Transatlantic Engagements with the British Eighteenth Century

Pamela J. Albert

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Kelly Hillgrove,
who died on December 26, 2004 during the tsunamis in Sri Lanka.
Linda Albert, my sister I never knew,
who is always watching over me.
My daughter, who is about to be born.

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Introduction

Transatlantic Retrospections

Caleb Deschanel's 1989 film *Crusoe* is a visually stunning revision of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Set in the nineteenth century, Deschanel's Crusoe is a southern aristocrat who sets off from America on a venture to bring slaves from Africa. He is caught in a storm, shipwrecked on an uncharted island and, after some time, he too encounters natives performing a ritual of human sacrifice. Crusoe rescues an intended victim, and nicknames him Lucky because there is no one to sell him to. In an intriguing twist to the classic plot, Lucky is slain during the night and Crusoe finds himself wrestling with the native warrior who evidently did the deed. However, rather than kill Crusoe, the warrior saves him from drowning when they roll into quicksand. From this moment onward the two men struggle to coexist on the island despite their individual prejudices and the language barrier, and a relationship of mutual respect eventually develops between them. When natural scientists on a specimen-collecting mission arrive from "civilization," they capture the warrior and lock him in a cage on their ship anchored offshore. Now, Crusoe must make a choice.

Deschanel's film exemplifies what postcolonial theorists and critics refer to as "writing back" to the empire. The figure of Crusoe is, at least initially, entirely comparable to Defoe's protagonist in that he is a colonist and slave-trader. Moreover, he rationalizes enslaving the natives whom he considers wild "cannibals." Through the filmmaker's vision, the warrior's humanity and the richness of his culture and language are highlighted, and Crusoe's decision in the final moments of the film to help the warrior escape suggests symbolic reparation. Defoe's imperialist narrative is thus seemingly inverted as Deschanel's "white master" returns to "civilization" with a wholly transformed attitude toward race and cultural relations. This kind of analysis implies that all's well that ends well, so to speak, as long as the ending is rewritten.

But assuming that eighteenth-century cultural artifacts and twentieth-century revisions sit neatly on opposite sides of the same political, cultural and social issues overlooks the ways that revisions and sources engage with each other. In this study, I revisit eighteenth-century culture through the lens of what I call *transatlantic retrospections*: creative works by contemporary African and Caribbean writers that engage with, rather than solely contest, the storytelling practices and fictional figures that emerged in eighteenth-century England. While these engagements take different forms, they reveal that writers from once-colonized regions of the globe, despite their political differences, detect similarities between their own aesthetic struggle to represent a "new" world and the aesthetic struggles of eighteenth-century British writers, artists and dramatists, who were similarly confronted, literally and figuratively, with a New World.

Transatlantic retrospections operate on two distinct levels. By adapting textual elements, themes, and fictional figures from historical narratives to represent or allegorize a modern situation, transatlantic retrospections invite awareness that the past is comparable to the present. The preservation of the source work's design and story can be understood as what Lorna Hardwick refers to in *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* as an "enactment of equivalence" between historical and current debates and crises. In this way, transatlantic retrospections draw attention to trans-historical, cross-cultural, and inter-textual correspondences and continuities, and thus they serve to destabilize formulaic and rigid assessments of the distinctions between historical moments and cultures. At the same time, by transforming the generic forms in which eighteenth-century representations of colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade were disseminated, the postcolonization writers whose works I examine assert their difference and distance themselves from their cultural forbears.[1] The genre shift is particularly crucial, as it enables a detached analysis of how the source work is being both adapted and transformed to represent the present, and also functions to expose ambiguities and contradictions in eighteenth-century political thought. Subsequently, transatlantic retrospections provide unique insights into the legacies of western cultural history for the colonized and descendents of the enslaved, and invite reinterpretations of the eighteenth-century cultural artifacts they revise.

I use the term "transatlantic" alongside "retrospections" with caution, as the term "transatlantic" has been associated with a multitude of diverse histories and institutionalized disciplines. As David Armitage explains, the Atlantic and Atlantic world are subjects of study among historians of North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and western

Europe, and encompass economics, politics, sociology, race relations and the early history of globalization. However, in the last decade or so the study of Atlantic history has emerged as a "subfield, or even subdiscipline, within the historical profession" (13). While the study of the Atlantic was at one time an analysis of the relations between North American societies (especially the United States) and Europe, "by means of a common set of pluralistic, democratic, liberal values," today the study of the Atlantic world includes the histories of the slave trade and slavery, the African continent and its diverse peoples, slave rebellions, abolition, and race relations.[2] Armitage subsequently proposes a "threefold typology" of Atlantic history: *Circum*-Atlantic history, the transnational history of the Atlantic world; *Trans*-Atlantic history, the international history of the Atlantic world; and *Cis*-Atlantic history, national or regional history within an Atlantic context.[3] I have opted to use the term "transatlantic" because, as Armitage suggests, "*trans*-Atlantic indicates the history of the Atlantic world told through comparisons." Moreover, it is especially suited to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century histories of the Atlantic world, when state formation went hand-in-hand with empire-state building, and it has most frequently been undertaken "within an imperial framework, often explicitly divided between centers and peripheries" (20).[4] While this study seeks to complicate, rather than reinforce, such paradigms as center and periphery, I nevertheless use "transatlantic" because the term resonates with the histories of the Atlantic Triangle.

While analyses of transatlantic retrospections can be grounded in the historical, social and political realities that inform cultural production, these engagements with eighteenth-century cultural artifacts are "retrospections" because they look back on and contemplate eighteenth-century culture, specifically the period's generic innovations and aesthetic experimentation. By transforming the generic forms of the works they revise, and thus by doing something *literary*, the postcolonization writers who produce transatlantic retrospections remind us that, as much as the eighteenth-century works they engage with contributed to and continue to reflect political agendas, those who produced them were first and foremost involved in the act of literary production. While transatlantic retrospections do reflect knowledge and belief systems inherited via colonial educations and ongoing relations with a metropolitan "center," they are literary creations. Thus even writings that are seemingly invested in or dependent upon "western" history, and even those works that represent the writer's own histories and experiences as well as their socio-political critique, are above all else products of the writer's imagination and creative ingenuity.

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Postcolonial theorists and critics have typically viewed rewrites of classic or canonical works as counter-discourse and embraced them for their politically transformative potential. The origins of this so-called "revisionist project" can be located in the 1950s, when the founders of colonialist discourse, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Dominique O. Mannoni, and Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi published their works in French.[5] These early analyses of the profound psychological effects of the colonial situation on both the colonizer and the colonized spawned such groundbreaking studies as Edward Said and Abdul JanMohamed's inquiries into the processes by which colonizers enforce domination, and the means with which the colonized respond to and resist colonial ideologies.[6] In their influential but controversial study of the literature of the former colonies, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin took Said and JanMohamed one step further by insisting that the term "postcolonial" can be used "to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2), and that "subversive maneuvers . . . are the characteristic features of the post-colonial text" (196).[7]

However, as Patrick Colm Hogan argues in *Empire and Poetic Voice*, the emphasis on resistance does not "adequately represent the multiple and complex relations" of postcolonization authors to either metropolitan or indigenous traditions. For example, "discussions of writing back tend to assume that the indigenous author has a critical intention and this intention actually produces resistance." In actuality, "things do not operate in such a straightforward manner." According to Hogan, "critical and theoretical writing on colonialism and literary tradition tends to suffer from two limitations: first, an overly narrow understanding of the postcolonization author's relation to metropolitan tradition; second, the virtual absence of reference to the postcolonization author's relation to indigenous tradition." While there are "individual exceptions at the level of textual criticism, and occasionally at the level of theory," the "general trend seems indisputable" (19). Hogan responds to this situation by examining—in addition to texts that exemplify resistance—texts that are (perhaps unintentionally) even "more complicit with colonial ideology than the metropolitan works" they write back to, texts that "outdo the paradigms of one's chosen genre," and the ways in which an author "might neither compete with nor simply imitate his/her precursors, but rather continue the trajectory of a generic tradition, extending it along paths suggested, but not followed out, by precursors." Significantly, Hogan's study is founded upon a conviction that "postcolonization authors are, after all, authors with literary interests, ambitions, and sensibilities much the same as those of authors anywhere" and, I would add, anytime (20).

By revisiting the British eighteenth century through the lens of transatlantic retrospections, I endeavor to expose what may seem for scholars who subscribe to such politically motivated theoretical approaches as "writing back" to be a paradox: writers from once-colonized regions of the globe and descendents of slaves are identifying with the same British cultural producers they reintroduce and the same British cultural artifacts they revise. More specifically, transatlantic retrospections reflect their authors' interests in eighteenth century generic developments and aesthetic innovations. Thus transatlantic retrospections can be understood on one level as trans-historical, cross-cultural dialogues enabling the authors to better understand and represent their distinct colonial histories and current encounters with neocolonialism and racism. At the same time they reflect the fact that, like those who produced the works they confront, contemporary writers are experimenting with different modes of representation to articulate and portray their experiences in a world that continues to be traumatized by political conflict and violence.

To identify with eighteenth-century writers and artists, and the cultural artifacts produced in Britain during the heyday of colonialism and slavery, seems like a paradox because it implies that the colonized, oppressed and exploited are aligning themselves with the western culture and vessels of imperial ideologies that served to impose and maintain European hegemony, and therefore to subjugate the colonized. This is not to suggest, however, that transatlantic retrospections are devoid of resistance tactics, such as exposing how the works they confront operate(d) to promote an identity of "Englishness." As Stuart Hall explains in "The Local and the Global," in the eighteenth century there emerged a "strongly centered, highly exclusive and exclusivist form of cultural identity," which placed everybody else in their "otherness," in their "marginality," by the nature of the "all encompassing 'English eye'" (20). Not only were the colonized, enslaved and *everybody else* prohibited from inhabiting this supposedly fixed and stable identity, but those who imagined they inhabited this identity of "Englishness" authorized the transportation, exploitation, enslavement and murder of Africans and native peoples, and the deliberate obliteration of local cultures.

In the mid-twentieth century, there began throughout the world a mass attempt to recover, reconstruct, and promote the local, non-European histories, languages, traditions and identities that had been lost, displaced and destroyed. In "Old and New Identities," Hall proposes that this "enormous act" of "imaginary political re-identification, re-territorialization and re-identification, without which counter-politics could not have been constructed," is how the margins began to speak and how those who had been excluded and marginalized came to represent themselves. Hence the critical approach to writings that emerged from the "margins" or "periphery" as counter-discursive resistance, the analytical focus on how these writings represent silenced or absent histories, and the institutional debates regarding whether these works constitute *authentic* representations of ethnic, national, and racial identities.

But just as categorizing all postcolonization writings under the rubric of "writing back" is a highly misleading act of containment, the implicit assumption in the "writing back" framework—that there is a static British identity or culture that is being *written back to*—is likewise deceptive. As Hall explains in the "The Local and the Global," Englishness "never was and never possibly could be" some stable point of reference "in relation to those societies with which [Britain] was deeply connected, both as a commercial and global political power overseas" (22).[8] Moreover, just as the notion of Englishness as a fixed identity emerged as a consequence of, or in reaction to, what Hall refers to as the "unfolding of global processes" (21), so too did the supposedly stable identities "African" or "black." But the words "African," "black," and "British" all meant different things to different people in different times, and *what it meant to be* African or black or British was something that changed over time and depended on the context. In addition, identities do not exist in isolation. Identities are products of encounters and formulated under gazes, and therefore always subject to negotiation, always unstable and fluid. In their introduction to *Black Experience and the Empire*, Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins similarly contend that "all identities are constructed and therefore highly variable over space and time," and the problem with calling them "identities" is that they are "assumed to be inherently true or authentic, rather than strategic and political." To examine how, in the history of the British empire, particular terms were used by individual subjects and by imperial and metropolitan authorities is to "see that they were never stable, certainly not static in their meanings, and *not necessarily mutually exclusive*" [my emphasis]" (3–4).

Transatlantic retrospections expose that cultural production is a space in which the ongoing processes of multiple yet oftentimes contradictory "identifications"—which constitute the *discursive* formation of identities—are played out. In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Hall claims that "identification" is actually an "articulation," which is "constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal." Identifications can never lead to a "total merging" because there is always "'too much' or 'too little,'" "an over-determination or a lack" (4), and therefore any identification with a person, group, idea or ideal does not eliminate the "difference" between the identifier and who or what they articulate an identification. For example, a postcolonization writer can concurrently identify with local histories and cultures and the western culture that is likewise their inheritance. Moreover, a postcolonization writer can simultaneously identify with and distance themselves from historical and/or fictional figures and texts.

Subsequently, as Carl Plasa asserts in *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism*, "identification—whether white or black—emerges as a complex, highly charged and multi-faceted phenomenon, linking a number of major texts and the violent histories of slavery, colonialism and racial oppression by which they are traversed." But as much as these identifications are "sites of political struggle and friction," they also "constitute spaces" where "psychic and historical realities, the subjective and the ideological, dramatically collide" (8). Identifications ultimately constitute spaces in which notions of corporeal and discursive identities, global and local traditions, aesthetic practices and cultural artifacts, and various forms of representation mingle—harmoniously as well as antagonistically—but never fuse or merge.

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Transatlantic retrospections also illustrate that *as a consequence of* global exploration, conquest and trade, the early modern era witnessed the emergence and transformation of many literary genres. Just as identities are not self-enclosed, the literary genres that we typically associate with eighteenth-century England, and that allegedly came into being as a means to understand distinctly "western" experiences in a rapidly expanding world, do not represent a closed, national culture. In fact, according to Andrew Smith, the "idea of a self-contained national literary tradition seems anomalous, time-bound, and hopelessly nostalgic. Increasingly, cultural products are exposed as hybrid, as tying together influences from many traditions, as existing not so much in a specific place and time but *between* different places at once." Smith further argues that, although the project of postcolonial literary studies begins "with the sense that 'other' places and stories are suddenly visible and vocal in the heart of the metropolis . . . it has also led to the recognition that those 'other' places have been there from the very beginning of the modern Western literary tradition" (245).[9]

In addition to correcting and contesting Eurocentric narratives and misrepresentations of the New World and its peoples, and in addition to using historical (cultural) artifacts to represent local and current conditions and concerns, transatlantic retrospections exemplify the varied and distinct ways African and Caribbean writers engage with and revise eighteenth-century works to reveal that certain genres of British literature cannot be considered hermetically British. In other words, just as imperial, transanational and cross-cultural forces influence *local* cultures and contribute to the production and transformation of cultural forms around the globe, so, too, encounters, exchanges and acts of resistance taking place around the globe during the eighteenth century influenced—even shaped—what we have come to think of as "western" cultural forms. Thus transatlantic retrospections reiterate or serve to illustrate that the circulation of culture has, as Paul Jay points out, "always been multidirectional." In "Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English," Jay argues that literary texts have always been "caught up in the transnational flow of commodities and cultures at least since the rise of [global] trade and colonial expansion," and therefore the "history of global expansion, trade, and intercultural exchange" can—and should—be given "precedence" over nationalist paradigms (43). This is not to suggest that critics should ignore how "literary writings have been theorized and politicized in efforts to define and empower nation-states," nor forgo investigating the asymmetry and inequality of global relations, exchanges and "multidirectional flows."[10] Rather, such an approach calls for a greater appreciation of the historical role literature has had in the "global network of forces—aesthetic, social cultural, economic—that transcend the borders of nation states" (42–43).

Interestingly, the push to globalize English literary histories is a relatively new academic endeavor, but the postcolonization writers who produce transatlantic retrospections have been recognizing and encouraging a global framework for literary history since the mid-twentieth century. Of course, such an approach can only be undertaken by acknowledging that globalization, rather than a contemporary (or postmodern) phenomenon, has been a long historical process. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse explains, because such definitions of globalization as the "*intensification* of worldwide social relations" (Giddens 64) necessarily presume the prior existence of "worldwide social relations," globalization can be thought of as a long-term process that began with the "first migration of peoples and long-distance trade connections, and subsequently accelerates under particular conditions (the spread of technologies, religions, literacy, empires capitalism)" (63). Felicity Nussbaum determines in *The Global Eighteenth Century* that the prehistory of globalization can be located in the eighteenth century, an era when the "increased mobility of commodities and ideas, the unprecedented expansion of global trade, improved navigational techniques, and cultural and racial mixing are of course very germane" (8). Moreover, as Kathleen Wilson points out, in England the "mesmerizing spectacle of Britain's global expansions" fueled British imaginations in ways that "gave it particular salience within domestic politics and culture" (24). Transatlantic retrospections, which likewise recognize a "global" eighteenth century, invite us to chart intersections between global activities and cultural developments in England by exposing correlations between global trade, intercultural contact and exchanges, the rapid commercialization of culture, and an upsurge of aesthetic experimentation in London.

For example when (often inaccurate) images of the New World and its inhabitants initially appeared in early explorers' and merchants' reports, writers and artists in England adopted these images to either represent or conceal relations with those the British were subjugating. By disseminating through their works depictions of "noble savagery," or rather, images against which British readers and audiences could compare themselves, writers and artists perpetuated the maintenance of such stereotypes as "primitive" or "savage." Aphra Behn reportedly visited Surinam in the early 1660s, and her *Oroonoko* (1688) was one of the first extended portrayals of a "noble savage" in print and also, significantly, the first realist prose narrative in English literature. With the publication of Behn's "true history" of a "royal slave," a blurring of fictional and historical "eye-witness" accounts was established as the genre for representing colonialism, slavery and non-European peoples, and a new mode of storytelling came into being. Behn's narrator insists that her story has "enough of Reality to support it . . . without the Addition of Invention. I was myself an Eye-witness to a great part . . . and what I cou'd not be Witness of, I received from the Mouth of the chief Actor in this History, the *Hero* himself" (8). Despite such claims, Behn's portrait of Oroonoko conforms more to the Renaissance conventions of romance and tragedy than the realities of life in the colonies and the slave trade. Nonetheless, the inclusion of such realist narrative tactics enables the brutal treatment of African slaves in Surinam to be both represented *and* suppressed, embellished *as well as* masked.

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