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Review: *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, New York: Routledge, 2017. 238 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-18780-1, h/bk £118.82, p/bk £34.99, e-book £31.49

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Bill Ashcroft's *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2017) urges a critical and contemporary reading given its close and continuous engagement with the philosophy related to utopic thinking and its relevance for postcolonial criticism. The 'Introduction' to the book charts out the history of writing on utopia, which localizes the origins of utopic thought within economic discourse, from Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) to William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1891). The book identifies the particular way in which utopic thought lends itself to prophesizing a better future to providing a narrative of dystopias such that the growth of totalitarian states and their social outcomes are explored and sometimes mitigated within the creative space of the novel. Ashcroft underlines, however, that the utopic vision originating within the 'economic' is still 'clearly derived from cultural difference, something that is perpetuated in cultural productions such as literary texts' (9). The place of production of the material book is, then, conflated with that of the utopic, which is both *eu-topia* (the non-place) and *ou-topia* (the good place). As Ashcroft states, postcolonial utopianism is marked by 'an expansion of the imagination rather than an expansion of territory' (15) in order to counter the effects of imperial possession and destruction of indigenous geography. In the successive chapters, Ashcroft demonstrates how much of our understanding of utopianism and its significance for postcolonial writing depend on accessing writings from spaces and of races that are left out of critical purview: the appreciation for the utopic dwindles with the vanishing spaces of literary representation.

Within the discourse of world literatures, approaches to the signifier of the world helps presuppose the circulatory potential of the texts. Reading utopic thought within postcolonial writings admits the fundamental split in the characterization of a unitary signifier of the world: the world is inherently impossible to inhabit on account of its relativized dimensions and at the same time, beckons for the imagined possibility of possession. In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes that substituting the 'globe' for the 'planet' changes the pattern of 'economic exchange' such that one studies circulation patterns of texts within the 'undifferentiated space of English rather than the differentiated political space' (72).[1] The vision for utopias within postcolonial narratives, as Ashcroft's book reveals, joins together the unattainable totality of a singular world with the precarious production site of the text: the hunt for the utopic and the imaginatively ameliorative is as much a study of the creative energies of language as it is a search for remote places that face uncertain representation in literary writing. As the chapters contend, the search for remote places is joined together with the utopic imagination: both as an effect of the religious motivation behind colonial expansion

[1] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

and as a creative resistance to such political processes. Through an identification of texts embedded in the recesses of history, overrun by the 'linear structure of European history' (15) and those that imaginatively cross the geographical frontiers of governed spaces, the book argues that postcolonial utopianism specifically identifies the location of 'future in memory' (15): a creatively constructed site that challenges stable notions of the nation, the home and their relations to the signifier of the world.

The first chapter, 'Utopia, Travel and Empire' traces the roots of 'utopia' to Thomas More's eponymous text, where the ideal society originates simultaneously with the 'epoch of the world market' (19). It is, therefore, paradoxical to have the notion of paradise—'a vision of static perfection'—enjoined with the idea of the utopic 'organized around communal ownership of property' (24). The chapter argues, through the study of seventeenth-century travel writing, that the romantic vision of a paradise was essential for the European imperial expansion. Reading into texts such as *The Isle of Pines* (1668), a British pamphlet which documents the fantastical manner of populating an island in the 'South Seas' (25), and Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), a romantic view of 'uncomplicated' society in Samoa, the chapter addresses the conflation of the dream of paradise and the desire for communal utopia for directing imperial projects for the reterritorialization of societies. Finally, the chapter reads *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) as literary exercises that locate colonial utopias in the move towards communality and which, nevertheless, assume their own problematic stances with regards to the treatment of the indigenous people and the environment.

Chapter Two, 'Heimat, Anticipation and Postcolonial Literatures' offers a critically invigorating study of the relation between literary creativity and utopia. Ashcroft looks for ways of equating Ernst Bloch's definition of *heimat* as 'a home beyond the nation, a home produced by the creative imagination' (40), theorized in *The Principle of Hope* (1986), with creative writing and its fundamental principle of non-correspondence with reality. From readings of less canonized texts such as Australian poet, Lee Cataldi's lyric 'what lies ahead,' in *The Race Against Time* (1998), and Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho's 'Mythmaker,' in *Harvest of Our Dreams* (1984), to more popular works such as J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974), the chapter argues for reading literary utopias as the 'constant presence of the horizon' (46): the promise of words making way for new words with expressive abandon in poetry and fiction foreshadowing the excess associated with the signifier of the world. With particular focus on the works of Palestinian writers like Mahmoud Darwish, and artists such as Naji El-Ali and Larissa Sansour, the chapter outlines the artistic phenomenon of 'grounded utopias' as adapting and assimilating the voices from the margins of the world, and, thereby,

fusing the project of representation of the world with the anticipation of a home yet to be inhabited.

The third chapter studies the conceptual limits that separate utopia from dystopia and identifies contradictions existing at the interfaces of 'utopias and utopianism,' 'future and memory,' and 'the individual and the collective' (63). Studying Paul Ricoeur's argument about 'utopia's contradictory relationship with ideology' (65), the chapter comments on how utopia is mobilized as 'nowhere' in Ricoeur's essay, 'Ideology, Utopia and Faith' (1976), for critiquing the setting up of the nation state — 'Stalinist Russia, the Third Reich, neo-liberal capitalism' — under pervasive false ideological identifications. The utopianism in Australian Aboriginal novels such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) advances indigenous sentiment and is written from 'within yet beyond the nation' (68), such that it contests Western notions of utopia. The dystopic or the non-utopic is similarly seen in the ways in which memory plants itself in the future as a reworking of the absent past: at its best, it becomes a 'redeployment' (71) of national myths for re-conceiving a future and at its most dystopic, it becomes a negation of the challenges of the present, as seen in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). In addition, the shift from the 'I' to the communal 'We' in the works of Caribbean writer Kamau Braithwaite is seen as challenging the expected spatial dimensions of the Caribbean archipelago, which holds the promise of procreation and the threat of displacement.

Chapter Four is of particular relevance to the study of world literatures in the way in which it brings together the retellings of African history by novelist Ayi Kwai Armah and historian Cheikh Anta Diop, and the spatial configuring of Africa as an 'integrated whole' (86). The case for a 'pharaohnic culture' which heralds a 'world capable of being transformed' (87) re-iterates the argument of Karim Mattar in his chapter in the recent edited volume *Premises and Problems* (2021) where the identification of an 'Islamic republic of letters' (Moreira 85) allows for a shift in the power dynamics related to the circulation of Arabic texts. [2]The chapter considers Ben Okri's criticism of imperial historiography in *Infinite Riches* (1998) as a macabre distortion of the European desire for establishing utopia. The poetry of Kofi Anyidoho and the writings of Ghanaian novelist Kojo Laing, among others, are read as ways of resourcing the 'ahistorical past' (91) of Africa for re-possessing the African present through organic metaphors and what the Gambian poet Tijan Sallah characterizes as the vegetative latticing of past and present: 'memory is roots; dreams are branches' (92).

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[2] Moreira, Luiza Franco. *Premises and Problems: Essays on World Literature and Cinema.* New York: State University of New York Press, 2021.

The fifth chapter, 'Beyond the Nation State,' studies the inadequacy of the category of the nation state in relation to the critical positions of postcolonial utopianism. The chapter argues that African texts written after independence are not only 'beyond national boundaries but also beyond transnationalism' (103), making representations of Afro-Modernity a contestation of existing 'borders between nations' (104): borders that have been instituted through the disinheritance of one collective of people over the other. Interestingly, the chapter contrasts the dream of Africa freed from the 'imagination of Europe' (106) through communal work—'sculptural hands linked together' (107), evidenced in the pre-independence poetry of Aghostino Neto, with the utopic in works of later writers such as the Congolese Kä Mana where the de-alienation of Africans from Western imagination rests on the more spiritual understanding of a 'transformation of the spirit' (106).

The sixth chapter, 'Writing and Re-Writing of India,' states that the representation of an Indian utopia in the movie *Mother India* (1957) offers ways of diversifying the concept of the utopic in India as present in Mohandas Gandhi's ideology in *Hind Swaraj of Indian Home Rule* (1908) and in Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1946). The utopic vision in Gandhi's narrative emerges as a conversation about ethics rather than a foregrounding of rules for governance; and in this regard, it upturns the colonial project of establishing utopias as ideal economic zones. The socialist reinterpretation of 'Indian' values and 'myth of Indian civilization' (120) 'discovered,' not without irony, by Nehru himself in *The Discovery of India,* founds the nation state on 'invented history' (119): a stance very different from Gandhi's enlightened anarchy and envisioned project of 'national self-determination' (121). The modern Indian utopia as presented in the movie is one where the individual succumbs to the collective, and where honour is 'preserved above justice' (120), thereby, paving the way for a nationalism that ultimately condemns utopic ideals. What is utopic in the movie—an affirmation of tradition over disruption—then, reveals itself as the failure of the utopic vision against the exploration of the values of the democratic state in later canonical Indian works such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008).

Chapter Seven, 'Borderland Heterotopia,' studies the 'unbounded space of borderlands' or 'heterotopias' characterized in Chicano writings as repurposing the idea of utopia into sites that have actual political and societal significance for the functioning of everyday life. The works of writers such as Rudolfo Anaya are read as particularized investigations of the ways in which myth and history influence each other in order to conceive of a 'homeland without boundaries' (143). Ashcroft's eighth chapter, 'Archipelago of Dreams,' reads a similar cartographic re-fashioning

of landscapes and seascapes present in the works of Caribbean writers, such as Derek Walcott and Kamau Braithwaite. The chapter reads Edouard Glissant's arguments for the open, stand-alone individuality of the Caribbean islands—'in the Caribbean each island embodies openness' (qtd. in Ashcroft 150)—as driving the quest for the *heimat* or the place beyond home in poems like Walcott's 'The Schooner Flight' (1979). Interestingly, Walcott's search for history through a traversal of oceanic space is transformed in Braithwaite's concept of 'tidalectics' (155), which absorbs the ebb and flow of history into a language that formally and syntactically remains marked by the oceanic currents and its continuing presence in Caribbean lives: 'tidalectic, like our grandmother's—our nana's—action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding ("reading") from the island(s) into perhaps the creative chaos of the(ir) future' (156). Ashcroft's study of the *heimat* and its relation to the utopic then starts to show the way for the study of the *heimlich* or the homey—the sense of familiarity associated with inhabited space—and its connection to utopia as 'jeux d'espaces' (Tally 24), as studied in detail by Robert T. Tally Jr. in *Topophrenia* (2019).[3] Ashcroft's study of the ways in which descriptions of place become untenable within the spatial dimensions of the nation state is further explored by Tally in his book where he argues that both the literary representations of real spaces as well as the mapping of fantastic spaces rely on a consideration of the utopic.

The last two chapters of Ashcroft's book are 'Oceanic Hope' and 'Settler Colony Utopianism,' and they read the impact of the imperial cartographic impulse on the self-imagination of communities, both indigenous and settler establishments, spatially and experientially cut-off from the colonizing countries. 'Oceanic Hope' is particularly sensitive to the ways in which imaginative writing presents a rehabilitation of Oceanic spaces that have been surveyed as 'much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centres of economic growth' (167). In the works of Samoan poet and writer Albert Wendt, Ashcroft identifies a reformulation of Pacific space in keeping with the perception of Oceanic time where 'the past is not separated' from the present, but instead, where the past, present and future spirals 'within time' (172). This spiraling movement of time becomes the reference point for a map which is not an 'outline' of space. Instead, the Oceanic map represents the 'intersection of pathways, the actual connection between all things' (173): an interconnectivity present in the Oceanic concept of '*va* and *va-tapuia*,' designating the connection between 'humans and their environment' (173). Again, of interest, is the way in which Ashcroft perceives

[3] Tally, Robert T., Jr., *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative and the Spatial Imagination*. Indiana UP. 2019.

a rethinking of Christianity—the religious principle behind the establishment of most imperial utopias—within Oceanic spaces such as Fiji, such that the alien religious practice is incorporated into Fijian cosmogony.

Chapter Ten studies ways through which narratives from settler colonies in Australia and New Zealand re-conceptualize the place of exile, both a dystopic site of hardship and a utopic one of 'freedom, hope and possibility' (183). The chapter reads the works of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British settlers in Australia, such as Henry Kendall's 'The Far Future' (1920), as envisioning a national future that is different from the one bequeathed by the imperial project. In a later work, such as Banjo Paterson's 'Song of the Future' (1993), the hunt for the 'beauties of the bush' (187) moves beyond the Christianized concept of 'utopia' to the Israelites search for the 'Promised Land' (187). Of particular significance are the works of David Malouf who writes from the 'Nowhere of an Australia that might have been' (190) in order to make language the very horizon where the utopic possibility and the individual intention meet. The utopic place, then, transforms itself, in Malouf's work, into language's ability to facilitate dwelling between syntactic particularities. As Ashcroft cites, in the beginning of the book, from Malouf's *The Great World* (1990) to characterize *heimat*: 'Beyond never-death into ever after, being/ In love with what is always out of reach [...]/ Word beyond word that breathes through mortal speech' (44). The chapter concludes with a reading of New Zealand writers, specifically Kerri Hulme and Janet Frame, to characterize a new kind of utopianism arising from settler colonies that ruptures the ontological certainties of race and gender. The destabilization of the essentialized categories of 'race' and 'gender' then concurs with the dismantling of the signifier of the 'world' within world literary studies. *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures*' focus on the religious roots of utopic thought makes the planetary/global relations between different national spaces as engendering a consideration of ethics implicit within the study of the circulation and re-circulation of global texts.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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