Imagination and the Contemporary Novel examines the global preoccupation 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.

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IMAGINATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

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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. 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
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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, preoccu-
pied with formalism to the exclusion of political concerns, and repro-
cucing 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 understand-
ing the historical function of the imagination, and my study builds on
Saree Makdisi’s argument that modern notions of imagination were cen-
tral to the emergence of modernity itself. From their inception, such
notions represented a crucial means of registering dissent against indus-
trial modernization in Western Europe and the basis for exploring alter-
 natives to the universal history projected by modern forms of imperialism
and capitalism. The reemerging interest in the imagination in contem-
porary 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 pol-
itical, economic, and social conditions.

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