes Back* was written, so he had no specific influence on the development of postcolonial studies.

The significant features of *The Empire Writes Back* were: a concern to avoid suppressing the voices of the writers beneath the weight of theory, and indeed to let the writers drive the theory; a belief in the agency of postcolonial writers, in particular their capacity to take a dominant imperial language and make it work for them; and a determination to open up a field of English literature that would radically expand what we understand as literatures in English.

The field of postcolonial studies grew exponentially beyond its original conception. Why do you think that was so?

The Empire Writes Back was a book for its time. The world was hungry for a language that could address the historical consequences of imperialism, for these consequences were continuing into the contemporary world. The language of postcolonialism drove the cultural turn in globalization studies in the 1990s for three reasons. First, the systematization of postcolonial theory occurred at about the same time as the rise to prominence of globalization studies in the late 1980s. Second, it was around this time that literary and cultural theorists realized that debates on globalization had become bogged down in the classical narrative of modernity. Third, it became clear, particularly after Appadurai, that there were many globalizations, and that far from the homogenizing downward pressure of economic globalization and the Washington Consensus, a circulation of local alternatives could be seen to affect the nature of the global. It was through cultural practices that difference and hybridity, diffusion and the imaginary, concepts that undermined the Eurocentric narrative of modernity, were most evident. Furthermore, in disciplines such as English studies the book opened up a whole new vibrant world of writing in English.

***Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001) was revolutionary for taking contested concepts like history, place, and resistance and foregrounding them as “transformative” notions. What was the impetus for exploring these concepts in this way?**

I have never identified the postcolonial with simple anti-colonial opposition but have always advanced the colonial subject as instrumental rather than abject, a transforming subject rather than a resisting object. The striking thing about colonial experience is that after colonization postcolonial societies did very often develop in ways that revealed a remarkable capacity for change and adaptation. A common view of colonization, which represents it, understandably, as an unmitigated cultural disaster, disregards the often quite extraordinary ways in which colonized societies engaged and utilized imperial culture for their own purposes. Since my early interest in language adaptation I have been concerned with how these colonized peoples responded to the political and cultural dominance of Europe. Many critics have argued that colonialism destroyed indigenous cultures, but this assumes that culture is static, and underestimates the resilience and adaptability of colonial societies. On the contrary, colonized cultures have often been so resilient and transformative that they have changed the character of imperial culture itself. This “transcultural” effect has not been seamless or unvaried, but it forces us to reassess the stereotyped view of colonized peoples’ victimhood and lack of agency. So the underlying principle of *Post-Colonial Transformation* is the belief in the agency and strength of colonized peoples to transform those

technologies (particularly the English language) that were used to oppress them. This principle of the book is echoed in Marshal Berman's view of peoples' response to modernity – “to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernity [...] to give them the power to change the world that is changing them” (Berman 1982, 16). It is this power that underpins the activity of postcolonial transformation.

Postcolonial positioning is also a matter of representation, of giving concrete form to ideological concepts. Representation describes both the site of identity formation and the site of the struggle over identity formation. For the positioning of cultural identity has involved the struggle over the means of representation since colonised peoples first took hold of the colonists' language to represent themselves. Today the means of representing cultural identity includes the whole range of plastic and visual arts, film and television, and crucially, strategies for consuming these products. Hence, transformation, which describes one way of viewing cultural identity, also describes the strategic process by which cultural identity is represented. By taking hold of the means of representation, colonised peoples throughout the world have appropriated and transformed those processes into culturally appropriate vehicles. It is this struggle over representation which articulates most clearly the material basis, the constructiveness and dialogic energy of the “postcolonial imagination.”

In your latest book *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016), you gesture towards this idea of the political utility of literary utopianism. Could you speak a little bit about this idea and your work on utopianism in general?

A natural consequence of this belief in the capacity of colonized peoples to transform the technologies used to suppress them has been an examination of the vision of the future that compelled such transformation. Utopianism has a long history and in the twentieth century has been driven by a combination of Marxism and science fiction. While anti-colonial utopias in colonial thinking and writing focused on the prospect of an independent nation, the postcolonial vision of utopia is rather the persistent belief in a transformed future. In Ruth Levitas's description this is “the desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life” (Levitas 1995, 257). Postcolonial literatures were underpinned by a hope that runs counter to the usual accounts of moral and social oppression that motivated colonial resistance. Indeed, political resistance could not have continued without such a belief in a radically transformed future. Postcolonial utopianism arises from an unrecognized but powerful reality: that successful resistance is transformative, and transformation rests on the belief in an achievable future. Writers from colonized cultures continue to have a vision of hope for the future.

Literature and other creative cultural expressions are critical in the production of postcolonial hope because their very *raison d'être* is to imagine a different world. With the significant exception of the settler colonies, few postcolonial utopias were conceived in quite the same way as those found in the tradition of utopian literature. Nevertheless, hope, anticipation and future thinking have been fundamental features of postcolonial writing. Belief in the future exists everywhere. It only appears extraordinary in the context of postcolonial discourse because it seems to many to be overshadowed by the dominance of an imperial past.

You have also done a significant amount of work in the area of Australian Literature. How do you conceptualize Australian literature these days?

I have chaired a committee to award the ALS (Australian Literature Society) Gold Medal for recent literature and I can say that the literature is very healthy indeed. Australia, like other settler colonies, has been obsessed with the idea of identity. But national identity is not a feature of writing, it is a feature of *reading*. It is in reading that the hoary issue of national identity keeps emerging. Therefore, it is encouraging to see that contemporary writing is less white, less male and less middle class and the reading of Australian literature tends more towards encountering its diversity. Women writers in particular have been coming to the fore. Young writers such as Zoë Morrison, Heather Rose and Sofie Laguna, as well as established writers such as Michelle de Kretser, Gail Jones and Alexis Wright are leading the ways into an exciting phase. Consequently, we are no longer tempted to talk about national identity but about the range of issues that surround us – women, Aboriginal people, migrants, and the precariat, those people who live precariously in the age of economic inequality. In short, the base of Australian literature is broadening, multiplying and diversifying.

You've discussed the efficacy of a postcolonial reading of Australian literary culture for coming to terms with the multiplicity of contemporary modernity. Could you talk about the links between Australian literature and postcolonial theory?

Postcolonial studies in general has had a marked impact on Australian literary studies. Settler colonies demonstrate in clearer form what is true of all postcolonial societies: that the colonized can be the colonizers, the marginalized can be the marginalizers, that imperial power circulates and produces rather than simply confines. When we understand that “being colonized” does not indicate a coherent and predictable state of being but a wide

range of cultural, political relationships, we are better able to see the network of strategies that constitute the “condition” of postcoloniality. Settler colonies develop strategies of resistance and transformation that are similar in *function* to those of other colonized societies while being very different in content. The struggle between filiation and affiliation; the struggle to represent self and thus obtain cultural agency; the inheritance of forms of subject formation such as nationalism and ethnicity; and the ambivalent and contested representation of place. All these experiences outline spaces of contestation shared by all colonies.

Postcolonial doesn’t mean “after colonialism” but refers to the way colonized writers and cultural producers engage the imperial discourses to which they are subject. Indeed “postcolonial” doesn’t refer to a state of being at all but is a way of reading, a way of talking about those engagements. A postcolonial reading of Australian culture unfolds the transformative nature of discursive resistance that we find in all colonies. Importantly, it places indigenous and non-indigenous cultural production in a continuum rather than in opposition with each other.

An important and controversial subject in Australian studies is that of indigeneity. Settler colonies, being both colonisers (of Aboriginal people) and colonised (by Britain), are a particularly ambivalent colonial phenomenon. Of course Aboriginal people remain colonised, and Aboriginal writers employ the same language and narrative strategies as other colonised people. Postcolonial analysis remains relevant in a wider sense as classical imperialism continues the function of economic dominance through global capitalism. The problems that arise when talking about Aboriginal writers is the idea that postcolonial means “after colonialism”.

Postcolonial studies overlaps with other areas of research like world literature, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and so on. How do you view these overlaps and how do they contribute to the study of postcoloniality?

The strategies of transformation and circulation that I regard as central to postcolonial studies provide postcolonial scholars with a useful set of strategies to deal with globalization. The question then is: what use is globalization theory to postcolonial studies? One way of testing this is to consider the growing global phenomenon of World Literature. Ironically, while the cultural turn in globalization studies was driven by the dissatisfaction with dependency theory and centre periphery models, such a model – as in Wallerstein’s world systems approach– has re-emerged as a theoretical basis for World Literature. Unfortunately, Wallerstein’s world systems theory rests on an outmoded geometric view of centre and periphery. As a model it shows the reliance of the rich nations on the poverty of the poor, but this condition is rhizomatic rather than geometric. Whether we agree with Goethe “that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times” (Eckerman 2014,

211), the idea of a literature transcending national limits is one that leans inexorably towards the Eurocentric myths of greatness and universality. The privileged place accorded by Goethe to European literatures has led directly to an almost parodic Eurocentrism in theories such as Pascale Casanova's, in which the Paris-centric structure of world literature rehearses one of the more outmoded aspects of imperial geometry. With David Damrosch we can take world literature "to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, [...] a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture (Damrosch 2003, 4).

Given this, my contention is that postcolonial literatures are a prime example of "world literature." By appropriating and transforming the language of colonial domination postcolonial writers were able to take control of their own representation and circulate it in the form of literary works throughout a world of English speakers. I would see this as at least the first way in which Australian literature may be read in a world context through its shared response to, and transformation of, the various dominating discourses of imperial control. By interpolating already existing modes of production and circulation these writers made use of the economic network of imperial relations to enter the world, so to speak. And by entering the world in this way postcolonial criticism became a distinct form of proximate reading in which proximity was provided by the shared reality of colonial domination. What made this "world literature" and not just an extension of English literature was its institutional exclusion from the English literary canon, an exclusion that allowed it to ignore any continuous *filiative* relationship with the texts of English literature in favour of its social, cultural and political *affiliations*. In many respects this was immensely liberating, for though provincial writers may be "cut off" they are freed from the bonds of an inherited tradition.

Clearly, the recent range of postcolonial discourse has pushed the discipline's initial boundaries, expanding and appropriating in line with developments in literary studies. I believe you call this postcolonialism's "driving energy" in one of your articles (Ashcroft, Introduction 2012). How do you think the field of postcolonial studies will develop and evolve in the future?

The fascinating thing about postcolonial studies is that almost since its inception people have been prophesying its demise. Looking back, it's hard to imagine a more frenetic or argumentative field of literary study than this one subsequently became over the next thirty years. Indeed, it often seemed as though to enter the field you had to critique the very idea of the post-colonial, while its demise was trumpeted by a jostling succession of Cassandras. Yet post-colonial studies has not only flourished, but has embraced its critics, channeling even their

objections into the broad collective agenda of the creative cultural engagement with imperialism in all its forms. In these days of global domination, the techniques and strategies have become even more useful and while individual experiences of imperial and neo-imperial domination may vary greatly, the transformative strategies with which people engage power remain.

A major feature of postcolonial studies has been its ability to analyze a vast array of cultural developments: race and racism; expressions of anticolonial nationalism; the paradoxical dissolution of the idea of nation along with the continuous persistence of national concerns; the question of language and appropriation; of the transformation of literary genres; the question of ethnicity and its relation to the state; the growing mobility of formerly colonized populations. Whether we like it or not, postcolonial studies now extends far beyond the original moment of colonization. The field has come to represent a dizzyingly broad network of cohabiting intellectual pursuits, circulating around the general idea of an ongoing engagement with imperial power in its various historical forms. Clearly, the power dynamic of that originating moment and the forms of transformation it generated are still relevant to the range of areas of study in the field today. Postcolonial analysis has always intersected the study of race, gender, class, but these intersections have generated an ever-increasing range of specific interests, overlapping and cohabiting within the field.

Finally, what other projects do you see yourself working on? Can we expect one more book from you?

I am writing a book on “transnation”, a concept that has emerged out of the vigorous postcolonial critique of nation. The rise in global mobility at the same time as state borders have become ever more hysterically protected, has interested postcolonial cultural critics for some time and this interest underpins an examination of the transitive movement of national subjects. The term “transnation” refers to much more than the “international”, or the “transnational”, which might be conceived as a relation between states, a crossing of borders or a cultural or political interplay between national cultures. It is also distinct from the categories of “diaspora” and “cosmopolitanism” which fail, on the whole, to account for subjects who may at various times identify with the nation, ethnicity, religion, family or tribe, who may know nothing of the workings of the state except for their experience of local officials, who may travel beyond national borders or stay within them, and may never be in contact with other cultural subjects, but whose experience provides the constant theme of the ambiguous relation between the nation and the state.

Transnation is the fluid movement within the nation that occurs “outside” of the structures of the state. The transnation is thus a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in between the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted. The transnation exists within, beyond and between nation

states. It is a collectivity comprised of communities who may be drawn in one way or another to the myth of a particular nation-state, but who draw away perpetually into the liberating region of representational undecideability. But it also reminds us that nevertheless, one of the most persistent categories with which people must negotiate is the nation. I hope that this book will be a postcolonial contribution to the increasing reality of postnationalism, mobility, precarity and the increasing ability of national subjects to circulate around the structures of the state.

Thank you very much for this interview, Bill.

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