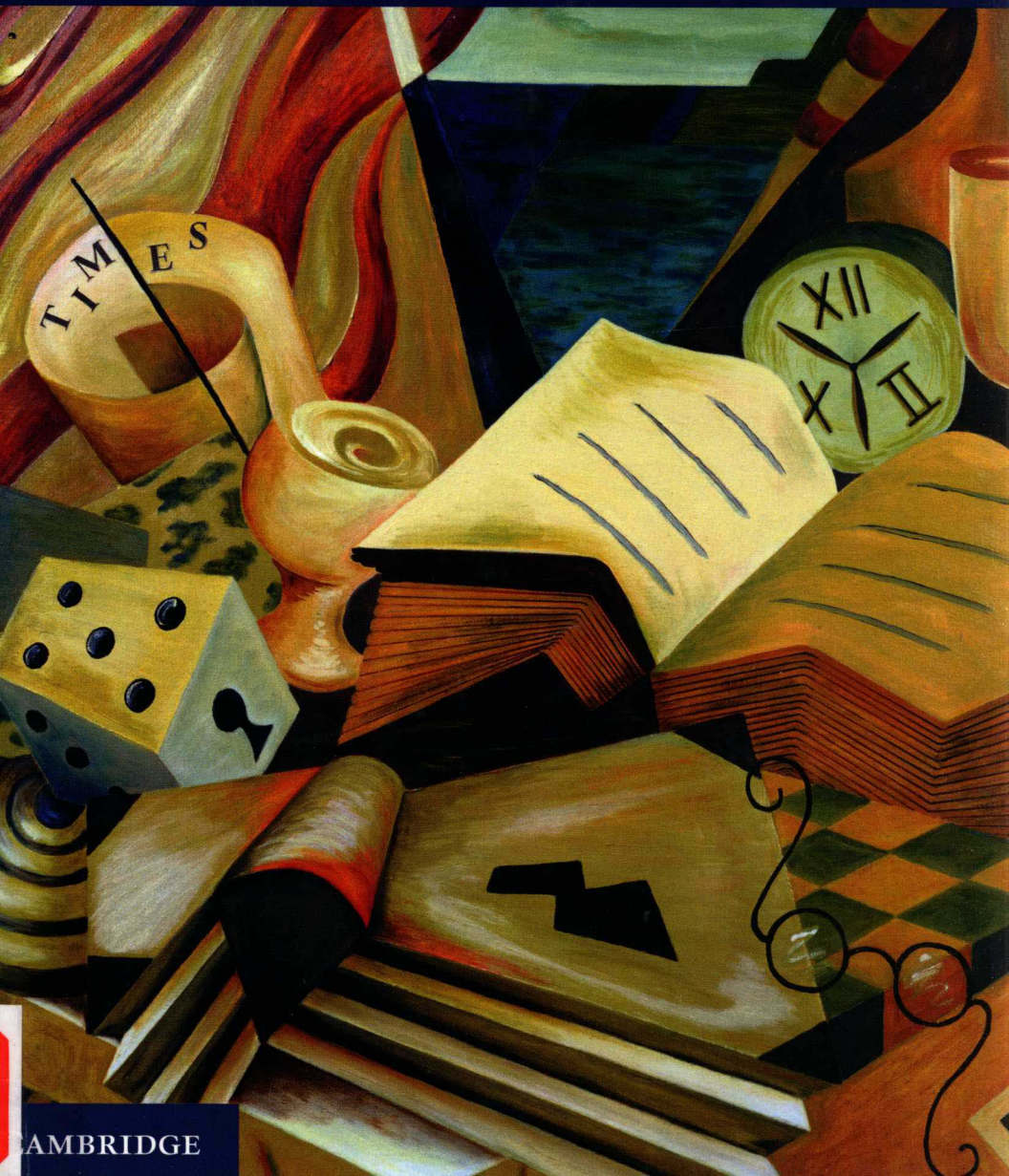
JOHN J. SU

Imagination and the Contemporary Novel



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JOHN J. SU
Marquette University

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IMAGINATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

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.

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

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

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.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: globalization, imagination, and the novel

> One of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary culture is that at a time when the image reigns supreme the very notion of a creative human imagination seems under mounting threat. We no longer appear to know who exactly produces or controls the images which condition our consciousness. We are at an impasse where the very rapport between *imagination* and *reality* seems not only inverted but subverted altogether. We cannot be sure which is which. And this very undecidability lends weight to the deepening suspicion that we may well be assisting at a wake of imagination.
>
> Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*

> The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice.* No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.
>
> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*

The emergence of modern notions of imagination was inseparable from a longing to effect radical social change. Friedrich Schiller and Samuel Taylor Coleridge both argued that the rise of capitalism and the modern nation-state dissolved an essential bond of human nature, and they looked to the imagination to provide the basis for a more egalitarian

state. Even as the European colonial powers subsumed ever greater spheres within their orbit, William Wordsworth and William Blake saw in the imagination the possibility of identifying and preserving images of what Saree Makdisi has called "sites of difference and otherness," thereby forestalling the worldwide assimilation of all cultures and histories within a single dominant narrative of modernity.[1] Such responses were often less a radical critique of capitalism than efforts to provide a tragic consolation for it,[2] but well into the twentieth century artists including T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and Pablo Picasso saw what they took to be vestigial remnants of alternatives to modernity in the far-flung reaches of the European empires. Eliot, in particular, held out hope that the preservation of such remnants within the aesthetic sphere of art might lead one day to a "mass-conversion" that would fundamentally redefine social and political institutions.[3]

The apparent consolidation of capitalism as the dominant world-system in the final decades of the twentieth century has led to significant anxieties about the capacity of the imagination to aid utopian thinking. Russell Jacoby's *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005), for example, ponders whether the relentless barrage of electronic media images has not finally overwhelmed our capacity to imagine. Reiterating a line of thinking tracing through Fredric Jameson and Richard Kearney back to Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Jacoby reads the imagination as a final frontier on the verge of incorporation.[4] His distinction between a now outdated "blue print tradition" and a still vital "iconoclastic tradition" of utopian thinking implies that the imagination – historically understood as an image-producing faculty – is no longer to be trusted.[5] In an "age of extreme visualization," the imagination itself has in large measure become unimaginative, reproducing commercial fantasies of limitless consumption.[6]

Intriguingly, the imagination reemerged as subject of explicit interest and meditation in a wide variety of contemporary Anglophone literatures written during the same era. It figures prominently in texts that have been categorized as postmodern, such as John Fowles's *Daniel Martin* (1977); it also figures in texts that have been categorized as postcolonial, such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2001). Indeed, despite their different backgrounds and social locations, both Fowles and Ghosh portray multinational capitalism as the dominant social, political, and economic formation in terms of which all conditions of life must be understood. Both Fowles and Ghosh claim that the novel enables its readers to engage in a unique form of imagining that is crucial to recovering

and communicating alternative systems of knowledge. Their narratives repeatedly turn to questions of what can be known or not known, what can be verified, and what is considered authentic knowledge. To the extent that they posit spaces beyond the reach of global capital, *Daniel Martin* and *The Glass Palace* have a utopian quality. Neither seeks to provide a blueprint for the future, but they both explore the extent to which imagining enables individuals to recognize the current conditions in which they live, and the nature of the exploitation they endure and often promote.

The crucial role these authors assign to the imagination in recognizing and interpreting reality is one that it historically has not often had. The mystification of everyday life effected by capitalism and imperialism means that conceptions of the imagination as a mimetic faculty tracing back to Aristotle or a creative faculty tracing back to European Romantics have little purchase. Rather, the imagination is required to engage in what André Brink calls a "transgression" of the senses.[7] Imagining is not seen as a withdrawal from the world but an effort to interpret it more accurately, and thereby to enable a clearer recognition of the possible shared horizons for the future.[8] In other words, the relevance of the novel depends on a new attention to the epistemological significance of the imagination.

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE IMAGINATION

As a field of philosophical inquiry into questions of how knowledge is acquired and verified, epistemology has tended to be understood in terms of the preoccupations established by René Descartes and developed by Immanuel Kant. Despite their differences, both philosophers understood the resolution to epistemological problems to lie in the pursuit of what has been called a "God's eye view" notion of objectivity. According to this idea, the cultural contexts, personal identifications, and philosophical commitments of an individual necessarily introduce distortions in perspective, the resolution to which demands temporarily bracketing these impediments to rational deliberation. This preoccupation with a transcendental point of view or transcendental self was rejected by both Hegel and Marx for its lack of historicity. Similar critiques were echoed throughout the twentieth century. In the Anglo-American academy, Richard Rorty provides perhaps the most well-known critique, declaring the impossibility and irrelevance of epistemology; critiques can also be found among thinkers influenced by hermeneutic traditions, including philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and historian F. R. Ankersmit.[9]

This study does not attempt to revive epistemology in its modern sense; however, I will argue that the conditions associated with late capitalism demand attention to epistemology of a certain kind. If Kearney is correct that capitalism has managed to effect a basic subversion of reality, such that it has become difficult to distinguish between reality and advertisement, then questions about where a person acquires knowledge and how he or she verifies truth become important. Such questions are central foci for the literary texts in this study. Ghosh, for example, explicitly addresses the importance of epistemology, declaring in an interview that "one of the essential topics of my writing is, what is it to know? ... In a world where everything is known, how do you become what is not known, how do you escape the omniscient gaze?"[10] Taking my lead from feminist philosophers Linda Martín Alcoff, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding, I argue that epistemology needs to be revised rather than rejected outright: to address questions of knowledge with respect to subjects who are located in history rather than universalized, whose biases are shaped by both the identities ascribed to them and those they fashion for themselves, and whose inescapable historicity is not only an impediment to but also a precondition of knowledge. Thought of in this way, epistemology – that often belittled field of inquiry – becomes vital to understanding the limits of ideology and the possibilities for experience to be communicated.

I will argue that one of the primary conditions of the post-1960s era is the extent to which the epistemological colonization, to borrow Gaurav Desai's term, of Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America is increasingly the fate of populations in the former colonial centers as well.[11] In contrast to theorists of postmodernism such as Brian McHale, who read postmodern literature in terms of ontology rather than epistemology, I will suggest throughout this study that authors who perceive capitalism to be a hegemonic world order tend to be preoccupied with epistemological issues. To anticipate later claims, the "free play" that is characteristic of the imagination in Western thinking since Kant – and the withdrawal or disengagement from the world of perception or action that it characterizes – becomes a necessary precondition for acquiring more objective knowledge about the world. If ideology involves conditioning the empirical senses to take certain images as more real than others, then the imagination's unique status as a mediator between the senses and cognition makes it crucial to recognition and understanding.[12]

This argument runs counter to the dominant strain of thinking in literary studies, within which the imagination is characterized as possessing minimal epistemological significance except insofar as the critical

analysis of it yields knowledge of the workings of ideology. Since the pioneering work of Jerome McGann, Paul de Man, and others, the imagination has been read as inseparably bound to ideology. As Deborah Elise White more recently put it, "the imagination posits a structure of recognition that authorizes claims of interiority, autonomy, and subjectivity, but it does so in the service of an exteriority, heteronomy, and objectivity that it denies."[13] Implicated for ignoring or mystifying social inequities, the imagination cannot be rehabilitated according to this argument. At best, for Forest Pyle, it can help to identify how ideology conceals dissent and difference in the name of promoting social consensus. "The poetic failure of the imagination," Pyle writes, "like a sort of photographic negative, leaves an image of the 'nontotalizability' of the social."[14] His explicit rejection of Paul Ricoeur's optimistic reading of the imagination suggests that any genuine utopian project requires rejecting all efforts to envision utopia in a direct manner.[15]

Pyle's categorical rejection of the imagination as a "positive faculty" highlights the extent to which critiques of the imagination have been guided by anxieties similar to those that led contemporary Anglophone authors to appropriate it.[16] Both the deconstruction and Frankfurt School Critical Theory that undergird Pyle's argument for the "'nontotalizability' of the social" are themselves responses to the increasingly totalizing grip of capitalism. Emerging out of particular crises in European modernisms, these theories do not provide a neutral, disinterested backdrop against which to evaluate literary texts. Indeed, their guiding philosophical assumptions warrant scrutiny in light of the anti-imperial struggles that emerged across the globe in the decades since their initial formulations. Nontotalizability is an assertion, not a given, though it is often taken as such in Anglo-American academic discourses. Even were it to be true, its implications for utopian thinking are by no means a foregone conclusion. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the novelists in this study are keenly aware of the historical culpability of many utopian fantasies and Western conceptions of the imagination underlying them. What is striking is that authors from so many different cultural, ethnic, and social contexts would perceive the dominance of ideology to require them nonetheless to turn to the imagination as a resource to be critically appropriated and revised.

The argument in *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* does not understand the imagination as a universal and unchanging phenomenon, but as something that is historically produced. From their emergence in the eighteenth century, modern notions of imagination took the forms

that they did in Germany and Great Britain because of contemporaneous developments in modes of production, and the shift toward capitalist forms of industrialization. The idea of an individual, creative imagination could not have emerged without it. Yet the fundamental connection to the economic system it critiques does not inherently mean that the imagination reproduces the ideology of capitalism. Distinct from a notion of fantasy as an escape from reality, distinct from a notion of a creative imagination that depends on partitioning reality and art into distinct and autonomous spheres, and distinct even from a notion of a utopian imagination that constructs an idealized alternative world, the notion of the imagination proposed here understands it to be an epistemological faculty for interpreting reality – a task that is inseparable from the creation of a horizon of expectations that emerges from an individual's social location, cultural identity, and idiosyncratic aspirations.

The definition of imagination as an epistemological faculty for interpreting reality separate from rational reasoning has historical precedents, of course, but rarely has its epistemological significance been tied so directly to the demystification of everyday life. Prior to Kant, the imagination was considered crucial to the production of knowledge to the extent that it plays a mediating role between sensory perception and rational reasoning. Aristotle declares in *De Anima*, for example, that "Imagination is different from both perception and thought; imagination does not occur without perception and without imagination there can be no belief."[17] The imagination is indispensable, in other words, if only as a medium. Kant grants a more significant role to the imagination in the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), arguing that it is "an indispensable function of the soul without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious."[18] Yet Kant's significant diminishment of the power of the imagination in his second, revised edition (1787) represents a signal moment in the modern history of the imagination – a history in which the opposition between reason and imagination tends to limit the purview of imagination to aesthetic appreciation and artistic creativity.[19] This partitioning of the realms of mental experience, which was largely adopted by Western European Romantics, meant that the knowledge purportedly produced by the imagination historically did not concern the specific economic, social, and political conditions of a person's life. As Nigel Leask and many others have shown, Coleridge understood the imagination to provide a model for civil society; however, the model itself emerges from a highly abstract notion of an "organic" synthesis of soul and nature, subject and society, not from a

sense that the imagination enables individuals to interpret the observable features of their world more accurately, as will consistently be the case for the authors in this study.[20]

The definition of the imagination used in this study is not meant to preclude or to minimize the considerable variations in how the word *imagination* is employed by the authors to be examined. Indeed, the variations in how the imagination is characterized in the following chapters provide a key to understanding the distinctive features of various localized responses to an apparently stable world-system. In other words, the differences between J. M. Coetzee's and N. Scott Momaday's conceptions (or even Coetzee's and fellow South African Nadine Gordimer's) illuminate the cultural contexts in which their ideas emerged and the different forms modernity has taken in their lives. And exploring how the imagination has been critically appropriated and translated to the specific situations in which authors write will be a core concern of this study.

While it has long been a truism within literary studies that the cultural institution of the novel endured well after the official end of European colonialism, how postcolonial authors inherited European notions of a creative imagination as the basis for literary production is less well recognized. As Simon Gikandi notes, after World War II, institutions of higher learning in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and elsewhere throughout the British Empire systematized the study of English literature according to the Leavisite model of the "Great Tradition" of English literature.[21] The moral significance of imaginative literature was central to the education of early postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and is apparent throughout their nonfictional writings. Ngũgĩ declares in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that "these great three [Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis] dominated our daily essays" in school.[22] Both Achebe and Ngũgĩ also discuss European Romantics and I. A. Richards, whose *Coleridge on Imagination* (1934) helped to reestablish the category of imagining as a central concern of literary studies. Perhaps Achebe's most famous pronouncement on the imagination occurs in an essay in which he discusses both Richards and Coleridge: "art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence *through his imagination*."[23]

The idea of a creative imagination was crucial to Achebe's project of validating African cultures and traditions as sources of genuine knowledge. His declaration that imagining enables individuals to acquire a "second handle on existence" implies that the conditions of everyday life are not

immediately apparent, and may be obfuscated by what he calls the "malignant fictions" of racism and colonialism (143). To accomplish his oft-cited goal of "teach[ing] my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (45), then, requires readers to engage in a mental activity that would require more than simply interpreting what they read based on their current standpoint, fitting unfamiliar stories and traditions in terms of their pre-existing categories of knowledge. The language of "imaginative sympathy" – and Leavis's insistence on aligning it with "moral discrimination" – provided Achebe with the vocabulary for describing such a process and the rationale for why readers should feel an imperative to engage in it.[24] Achebe characterizes the moral dimension of art in terms of its capacity to elicit "imaginative identification" (144) through which readers develop a vicarious experience of the world through literature.[25] The terminology of imagining is consistently invoked by Achebe when he asks his readers to engage in a hypothetical exercise of viewing the world through an alien standpoint. By reminding his readers of the European tradition of characterizing Africa as its alien other, Achebe not only makes the representation of Africa a central criterion for artistic achievement but also redefines the moral imperative of art: to engage with cultural traditions that have been demeaned and effaced by the colonial system of education. The imagination is invoked, in other words, to resolve problems introduced by European colonialism, which actively sought to attenuate sympathetic identifications with colonized populations. Recognizing that "it is even arguable whether we can truly *know* anything which we have not personally experienced," Achebe argues that the imagination gives us "the closest approximation to experience that we are ever likely to get" (145).

The conception of imagining as a mental activity directed toward sympathetic understanding helps to explain the relative unimportance attributed to it in literary scholarship on Achebe, which has tended to view him as an embodiment of what Abdul R. JanMohamed has called the "generation of realism."[26] According to this argument, African writers during the 1950s and 1960s countered a history of colonialist representations by recourse to a kind of Lukácsean critical realism; as JanMohamed puts it, "they overc[a]me the colonialist 'romance' of Africa by using metropolitan 'realism.'"[27] The opposition between romance and realism presupposes a set of aesthetic dichotomies that devalue imagination as fantasy, opposed to reality. Thus, the preoccupation among literary scholars with realism combined with the tendency toward anthropological readings of