

Interview with Bill Ashcroft (School of the Arts & Media, University of New South Wales, Australia)

This took place 26 July 2018 after the ICL 2018 conference at the Eastin Hotel in Penang Malaysia, conducted by Dr Hsu Li-hsin (Department of English, National Chungchi University, Taiwan); some of the interview questions were kindly provided by Dr Shizen Ozawa (Department of English, Tamkang University, Taiwan), and the recording was transcribed by Sean McHugh (College of Liberal Arts, Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, China).

HLH Hello Bill, it's really nice to have you with us.

BA Nice to be here.

HLH I do appreciate your willingness to accept this interview with our *Wenshan Review*.

BA My pleasure.

HLH I enjoyed your talk at the conference about the utility of hope. As I'm currently organizing a research group with my colleagues on the Enlightenment and Romantic thinking, I'm wondering if you can say something about the relationship between colonialism and Enlightenment thinking, together with Romanticism. Do you think the postcolonial period in a way is a distant product of the Enlightenment or is it really the opposite?

BA That's an interesting question of course. Enlightenment thinking is at the foundation of contemporary Western philosophy, but I think postcolonial thinking in some respects contests the Western orientation developed out of Enlightenment thinking. I'm interested for instance in Gandhi, whose resistance to the British Raj was also a resistance to the whole framework of Enlightenment thinking that underpinned the notion of orientalism.

Ghandi and Nehru exhibit a particular relation to the “problematic” and “thematic” of Orientalism, which underlies the nationalist discourse inherited from the Enlightenment. Nationalist activism might reverse the *problematic* of Orientalist thought which sees the “Oriental” as a passive and essentialized subject, but still operates within the Orientalist *thematic*—the post-

Enlightenment framework of Knowledge, Science and Reason within which it re-defines that subject. So while the Enlightenment can be seen as the movement that drove modernity, Gandhi saw that you could resist imperial pressure and resist colonialism but you could still be caught in the thematic of orientalism which was the project of Enlightenment rationality itself.

And of course we think of the Enlightenment as a great epoch in history when the human being became the centre of philosophical thought, but in fact there is a great aporia in Enlightenment thinking and the ostensibly “enlightened” western world view—slavery—an industrial level slavery in which twenty million Africans were transported to the New World. So while the European cultural conquest of the world developed further with the program of the “civilizing mission” that accompanied invasion and colonisation, the great evil of slavery sat there at the centre of Enlightenment modernity as its defining contradiction.

The African philosopher Immanuel Eze believes slavery is not a contradiction, but the inevitable Othering, the dialectical negation needed to establish the imperial being of Europe, the sub-human and uncivilized black subject confirming the natural humanity and civilization of the white man. Contradiction or not, the Enlightenment project of placing the human at the centre of the universe did not include the non-white, non-European, colonized humans.

I’d have to think a little more about the relationship between postcolonialism and Romanticism. In many respects postcolonialism is a resistant and transformative movement while Romanticism is a way of thinking about European letters and the arts, so I’m not sure it’s all that appropriate when applied to colonized peoples.

HLH I guess when it comes to Romanticism there is talk about hope and the desire for something which cannot be reached. Hence though there are voices emphasizing how romanticism is anti-Enlightenment because of its concerns for revolution and subjectivity, at the same time it’s in a way a response towards the emergence of modernity and can be seen as a way to criticize imperialism and its power; it’s not just an extension of imperialism.

BA Romanticism was in some respects a response to the Industrial Revolution with an emphasis on emotion and individualism as well as a glorification of nature. Its emergence in the era of revolution has been well studied and suggests a link with postcolonialism in its vision of the new. But in addition to this, Romanticism in its quest for secular transcendence has much affinity with postcolonial utopianism. Utopianism extends as far back as Thomas Moore's book *Utopia* which inspired different manifestations of hope and revolution, but the great movement of utopianism in the twentieth century is motivated by Ernst Bloch's magisterial three-volume work *The Principle of Hope*. For the entire century utopian thinking had been dominated by Marxist philosophy and some examples from science fiction, but the theme of Bloch's philosophy, that utopianism is about a broader hope for the future has ensured its continuing attraction.

Utopia is a word that has been used in derogatory ways as a kind of insult, connoting vague and wishful thinking, but it's important not only in postcolonial thought but in the way art and literature in general imagine different kinds of worlds to give us a sense of possibility. The utopian hope of pre-independence colonized peoples changed when independence was gained. When they realized the new nation wasn't the utopia they were expecting, the somber realities of post-independence politics soon became felt. Nevertheless the idea that up ahead the *Novum*, the new awaits, became a powerful driver of transformative resistance. Bloch has another, resonant term for the goal of future thinking—*Heimat*—the home we have all sensed but not yet experienced and this sense of home drives us forward.

The great paradox is that achieved utopias are always liable to become dystopias—we can think of the Third Reich or Stalinist Russia or neo-liberal capitalism—when these utopian visions were actually achieved they quickly revealed themselves to be dystopias. Nevertheless without utopian thinking and its hope for the future we will never have the drive to resist and change; hope is important and I'm particularly interested in its generation by the creative imagination in art and literature.

These ideas are derived from Bloch, who argued that art and literature are the primary drivers of utopian thinking because they frame a different kind of world a view of what might be possible, and we must remember that both utopian and

dystopian thinking are always a critique of the present. It's something to keep in mind that thinking of the future and the possibility of change, in whatever way we represent and visualize it, is always a critique of the present and how injustices in the world are played out.

Utopian hope has considerable utility through its capacity to drive political change and lead on to freedom, but the nature of human society suggests that we need to keep pushing against the forces of oppression and power. Edward Said urged us to “speak truth to power”; truth being the truth of the oppressed, and it needs to be articulated time and time again. Nevertheless all resistance, opposition, insurrection and insurgency have no point unless they have a vision of a different kind of future to work to.

HLH Thank you for this; you also talk about the paradoxical nature of hope and how it seems to be unattainable and causing a sense of irony.

BA Well, perhaps paradox more than irony. While utopia may appear far off, hope itself is attainable here in the present. The paradox is that achieved utopias always fail, and pre-independence thinkers and activists in their societies found this out in the colonial context. Once independence came the utopia they hoped for didn't arrive because the newly independent societies simply took on the frameworks and architectures of power that the colonial forces left them. Also perhaps most catastrophically in Africa where they took over the colonial boundaries that had carved up the land like some crazy quilt.

HLH Does postcolonialism have a future and continued relevance?

BA As way back as 2000 articles such as “what was postmodernism?” and “what was postcolonialism” were being published, as though their time had passed. But actually as far back as the 1990s people had been saying that postcolonialism was dead, yet it has always refused to lie down because it's a creative resistance to colonial power that was generated throughout the colonial period and after it.

The language of post-colonialism drove the cultural turn in globalization studies in the 1990s for three reasons. First, the systematization of post-colonial 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's work, 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.

Of course the initial interest in postcolonial literature was specifically writing in English, a consequence of the British Empire's forcible teaching of English in the colonies. This may seem to make it a dated discussion but in fact a way of reading was developed that could empower a critique of imperialism in all its forms. That continues today, particularly in the ongoing power of capitalist imperialism, but more than that postcolonial studies has provided a language and literature for those who feel they are powerless. I was in a conference once when a Dalit woman stood up to say that postcolonial theory has provided a language that could be used to resist—it gave her a voice to speak to oppression. So it continues to be important. While its origins lie in the engagement with British imperialism, imperialism never dies down, postcolonial analysis still shows its relevance because wherever imperialism exists it needs to be analyzed and contested; postcolonial theory provides the tools to do that.

HLH How do you view the differences between postcolonial literature and world literature?

BA I get asked this quite a lot but the important thing to remember is that the theory of world literature is in many respects a recapitulation of the old ideas of centre and margin. If you take people like Casanova, who see Paris as the centre of the world and other forms of literature as on the margin, then you have entered a tremendous fallacy over the structure of world literature.

World literature relies a lot on Immanuel Wallerstein's argument that the rich countries of the capitalist world require the poverty of the capitalist margin. I find that very persuasive but the problem with world literature is that Wallerstein's view led to a geometric view of world power in which London or Paris and their imperial administrations lay at the centre and the colonies occupied the margins. This, I think, is an outmoded model of world power. The

other difference is that postcolonial studies looks at world literature in a range of European languages written in countries that were colonized. I'm interested in literatures written in English but there are also world literatures in French and Spanish, being quite consciously written as colonial languages.

The point here is that postcolonial literature doesn't exist everywhere but where it does it's an appropriation of a former dominant language, showing the way an oppressed people can take various technologies that were used to dominate them and transform them for their own benefit. This reapplication in representing themselves is a powerful consequence of postcolonial literatures, particularly in English.

It's important to realize that those technologies that oppress people can be taken and refashioned to empower those people and give them agency. I don't see world literature talking about this at all however and has instead been about distant meanings, or about literatures that enter into a world audience. These have their own place but are quite different from postcolonial literature because the sense of urgency of resistance and transformation doesn't seem to be there and is just a way of reorganizing the literature of the world. In some respects, Goethe's view of literature as something the world shared was an attractive idea but is quite different from a literature that represented a dominating language but whose power is reused, transformed and aggregated—this is what makes postcolonial literature different from world literature.

HLH You mentioned earlier that you think that postcolonialism was a term that could have been used prior to the postcolonial struggles and emergence of newly independent countries.

BA Yes. Postcolonialism is often taken to be something that comes after colonialism but it actually means after the moment of invasion when colonized intellectuals began to engage with colonial power. Countries are colonized and subject peoples are made to learn the dominating colonial language, hence postcolonial analysis has become very interested in the way writers take hold of their new language and make it work for them. Postcolonial is not a chronological term but a way of reading the engagement of colonized people with imperial power.

And so this engagement continues after independence too, and this is where postcolonial writers need a different view of hope, because the former utopian goals of the independent nations have failed. That's the important distinction; many people say that postcolonialism doesn't apply because the indigenous people are still effectively colonized but of course it does in that postcolonial analysis is a way of reading. And it reads the continuing path of colonial force even after independence. Even after freely settled democracies are established there is a way in which postcolonial criticism remains relevant to the contemporary world.

HLH I remember how mid-nineteenth century American literature could also be read within postcolonialism.

BA In a sense you can read American and Australian nineteenth-century literature in terms of a constant sense of British dominance along with the need to establish some kind of difference. American and Australian literatures were pushing against the dominance of British literature and that led into the attitudes of nationalist independence and freedom. This has led to some misunderstanding, as though US literature was still postcolonial, when America is in fact the dominant world empire. The dynamic of British dominance lies a long way in the past. If you dispense with the idea that postcolonial means after the period of colonization but rather refers to a dynamic of engagement, resistance and transformation, then American literature is no longer postcolonial.

It was quite different in America and Australia for various reasons; the migration to America for example was phenomenal at 70 million people during the nineteenth century yet Australia at the turn of the twentieth century had four to five million. Nevertheless the ways in which we read the literatures of these times can be reassessed.

HLH Regarding the relationship between Taiwan and China, it's sometimes said that the two are divided by a common language and its different usage; it's also ambiguous how Taiwanese literature positions itself against Chinese. My generation learnt Chinese classical literature as well as later more contemporary Taiwanese literature, which is also different from emerging Taiwanese Aborigine literature; there are multiple emergences of identity.

BA China is an empire parading as a nation; it's an incremental empire, invading and appropriating places on its margins. There are 52 ethnicities in China but Mandarin is the dominant language and in many respects it's doing the same thing as the British Empire. The Chinese empire so far hasn't been a global empire but it's setting up bases on South China Sea islands and its attitudes to Taiwan and Hong Kong remain those of a colonizing power. I think that we need to see to what extent territories subject to incremental absorption are taking and using the colonizer's language.

Now Taiwanese and Chinese use of language differs in that Taiwan uses a traditional form of writing while mainland Mandarin is being modernized; I'd like to see how writers in Chinese address the relationship with the dominant imperial power and how they could be read in postcolonial ways.

I think America is an empire of a particular kind and China an emerging empire of a different kind, but they each provide the opportunity for postcolonial scholars to read the incursion of imperial power. Of course I'm interested in the way in which this incursion and resistance emerges in literature but there are postcolonial scholars in all fields, and the tools have been provided to re-analyze and possibly contest the movement of power. It's an important way for postcolonial analysis to proceed and will continue to proceed.

Postcolonial analysis is relevant to all forms of imperial power, and it needs to address the movement of capitalist imperialism and ways in which individual societies may be resisting. It's something Hardt and Negri have talked about. In fact traditional or classical imperialism was an extension of British nationality into the world but particularly an extension of British corporate power into the world, for example with the East India Company in particular.

Imperialism always goes with economic domination and so this aspect of classical imperialism continuing today, where political and cultural dominance goes with economic dominance, is an area where postcolonial analysis can continue to have an effect.

HLH In one of the talks you were speaking of trans-modernity or multiple modernities.

BA Yes, I've written an article on the notion of multiple modernities; we think of modernity as a great historical movement and achievement towards betterment in the West, but we find that modernization emerged in different ways. Aspects of modernity were taken on by non-European societies yet we fail to realize that modernities arose throughout the world in different ways; these aren't just an emergence of Westernization across the world but are other forms of modernity arising in distinction.

So there are two processes going on at the same time, one of appropriating and transforming aspects of European modernity and another where local modernizing forms also emerge. Figures like Max Weber say that the West is responsible for all the world's great innovations, but there are different forms and alternatives of modernity, and this is of great interest to postcolonial scholars.

HLH I find myself wondering what exactly modernity means here.

BA The traditional explanation is that modernity is the result of the great movements of the Reformation and Enlightenment, and the rise of mercantile capitalism, so modernity as an epoch is possibly the way to see European modernity. Modernity is in the broader sense a way of approaching the future and hence I see the notion of hope as significant, and it was a sense of hope that peoples had that they could change forces that appeared only to be changing them. This process of struggle then led to various "coeval" modernities emerging in the world.

HLH Great. And congratulations on your retirement; would you like to say something on what your future projects will be?

BA I retired in February as an emeritus professor and I'm busier than ever, continuing to accept engagements and giving papers all round the world; my next book will be on transnation, looking at issues of post-nationalism and how national communities circulate around structures of the state. I'm doing that because it has its foundations in postcolonial questioning of borders that was inherited from colonial powers; the whole idea of borders has become important in connection with post-nationalism and the developing idea of nations.

HLH How do you understand the idea of a cosmopolitan state?

BA When I talk to people in Asia and Africa they seem to feel that cosmopolitanism is very white and doesn't apply to the kind of multiplicity going on in their postcolonial world. So I think the attractive thing about cosmopolitanism is the ethical idea coming from Kant that everyone should be welcome, yet cosmopolitanism whether it intends to or not tends to mean the freedom of the rich to travel. You can't really place refugees as part of a cosmopolitan world, the Rohingya for example aren't, and hence it's a concept to be handled carefully. I prefer the term transnation because it acknowledges that everyone is in a relation with a nation of some kind or other, whether they're a citizen of it or fleeing from it.

The interesting things are the tremendous agency exerted and circulating around those structures that the state uses to keep people under control, and how this circulation also affects dictatorial power and the emergence of strong leaders. Perhaps there's an awareness that people can use these structures, and this is something I'll be investigating.

HLH Fabulous, thanks so much, most kind.

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