

Reflections on Edward Said: A Caribbean Perspective

MELANIE NEWTON

In *Culture and Imperialism*—the work which, of all of Edward Said’s writings, resonated most with me, and, I think, with many scholars of and from the Caribbean—Said did for the British novel what Trinidadian scholar and prime minister Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* did a generation before for slave emancipation. Said took what were previously dismissed as merely peripheral, passing references to the empire “out there,” comments carelessly “thrown away” and forgotten, and showed how central they in fact were to the stories being told. Said represented more than just the empire “writing back.” His was a voice writing through and beyond the master narratives of empire, refusing the binary oppositions between empire and metropole, “them” and “us,” “familiar” and “unfamiliar” which have been so important to colonial expansion and which still informs so much of our academic inquiry.

Beneath the carefully considered prose, the humorous language and the kindness of Said’s writings—a kindness frequently not replicated and usually unacknowledged in the writings of his detractors—is a sense of urgency, which also animates the writings of so many writers and artists from the Caribbean, who are or were public intellectuals like Said. In common with Said, many of these intellectuals have found that the history of the Caribbean does not permit them the illusion that the beauty of art can ever be disconnected from its wider historical context. Through their works these intellectuals have both helped and forced their audiences to face the fact that artistic forms, like the novel, are inextricably bound up with colonialism, and will always recall histories and legacies of exploitation, persistent inequalities and enslavement. It is no accident that the novel—perhaps the most imperially imbricated of all forms of artistic expression—became one of the principal sites for the articulation of a language of decolonization in the twentieth century Caribbean.

Said’s writings are peppered with references to Caribbean thinkers and public intellectuals who were writing in exile of various kinds. His writings on Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney reflect the empathy of a fellow traveler who shared a consciousness of himself as *in* but not *of* this messy array of institutions which make up the “West.” Like Fanon, James, or Rodney, Said did more than simply provide a

voice for the dispossessed—already a noble thing—or serve as the intellectual face of anti-colonial nationalism. He was able to occupy a difficult space of ambivalence, a position “out of place”, which could not be satisfied with easy recourse to identitarian politics. This gift of living creatively with the ambivalence of the perpetual insider/outsider speaks powerfully to the experience of many Caribbean intellectuals who have come to terms, in the words of the Barbadian novelist George Lamming, with the “pleasures of exile.” It is a rare ability, but one which is essential to any vision of a just and genuinely postcolonial world.

Said brought to his analysis a determination to recognise the imperialist assumptions, the “throw-away” references to empire which so shaped the world view of, for example, Jane Austen and William Thackeray, while still retaining the ability to admire their beauty. Even as Said laid bare the imperialist assumptions that informed the English literary canon, taking it apart and rebuilding it with empire and slavery at its heart, he also laid claim to the British novel as *his*. Like C.L.R. James, who probably knew every word of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* by heart, Said could confront and accept his own uncomfortable sense of simultaneous familiarity and unbelonging in this imperial vision, and still claim such texts, in all their ambivalence, as part of himself. I was touched by his ability to see, for example, the genius of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and yet also critique the fact that Conrad could afford—despite his trenchant critique of European imperialism in Africa—to paint a picture of Africa which closed off the possibility of alternative visions either of Africans or of the encounter between Africans and Europeans.

This ability to see beauty in all its tarnished forms, to understand that we should not run from that beauty even as we expose and condemn the assumptions on which it was based, was perhaps one of Said’s most important legacies. He understood that beauty is not to be found in the absence or suppression of historical pain but in the act of creation, recognition, naming and refusing to “throw away”. Perhaps what moves me most about Said’s writings, his life and his passing was this generosity of spirit, this capacity to marvel, whether through literature, music, or academic scholarship, at the beauty of the mess that we have made of the world.