

IMAGINATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

Imagination and the Contemporary Novel examines the global pre-occupation with the imagination among literary authors with ties to former colonies of the British Empire since the 1960s. John Su draws on a wide range of authors including Peter Ackroyd, Monica Ali, Julian Barnes, André Brink, J. M. Coetzee, John Fowles, Amitav Ghosh, Nadine Gordimer, Hanif Kureishi, Salman Rushdie, and Zadie Smith. This study rehabilitates the category of imagination in order to understand a broad range of contemporary Anglophone literatures, whose responses to shifts in global capitalism have been misunderstood by the dominant categories of literary studies, the postmodern and the postcolonial. As both an insightful critique into the themes that drive a range of the best novelists writing today, and a bold restatement of what the imagination is and means for contemporary culture, this book breaks new ground in the study of twenty-first-century literature.

JOHN J. SU is Associate Professor of English at Marquette University.

IMAGINATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

JOHN J. SU

Marquette University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107006775

© John Su 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

First paperback edition 2013

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Su, John J.

Imagination and the contemporary novel / John J. Su.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-107-00677-5 (hardback)

1. English fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 2. English fiction—21st century—History and criticism. 3. Imagination in literature.
4. Literature and globalization. 5. Postcolonialism in literature. 6. English fiction—English-speaking countries—History and criticism. 1. Title.

PR881.S785 2011

823'.91409—dc22

2011002470

ISBN 978-1-107-00677-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-64597-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> vii
1 Introduction: globalization, imagination, and the novel	i
2 Aesthetic revolutions: white South African writing and the State of Emergency	20
3 The pastoral and the postmodern	55
4 Hybridity, enterprise culture, and the fiction of multicultural Britain	82
5 Ghosts of essentialism: racial memory as epistemological claim	107
6 Amitav Ghosh and the aesthetic turn in postcolonial studies	126
Conclusion: imagining together?	153
<i>Notes</i>	157
<i>Bibliography</i>	198
<i>Index</i>	214

Preface and acknowledgments

This study is motivated by the desire to understand the global preoccupation with the imagination since the 1960s, particularly among literary authors with ties to former colonies of the British Empire. The historical tendency of academic scholarship to couple the imagination and Western European Romanticism has meant that the preoccupation with the imagination in the fiction of authors from across the Anglophone world has gone largely unnoticed.¹ Yet its presence in the works of Amitav Ghosh, Nadine Gordimer, N. Scott Momaday, Salman Rushdie, and many others demands a critical re-examination. The categories of literary history that have dominated academic discourses – “postmodern” and “postcolonial” most prominently – have partitioned literary histories in ways that often efface the broader significance of phenomena such as the imagination. Because prevailing literary categories discourage, for example, comparative analysis of South African writer André Brink and British writer John Fowles, or even Fowles and fellow Briton Hanif Kureishi, scholars have largely failed to recognize the social significance they all attribute to the imagination. This study proposes to explore the possibilities and limitations of the imagination as a social practice and the extent to which a re-examination of imagining might offer insight into the resurgent interest in aesthetics in the humanities.

My central argument is that the emergence of the imagination as an explicit topic of discourse in contemporary fiction comes as a response to epistemological crises opened up by the perceived consolidation of an imperialist form of capitalism as the dominant world-system. Less a mimetic or creative power, the imagination increasingly becomes characterized in contemporary Anglophone literatures as a knowledge-producing faculty crucial to countering ideological mystification. The imagination accomplishes this task in somewhat different ways for the diverse authors in this study, but they all share a sense that current social, economic, and

political conditions necessitate a reconsideration of the imaginative functions of the novel.

Although the imagination has a remarkable capacity to defy strict definition, it is a term we apparently cannot do without, now more than ever.² It continues to be considered the precondition of all literary production; no work of literature can be ascribed significant artistic value and at the same time be described as “unimaginative.” More importantly, the imagination is identified as a social practice crucial to living in an age of globalized modernity. No longer relegated to the domain of Western European Romanticism, the imagination is, according to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, “now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.”³ Philosopher Richard Kearney is far more pessimistic about the fate of the imagination, but he considers it no less essential to daily life. The “imminent demise of the imagination” that defines the postmodern condition, for Kearney, represents not the death of European humanism but of humanity itself.⁴

The repudiation of all things postmodern in the humanities and the rise of postcolonial studies has not rendered Kearney’s anxiety moot. Whatever else the various theories of postmodernism were, they were responses to the same social and economic conditions that, for Appadurai, characterize the present moment: the ever-increasing flows of capital, information, and people across national boundaries; the ubiquitous and inescapable presence of electronic media in everyday life. If theories of postmodernism presented by Jean Baudrillard, Ihab Hassan, David Harvey, Linda Hutcheon, Andreas Huyssen, Fredric Jameson, Charles Jencks, Jean-François Lyotard, and others often failed to provide compelling accounts of the experiences of minorities in the United States and Western European nations – and majorities everywhere else – this does not necessarily imply that the theories asked the wrong questions. Indeed, fundamental questions formulated by these theorists remain unanswered, and the disappearance of postmodernism from academic discourses has meant that some of the questions that were central to writers since the 1960s linger: to what extent does ideology limit our capacity to acquire knowledge about our circumstances? To what extent can experiences be communicated? What, if any, epistemological significance does identity have?

The implosion of postmodern studies in the 1990s and the current crises facing postcolonial studies can easily give the impression that the questions taken up by literary studies are guided by taste or fashion rather

Preface and acknowledgments

ix

than the production of knowledge. I wish to emphasize, however, that my study is made possible by the very theories of postmodernism and postcoloniality of which I am often critical. I will challenge their nearly unanimous dismissal of the imagination as elitist, Eurocentric, preoccupied with formalism to the exclusion of political concerns, and reproducing the very ideologies that enabled the rise of capitalism. But my efforts to explore the complex and conflicted appropriations of the imagination by contemporary Anglophone authors necessarily presupposes earlier critiques of Eurocentrism and its universalizing propensities. Indeed, theories of postmodernism and postcoloniality are crucial to understanding the historical function of the imagination, and my study builds on Saree Makdisi's argument that modern notions of imagination were central to the emergence of modernity itself.⁵ From their inception, such notions represented a crucial means of registering dissent against industrial modernization in Western Europe and the basis for exploring alternatives to the universal history projected by modern forms of imperialism and capitalism. The reemerging interest in the imagination in contemporary Anglophone literatures since the 1960s, then, need not be read as a turn away from political concerns toward some rarefied formalism but rather as a mode of exploring possible forms of response to prevailing political, economic, and social conditions.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to friends and colleagues who have made this work possible. In particular, Tobin Siebers, Michael Patrick Gillespie, Tim Machan, Satya P. Mohanty, Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, and Jodi Melamed provided crucial advice and feedback – I have benefited immensely from their help. I would like to thank audiences at the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, Cornell University, and Stanford University, who have attended talks drawn from this work; I appreciate the thoughtful and often critical responses I have received. Writing was facilitated by a year-long sabbatical fellowship, and I would like to thank Dean Michael McKinney for granting me leave time. I would also like to thank Ray Ryan and Maartje Scheltens at Cambridge University Press for their superb editorial guidance, and the anonymous readers of this manuscript for their helpful suggestions.

My greatest debts are to Cindy Petrites and Gabriel and Julian Su, who have supported me and brought me happiness.

An earlier version of chapter 5 was published as “Ghosts of Essentialism: Racial Memory as Epistemological Claim,” in *American*

Literature 81.2 (2009): 361–86. Copyright 2009, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher. A shorter version of chapter 6 appears in *Journal of Modern Literature* 34.2 (2011) as “Amitav Ghosh and the Aesthetic Turn in Postcolonial Studies.” Copyright 2011, Indiana University Press. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher.