CHAPTER 31

# Transformation as Resistance

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These two words—resistance and transformation—appear to be antonyms. *Resistance* refers to the application of force to prevent pressure, *transformation* is the process of movement and change. Colonial occupation attempted to transform, develop, or change the colonized culture by a strategy of civilizing violence and the colonial response is usually seen as resistance against that force. We tend to think of transformation as a consequence, something that happens to the subject, but transformation can be dynamic and intentional. It is important to recognize, then, that the term *postcolonial transformation* refers not to the transformation of colonial society by imperial power, but the opposite—the transformation of the discourses and technologies of power by the colonized. Such major discourses as literature, history, the representation of place, and ultimately modernity itself have been transformed by the active intervention of postcolonial artists and writers. This transformative dynamic reconfigures what we understand by "postcolonial resistance."

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A. Nicolaides et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84694-7_31

Resistance has become a much-used word in postcolonial discourse, and indeed, in all discussion of “Third World” politics, invariably connoting the imagery of conflict. This has much to do with the generally violent nature of colonial incursion. But we might well ask whether armed or ideological rebellion, or even active insurgency, is the only possible meaning of resistance, and, more importantly, whether the history of colonial rebellion leaves in its wake a rhetoric of opposition emptied of any capacity for social change. What does it really mean to *resist*? If we think of resistance as any form of defense by which an invader is kept out, then subtle and sometimes even unspoken forms of social and cultural resistance have been much more common. It is these subtle and more widespread forms of resistance, forms of avoidance and evasion that are most interesting because they are most difficult for imperial powers to combat. Undoubtedly the most effective form of resistance has been the transformation of the forces of oppression.

How then did postcolonial resistance develop as a process of transformation? Paradoxically, it began with the British determination to teach English to Indian elites, to create a class of “mimic men.” The founding moment of this move was Lord Macaulay’s Minute to Parliament in 1835. This document, Gauri Viswanathan (1987) tells us, signified the rise to prominence of the Anglicists over the Orientalists in the British administration of India. The Charter Act of 1813, devolving responsibility for Indian education on the colonial administration, led to a struggle between the two approaches, ultimately resolved by Macaulay’s Minute, in which we find stated not just the assumptions of the Anglicists, but the profoundly universalist assumptions of English national culture itself. “We must educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue,” says Macaulay, with breathtaking confidence, that because English “stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west” (1835, pp. 349–350) the advancement of any colonized people could only occur under its auspices, and it was on English literature that the burden of imparting civilized values was to rest. This strategy worked so well as a form of cultural studies because English literature “all but effaced the sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation and class and race oppression behind European world dominance” (Viswanathan, 1987, p. 22). Consequently, English literature became a prominent agent of colonial control, indeed, it can be said that English literary study really began in earnest even in Britain once its function as

a discipline of cultural indoctrination had been established, and its ability to "civilize" the lower classes had thus been triumphantly revealed.

But what the administrators of colonial education could never have anticipated was that the English language and the literature used to inculcate British culture provided the colonized with the tools of resistance. This resistance proceeded subtly as colonized peoples transformed the language into a vehicle of self-representation and wrote their own literature in English to interpolate and transform the edifice of English literature itself. So the very tools the empire used to inculcate the colonized with Western culture were transformed into tools with which the non-European culture was given a global voice.

## Transforming English

The first stage of this strategy was the transformation of the English language into a culturally relevant vehicle. This was achieved by appropriating the language to the grammatical and syntactical forms of the mother tongue, and the best place to do this and disseminate it was literary writing. Such writing became, in effect, an ethnography of the writer's own culture. The simplest of these techniques is the glossing of individual words, such as "he took him into his obi (hut)." But a more common technique is that of including untranslated vernacular words. Refusing to translate words not only registers a sense of cultural distinctiveness but also forces the reader into an active engagement with the vernacular culture. Other forms of linguistic transformation include the development of an "interlanguage" by fusing the linguistic structures of English and mother tongue. But perhaps the most common method of inscribing cultural mobility is the technique of switching between two or more codes, particularly in the literatures of the Caribbean "creole continuum" (See for e.g., Bickerton, 1973; D'Costa, 1983, 1984; Le Page, 1969; Le Page & DeCamp, 1960). The techniques employed by the polydialectical writer include variable orthography to make dialect more accessible, double glossing, and code switching to act as an interweaving interpretative mode, and syntactic fusion. All these are common ways of installing cultural distinctiveness in the writing (See Ashcroft et al., 1989, pp. 39–77).

These strategies open up what may be called a *metonymic gap*—the cultural gap formed when writers (in particular) transform English according to the needs of their source culture (Ashcroft, 2008, p. 174).

Such variations become synecdochic of the writer's culture—the part that stands for the whole—rather than representations of the world, as the colonizing language might. Thus the transformed language "stands for" the colonized culture in a metonymic way, and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a gap between the writer's culture and the colonial culture. Being constructed, this gap is very different from the gaps that might emerge in a translation. The local writer is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in a version of the metropolitan language, and at the same time, to signal and emphasize a difference from it. In effect, the writer is saying "I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share my experience."

When writers transform the English language, then, they are engaged in a political and cultural act, an act that assertively occupies what Homi Bhabha calls the "Third Space of Enunciation." The difference is that this Third Space characterizes language itself. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Caribbean poet and critic, describes local appropriations of English by the term "Nation Language," giving us an excellent insight into the ways in which the character of language, not just the orthography and grammar, can be transformed: "English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English" (Brathwaite, 1984, p. 13).

## Transforming English Literature

The transformation of language was the beginning of this process because English became a medium of literary expression, producing literary works that interpolated the discipline of English literature and effectively transformed it by broadening its reach. Macaulay's Minute shows how deeply English literature is rooted in the cultural relationships established by British imperialism. The ideological function of English was re-confirmed in all postcolonial societies, in very different pedagogic situations. Literature, by definition, excluded local writing. Mathew Arnold's glowingly humanist credo "nothing human is alien to me"[1] only operates by incorporating an extensive array of quite specific exclusions; for you cannot

[1] This is a quote from the Roman poet Terence from the play "Heauton Timorumenos": "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto," or "I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me".

have a Culture that is Ugandan, Australian, or Jamaican. The matter was put succinctly by Edmund Gosse, commenting on Robert Louis Stephenson's return to Samoa: "The fact seems to be that it is very nice to live in Samoa, but not healthy to write there. Within a three-mile radius of Charing Cross is the literary atmosphere, I suspect" (Gosse, 1891, p. 375). This bias assumed the status of an ideology—one that became absorbed by colonial cultural production itself: colonials also often believed that the margin of empire was not the place to write literature.

Postcolonial writers tend to recognize the way in which intellectual endeavor is compromised and contained by State power as it is mediated through intellectual work. Bringing to mind Adorno's thesis of the state production of culture, Edward Said says:

> To a great extent culture, cultural formations, and intellectuals exist by virtue of a very interesting network of relationships with the State's almost absolute power. (1983, p. 169)

This is a set of relationships about which all contemporary left criticism, according to Said, and indeed all literary study, remains stunningly silent.

As Said goes on to point out, even if we want to claim that "culture" as aesthetic production subsists on its own, according to an art-for-art's sake theory, no one is prepared to show how that independence was gained nor, more importantly, how it was maintained.

The postcolonial writer is very attuned to the fact that this work is "occurring at some place at some time in a mapped-out and permissible terrain" (p. 169) because the reality of place, the reality of publishing requirements, markets, form some of the defining conditions of its production, and the ideological containment produces the tension against which it must constantly test itself. However, because "containment" by the State is far from absolute, being negotiated at many levels by an access to and appropriation of global culture, the transformation of English literature by postcolonial writers demonstrates the broader agency of global subjects to interpolate structures of power. The resilience of postcolonial production in its appropriation of imperial forms for local identity construction, is, as we shall see, a model for the local engagement with global culture.

## Transforming History

The transformation of imperial language and literature is a key transformation because it is focused on the critical issue of cultural representation. But postcolonial societies made many other responses to imperial discourse. When we consider the extensive ways in which the West came to control global reality we can see that language and the technologies of writing were instrumental in perpetuating the modes of this dominance. The engagement with geography, history and a wide-ranging array of dominant epistemological discourses demonstrates a remarkable facility in colonized people to use the modes of these discourses against imperial power, transforming them in ways that have been both profound and lasting.

Historiography has been one of the most influential Eurocentric constructions of subjectivity. As Ashis Nandy puts it, "Today the whole world wants to enter History," because "Historical consciousness now owns the globe…Though millions of people continue to stay outside history, millions have, since the days of Marx, dutifully migrated to the empire of history to become its loyal subjects." (1995, p. 46) When colonial societies are historicized they are brought into history, brought into the discourse of "modernity" as a function of imperial control—mapped, named, organized, legislated, inscribed. But at the same time they are kept at History's margins, implanting the joint sense of loss and desire. Being inscribed into History is to be made modern because History and European modernity go hand in hand. History is that which keeps the colonized locked into the embrace of empire with its promise of modernity and nationality (see Chakrabarty, 1992, p. 19).

By interpolating history through literary and other non-empirical texts, postcolonial narratives of historical experience reveal the fundamentally fabricated nature of history itself but more pertinently the different historical experience of the colonized. Postcolonial histories began to give rise to various counter-narratives that took the view of the colonized, but such narratives may also contest the disciplinary boundaries of history as well. Wilson Harris believes that "a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination" (Harris, 1970, pp. 24–5). For Harris such imaginative arts extend beyond the literary to include the discourse of the limbo dance or of vodun, all examples of the creativity of "stratagems available to Caribbean man in the dilemmas of history which surround him" (p. 25).

There are various ways in which the colonized can respond to the imperial function of history: they may acquiesce with its historical narrative; they may interject a different perspective into the discipline of history; they may interpolate history in a way that reveals its assumptions and limitations; or they may offer a different more rhetorical version of history (White, 1982, p. 120). The simplest is *acquiescence*, a characteristic of those colonial histories which ask no questions at all about historical method, and which accede to the idea of colony as an outpost of civilization, an "empirical record" of the movement of civilized values into the wilderness of an "undiscovered wasteland."

But there are a number of transformative responses to historical method, the simplest of which is *interpolation*, in which the basic premises of historical narrative are accepted, but a contrary narrative, which claims to offer a more immediate or "truer" picture of postcolonial life, a record of those experiences omitted from imperial history, is inserted into the historical record. A good example of this is Ayi Kwai Armah who is better known for his earlier novels such as *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), *Fragments* (1970) and *Why are We so Blessed?* (1972)—all deeply pessimistic about the post-independence African regimes. Yet that dystopian view of the present betrayal of Africa by its leaders is closely connected to the utopianism that emerges in his work (1977, 2002, 2006). *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973, 2000) is an example of an allegorical re-writing of African history in which a pluralized communal voice recounts the experiences of his people over a period of one thousand years.

Re-telling the history of slavery as this novel does is one form of historical recuperation, which offers the vision of a different future, but Armah is even more interested in engaging the discourse of western history and he does this by adopting the revisionist history of Cheikh-Anta Diop. Diop's book, *Nations Nègres et Culture* (1974), is a passionate attempt to show that ancient Egyptian civilization was in fact a Black African achievement, and thus to prove that the west owed its enlightenment not to Greece but to Africa. The concept of Pharaohnic Africa was taken up wholeheartedly by Armah in *KMT* (2002, pronounced "Kemet") and *Osiris Rising* (1995, 2008), extending his re-imagining of African history into a vision of the subversive and politically repressed reality of African Egypt in African culture. This method is fundamentally a political contestation of European imperial power. But it is one that works through, in

the interstices of, in the fringes of rather than in simple opposition to history.

Where at least one of Armah's purposes was to interpolate world history with a narrative of the pharaohnic past, Ben Okri manages, in the Famished Road trilogy (1991, 1998), to achieve the sense of a different kind of history in the language itself, as well as his narrative. His representation of a fantastically expanded world of experience conceives the rich horizon of African reality, an *imaginaire* that constantly resists the temptation of the Western reader to appropriate it into a familiar landscape. Thus, Okri does in narrative what many examples of transformed language do in postcolonial writing—communicating and resisting at the same time. This leads to a language that overlaps magical realism, a language of excess and accretion, a layering of experience in which the border between the real and spirit world is dissolved.

## Transforming Colonial Space

There is a growing perception among human geographers that space is not "simply there" but is the product of social actors: "space, and by implication scale, are both material and discursive categories that are 'constructed' or 'produced' by social processes and the intervention of human agents" (Sheppard & McMaster, 2004, p. 15). These social processes are also critical in the production of place. The issues surrounding the concept of place: how it is conceived, how it differs from space or location, how it enters into and produces cultural consciousness, how it becomes the horizon of identity, are some of the most difficult and debated in postcolonial experience. Where is one's place? What happens to the concept of "home" when home is colonized, when the very ways of conceiving home, of talking about it, writing about it, remembering it, begin to occur through the medium of the colonizer's way of seeing the world? The Eurocentric control of space, through its ocularcentrism, its cartography, its development of perspective, its modes of surveillance, and above all, through its language, has been one of the most difficult forms of cultural control faced by postcolonial societies. Resistance to dominant assumptions about spatial location and the identity of place has occurred most generally in the way in which such space has been inhabited.

The Western construction of global space has become a given for contemporary representations of place and remains the inevitable context in which those local representations must occur. In effect, the discourse

of place operates within the same set of power relations that affect other forms of postcolonial transformation, and indeed, becomes one of their most contested sites. The Mercator Atlas was a key instrument in that re-organization of space and time, which characterized the great historical and discursive shift of European modernity. The most far-reaching impact of this re-organization upon colonized societies was the severance of the traditional links between time, space, and place within modern consciousness. This is not only because many pre-colonial societies were categorized as "pre-modern," and have therefore experienced very great social and cultural disruptions through colonization, but because all postcolonial societies, indeed all societies today, are subject to global representations of time and space, which have little reference to locality. A radical disruption of the experience of place was also made by the colonial imposition of the concept of private property, which in Australia for instance, saw one's place as that which was bordered and fenced sealed off from the "Absolute Dark" of Aboriginal country (Malouf, 1993).

What becomes apparent in postcolonial artists and writers is that place is much more than the land. The theory of place does not propose a simple separation between the place named and described in language, and some "real" place inaccessible to it, but rather indicates that in some sense place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process. Place is never simply location, nor is it static, a cultural memory which colonization buries. For, like culture itself, place is in a continual and dynamic state of formation, a process intimately bound up with the culture and the identity of its inhabitants. Above all place, like space, is a result of habitation, a consequence of the ways in which people inhabit space, particularly that conception of space as universal and uncontestable that is constructed for them by imperial discourse. The transformation of imperial conceptions of place, and of imperial technologies of spatial representation, has often occurred successfully through imaginative acts of resistance in the creative representations of place. Such place forms itself out of the densely woven web of language, memory, and cultural practice and keeps being formed by the process of living.

### *Perspective*

While there are far more aspects to the perception and representation of space than can be addressed here, the prominence of perspective in Western seeing offers a strategic reference point. The "discovery"

of perspective during the Renaissance, the invention of the perspectival method, was a huge and crucial shift in European spatial perception, and became so embedded and naturalized that visual perspective became the only and "true" way to see. This construction of the method of perspectival perception offers a clear example of the development of a discourse. That which we take for granted today as the way the world really is visual, is the result of a highly codified method that grew out of Renaissance theories about the separation of the individual subject from the world. The discourse of space is one which we enter as we enter ideology. So complete is the success of the perspectival method that this is the way we (westerners, and increasingly, all cultures) understand what the world looks like.

The perspectival concept of space, the sense of static extension and the isolation of the viewer from the scene, the separation of subject and object, are all characteristic of European painters' views of colonial space. In most cases, colonial painters find in the open spaces of many of the colonized places, a spatial extension, a horizon of uninhabited land, which provides a ready opportunity to impose the priority of perspective, indeed the priority of visual space itself over any other indigenous modes of spatial perception. But the view of space in many colonized cultures hinges of the presence of the subject in the scene, a reversal of the principle of perspective. For instance, in Aboriginal societies, place is traditionally not a visual construct at all in the perspectival tradition, neither a measurable space nor even a topographical system but a tangible location of one's own dreaming, an extension of one's own being.

The most strategic place to transform the dominance of perspective was in art. Perspective was invented in Renaissance art. It is in art that the transformation of colonial space occurs, and Aboriginal art offers an important model for the transformation of the perspectival view. This art is metonymic and symbolic rather than representational in function, and deeply implicated in the performance of religious obligations. Animal and abstract forms are drawn for their sacred significance because, like oral language, they embody rather than represent the power of the things they signify. The Aboriginal paints on things and on the body itself, rather than paint the perception of things because the individual's art is an activity that expresses the community's participation in this power. Sometimes paintings may seem to follow the principles of a map but the elements are organized in terms of ritual power and inhering relationships rather than in terms of spatial extension. On the other hand, the art of the White

settlers in Australia appears to be obsessed with landscape, and especially with the task of inventing the spatial representation of a landscape as a way of "indigenizing" place. Such passion for the visual space, with its Gothic overtones of vastness and hostility, is evident in the literature as well, but it is in the landscape that we find the most striking visual metaphor for a sense of cultural uniqueness which the settler society constructs as a sign of its distinctiveness from imperial culture.

The Aboriginal has no need to paint the landscape in traditional artistic activity because the land as a visual space is nameless. What matters are those named features into which the Dreaming ancestors metamorphosed when they completed their travels on the nameless plane of the original universe. By relationship with these beings the land is a function of the Aboriginal's own being, an embodiment which is expressed in art, and in dance. As Galarrwuy Yunipingu says:

> When aboriginal people get together we put the land into action. When I perform, the land is within me, and I am the only one who can move, land doesn't, so I represent the land when I dance. (Yunipingu, 1980. pp. 13–14)

The idea of not owning the land but in some sense being owned by it, is a way of seeing the world that is so different from the materiality and commodification of imperial discourse, that effective protection of one's place is radically disabled when that new system—perspectival vision—becomes the dominant one as European spatial representations are inscribed upon the palimpsest of place. Aboriginal art offers a different way of seeing that has made a global impact.

## Transforming Modernity

Perhaps the most profound postcolonial transformation has been that of modernity itself, or more specifically, our growing recognition of the multiplicity of modernity. This transformation occurred in three ways: the role of Indigenous art in the emergence of European modernism; the appropriation and transformation of Western modernity through creative adaptation; and the emergence of non-Western, and particularly Indigenous modernities through the engagement with imperial power.

### *The Origins of Modernism*

The story begins with the pivotal role of the artworks of the colonized in the emergence of European modernism. The discovery of cultures whose aesthetic practices and cultural models were radically disruptive of the prevailing European assumptions forced Europeans to realize that their culture was only one among a plurality of alternative ways of conceiving of reality and organizing its representations in art and social practice. Central to this realization was the encounter with African culture after the scramble for Africa in the 1880s and 90 s. An alternative view of the world emerged from the collection of African masks, carvings, and jewelry that were seized and expatriated to Europe and generally stored away in the basements of the new museums of ethnology and anthropology. When placed on display in the early decades of the next century, the art was to inspire the modernists and encourage them in their attempts to create the images of an alternative and radically "unrealistic" art. Universalist claims of taste and function for art were subverted as these alternative cultural artifacts transformed contemporary art. The colonial inspiration of European modernism transformed European modernity in a specific and strategic case, one that began to show the transcultural effects of colonial occupation.

### *Creative Adaptation*

In many cases the transformation of modernity followed the pattern of the transformation of language and literature, which can be taken as a metonym for the creative adaptation of Western modernity. A common assumption is that European modernity swept over the world like a wave. Achille Mbembe claims that colonization and the modern went hand in hand: "Like Islam and Christianity, colonization is a universalizing project. Its ultimate aim is to inscribe the colonized in the space of modernity" (Mbembe, 2002, p. 634). But if colonization was a universalizing project, did it succeed? Did it "inscribe" the colonized in the space of modernity, and if so was that a "wave-like" engulfment, a cultural disorientation, or did the colonized take hold of the pen and inscribe themselves in that space in a curious act of defiance modeled by postcolonial writers?

Despite the ambivalence toward both colonial culture and its literature, transformation was a particularly enterprising form of resistance that

utilized the technologies of European modernity without being engulfed by them. Postcolonial literature therefore stands as a metonym for the creative adaptation of non-Western modernities: they are a specific practice, an enterprise engaged by agents who locate themselves in a discourse in a resistant, counter-discursive way through the transformation of dominant technologies. They are a specific example of how individual subjects could "change the world that is changing them" (Berman, 1982, p. 16). This doesn't mean that they act independently of the forces acting upon them, but they act. Whereas *developmen*t—the acultural theory of modernization—acts to force the local into globally normative patterns, *transformation* shows that those patterns are adjusted to and by the requirements of local values and needs. Subsequently, the features of these alternative modernities may be re-circulated globally in various ways.

### *Indigenous Modernities*

Perhaps the most significant transformation of our understanding of modernity has been the growing recognition of the development of non-Western modernities quite distinct from the direct influence of the West. This is not so much a transformation of modernity as a transformation of our understanding of the diversity of modernity. In many cases, the originating moment in non-Western modernities was coeval with that of the West rather than inherited. This was not limited to Indigenous peoples but to the entire non-European world. David Carter argues, for instance, that one cannot "speak simply of the arrival of modernism in Australia." The Australian reactions are not made directly to such modernists as Eliot, Joyce, Picasso, or Freud, but they are "multiple artistic, intellectual and political responses to communist revolution, world war, economic depression and the threat of fascism" (1984, p. 160).

In many cases the colonized saw colonial invasion as a process of creating a binary between primitive and modern and Indigenous societies regularly produced their own modernities as reactions to rather than copies of the imperial arm of European modernity. The flourishing of Indigenous art is one example of the emergence of modernity as the product of cultural tension. Stephen Muecke suggests that.

> This modernity is quite distinct from European modernisation processes since it developed its own forms, later including modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. (Muecke, 2004, p. 155)

As Pamela Scully points out, "like modernity, indigeneity was and is as much about self-representation and self-presentation as about lineage or parentage or place. (Scully, 2012, p. 591). Far from being merely "primitives" Indigenous people have crafted versions of their own indigeneity in a system of representational transformation. The character of Indigenous modernity lies precisely in this capacity for engagement and transformation.

The "Indigenous modern" may seem to be an oxymoron, but it is a phrase that should be as acceptable as "modern Australian." We take the Indigenous modern as an inclusive category of the contemporaneous, and hence as part of an argument for implementing fully serviced and responsibility-bearing citizenship for Aboriginal people. How can one be seen to be a fully participating citizen if one is deemed to be either from a radically incommensurable traditional culture, or a perpetually disadvantaged urban one? At the very simplest, being modern means having a range of inventive responses to the contemporary world (p. 158).

The identification of Indigenous modernities transforms modernity in particular ways: it contests the assumption that European modernity engulfed the world like a wave; it refutes the myth of "belatedness" which sees "traditional" or "pre-modern" societies "catching up" with the West in a process of delayed influence; it refutes the idea that European modernity is global, inevitable and unavoidable; it refutes the "acultural" theory of modernity that sees it severed from culture, place and time; and it refutes the idea that there is only one modernity, despite the undoubted colonizing power of capitalism.

## Conclusion

The message of postcolonial engagements with imperial power is that transformation can be a consequence of concerted political action. Whereas the discourse of development has acted to transform the non-Western world, that world has shown, through the example of postcolonial creative producers, that power and its technologies can be transformed by active political engagement. This is more than decolonization. By transforming the technologies of power—language, literature, and history, conceptions of space and place, and ultimately modernity itself—postcolonial writers have begun to transform the landscape of power.

Such action stands as a model for the power of dominated and oppressed classes on a global scale. The range of strategies, the tenacity, and the practical assertiveness of the apparently powerless are striking. When we project our analysis onto a global screen we find that the capacity, the agency, the inventiveness of postcolonial transformation helps us to explain something about the ways in which local communities resist absorption and transform global culture itself. In the end the transformative energy of postcolonial societies, tells us about the present because it is overwhelmingly concerned with the future.

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