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## A Poetics of Relations: The Multiple Returns of Caribbean Literary Studies

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In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said invokes T. S. Eliot's claim that no writer writes "merely with his own generation in his bones." Nor, Said adds, is there any "just way the past can be quarantined from the present" (4). I found the truth of both aphorisms when, as a student in India, I was first introduced (in what was then called a Commonwealth Literature course) to the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, V. S. Naipaul, and particularly George Lamming, whose novels formed the subject of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin years later. Until then a dutiful devotee of the English canon and a self-confessed anglophile, I was ideologically reconstituted by the penetrating analyses of colonial education and the distasteful history of the British empire that these writers revealed. I became more aware of "resistance culture," the continuous albeit misrepresented struggle of the colonized to gain self-determination, if not outright independence, through centuries of colonialism.

Said cites the trope of Caliban, agreeing with Lamming that the process by which Caliban moves from a state of exploited existence to a condition of developing possibility charts the typical course of decolonization (I will raise the exclusions in this understanding of the "typical" later). Like Ngũgĩ in *Decolonising the Mind*, Said gives tremendous importance not simply to the physical arena--the political events and historic revolts on the ground--but to culture at large, to narrative fiction in battling for and achieving what Lamming would call the "sovereignty of the imagination." If I cite several figures here, it is to emphasize Said's notion of "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories," and to confirm the significance of creative fiction and non-fiction conversing across borders, the transfiguring power of the shared literary imagination in the poetics and politics of decolonization.

While I enjoyed Enid Blyton and revered T. S. Eliot in India like almost every other English-language student in (post)colonial territories, the fortuitous consequence of empire was the eventual learning trajectory through Lamming and others from different hemispheres. Said was indeed right in claiming that empire, with all its vicious depredations, also forged new communities across the world as texts and theories migrated along with bodies in its chaotic vortex. The writers I mention helped me more fully comprehend a shared colonial history, despite differences in background, geography, era, gender, race, and even experience of empire. Ngũgĩ himself acknowledged coming to a political understanding of his writerly vocation through his study of Lamming, an inspiration he expands to other West Indian writers of the fifties' generation that he was exposed to during his graduate studies at Leeds.

Given these ripples of expanding radical impact in and beyond the heart of the colonial metropolis, and their invaluable contribution to a broader postcolonial sense of historicity, it seems ironic that Caribbean writers would spend so much time debating the region's involvement with history, a relationship that Edward

Baugh famously referred to as a quarrel. Even as the fraught nature of the debate was reinforced by Naipaul, a writer of Indian heritage from Trinidad, his exposition of colonial mimicry influenced the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories of Homi Bhabha, whose trajectory from India to the UK and then to the United States replicates the transnational migrations of a number of postcolonial subjects. While postcolonial theory brought a sharper edge to Commonwealth literature, along with additional perspectives and a cross-cultural lens to debates in Caribbean studies, its metropolitan origins in the academy, the problematic erasure of the Indigenous peoples in the New World in teleological schemes of post-coloniality, and the relative lack of visibility of the Caribbean in this field continue to pose challenges. Nevertheless, it is my hope that South-South dialogues will develop further as the current shifts in global power alter conventional postcolonial paradigms.

Édouard Glissant's extraordinarily fertile figuration of entangled rhizomes that sprout from bloodied landscapes of plantation cultures perhaps best captures this sense of a sprawling family tree through which Caribbean regions, as well as other parts of the colonial and postcolonial world not strictly tied to slavery and servitude, would continue to intersect, even procreate, with each other. My illumination through the discourses that crisscrossed temporalities, spaces, and nationalities thus affirms Wilson Harris's sense of the void as not simply a soundless, dark vacuum but also an evolved, enlightening, and enigmatic space of being and becoming. In some ways, as Harris implies, our very ruins bore the fruits of our historical experience and wisdom, and these were not always bitter. This does not mean that, to extend Baugh's metaphor, there were no family quarrels. Naipaul's controversial status in the Caribbean as prodigal son signals deeper rifts than political differences with his illiberalism. Recent work that allows him a complex, if ambivalent, status reflects a more self-critical turn in both Caribbean and postcolonial theories, where the radical legacies of the anti-colonial era, the blind spots of inter-ethnic conflict and racialized loyalties, the indeterminate status of insiders and outsiders, who stayed and who left, who belongs and who does not, who has the right to critique and in what way etc., are contemplated with some skepticism.

Any melancholy induced by such an exercise does not survive the humorous perspectives and the wry auto-critique of writers like Louise Bennett, Willi Chen, Junot Díaz, Andrea Levy, Samuel Selvon, Zadie Smith, and even the early Naipaul. I was inspired in the final chapter of my book, *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours*, to conceive of Caribbean humor as a unique phenomenon, shared by other contexts of trauma but with its distinct stamp. Derek Walcott may have been right in portentously calling history the "Medusa of the New World" (36), but it is still a Medusa who laughs, as Zadie Smith more irreverently puts it, at the "palaver over nuffin'." Irie's parodic family tree key:

“&=copulated with;” “%=paternity unsure;” “?=child’s name unknown;” “G=brought up by grandmother”(281), the debate over the Indian 1857 revolt, and the affectionate undercutting of the heroized Mangal Pandey and his supposed descendant Samad in *White Teeth*, all display Smith’s roguish amusement at the pompous but incomplete tabulation of colonial history, and her sense of the intersections between Indian and Caribbean genealogies. In this good-humored quarrel with history, Smith mockingly overlays the unreliable palimpsests of colonial documentation, and through such distortions, she paradoxically reveals an obscured but legitimate history. The tragedy that underlies the humor is made more apparent in the family tree of Lawrence Scott’s *Witchbroom*: “Records lost due to shortage of paper and ink;” “Records lost in the Diaspora.” Or as in Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon*: “”The one unrecalled[/]b. 1841,” “”The ones left in the sea b. 1846, 1849, 1850.”

The unstable and incomplete family trees of Caribbean genomic and literary histories contained other voids and omissions. While breaking silence and restoring visibility are the tropes by which Maryse Condé began her excavation of Tituba’s forgotten archive--“I can look for my story among those of the witches of Salem, but it isn’t there”--(149), Caribbean literature continues to exhume the muted voices of different ethnicities and sexualities, the history of violence and abuse (against women, for instance) that is not only colonial and racist, the different migratory populations, and the ancestral cultures that they brought with them. Perhaps the most promising new directions in the field would include some sense of greater balance between the region and its diasporas, a more equitable exchange of intellectual material and resources, a more prominent status for writing from within the Caribbean, and for more genres when constructing class syllabi and undertaking graduate and postdoctoral research. The recent digitalization of archival records and out of print publications, and the republication of older material for a younger audience help us more scrupulously trace the development of Caribbean literature.

I began advanced doctoral work in the United States in the nineties, when the fuss over cultural studies in the mainstream literary academy had barely died down. I could only be grateful that, far from rejecting such fusion, Caribbean literature invites an interdisciplinary and cultural studies approach. The scribal, the performative, the musical, and the spoken; the social sciences and the humanities; the canon (whether metropolitan or Caribbean) and popular culture; the archival and the contemporary--all these provide companionable gateways into the literary terrain despite the occasional blockades between them. The field is not just an academic cornucopia; it is rewardingly teachable. Whatever Walcott’s (and Baugh’s) sense of wrestling with history, as with Jacob’s biblical struggle, Caribbean writers have refused to let go without also gaining the angel’s benediction. It is to their merit that we may consider ourselves so blessed.

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