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The Literary Presence of Atlantic Colonialism as Notation and Counterpoint

Abstract: In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said demonstrates how many of the classical literary texts of Europe wrestle with the historical realities of colonialism and imperialism. The two analytical tropes he uses for discussing this ‘ornate absence’ (Morrison) of empire in the European novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century – the concepts of “geographical notation” and “counterpoint” – are both taken from the analysis of music. This essay seeks to adapt Said’s analytical figures to the analysis of nineteenth century American literature’s disarticulation of the nation’s residual involvement in the slave-based Atlantic economy and the links between America’s colonial (Atlantic) and imperial (continental, Pacific) activities. It argues that the geographical and meteorological notations of American texts differ from those of British novels because of the general foregrounding of spatial aspects in the early literature of the United States. Due to the vast and inherently diverse nature of American territorial engagement in the years before the Civil War (both at land and sea), American literature’s historical and geographical notations can at times be seen to include strategies of topographical displacement which endow it with an almost ‘contrapuntal’ quality.

Imperialism’s culture was not invisible, nor did it conceal its worldly affiliations and interests. There is a sufficient clarity in the culture’s major lines for us to remark the often scrupulous notations recorded there, and also to remark how they have not been paid much attention. Why they are now of such interest [...] derives less from a kind of retrospective vindictiveness than from a fortified need for links and connections. One of imperialism’s achievements was to bring the world closer together and, although in the process the separation between Europeans and natives was an insidious and fundamentally unjust one, most of us should now regard the historical experience of empire as a common one. The task then is to describe it as pertaining to Indians and Britishers, Algerians and French, Westerners and Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and Australians despite the horrors, the bloodshed, and the vengeful bitterness.

Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

This essay wants to assess two of Edward Said’s critical concepts – in particular his notions of “counterpoint” and “geographical notation” – which he developed in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), with the purpose of testing their adaptability to the study of the ‘oceanic’ context of antebellum American literature. Written almost exactly a year after his death, it would be foolish to deny that the present text is also an attempt to pay homage to the work of an exceptional critic whose
comments on modern Western empires and their cultural ramifications have accompanied me throughout my academic life – without whose intellectual courage, critical spirit and moral honesty the critical production of a whole generation of scholars, including my own, would be unthinkable. Although he opposed the idea of forming academic schools of thought and was suspicious of the intellectual ‘cults’ that his own work helped produce, it is important in my view to regard Said’s work on literature and empire as part of a larger movement toward the pluralization of literary canons and a growing awareness for the historical and geographical connections of texts and cultures. Ten years ago these facts were less widely accepted than today, and *Culture and Imperialism* aimed at, and greatly contributed to, a broader dissemination of these ideas formerly discussed in more or less discrete academic circles. This general orientation of his book toward a wider educated and liberal audience has to be borne in mind when discussing its theoretical impact.¹ As the above quote testifies quite clearly, Said combines the analytical tools he inherited from critics like Raymond Williams, Georg Lukács, and Antonio Gramsci – tools which enable him to read the classic texts of Western literature against their silencing of the imperial ‘margins’ – with a conciliatory gesture, an appeal for respecting equally the two sides of the former colonial divide for the benefit of a shared future in a globalized world. The metaphorical expression which Said finds for this vision of reconciliation – the “fortified need” he sees “for links and connections” – is that of the “counterpoint,” a complex ensemble of voices in which harmony is reached only by giving full expression to each individual voice. With its choice of the musical figure of counterpoint as its leading critical concept, *Culture and Imperialism* lacks the confrontational tone of much of Said’s earlier writing, especially *Orientalism* (1978).²

Written under the – as he saw it later, slightly irrational – expectation of impending death (Said 2001a, 190), *Culture and Imperialism* itself deploys a somewhat repetitive and circular structure. It moves from a territorial or geographical view of the “intertwined histories” of colonialism, to the “consolidated vision” of major Western texts articulating an involvement with the colonies, to “resistance and opposition,” predominantly an assessment of the counter-imperial work of Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, and other writers and critics from the former colonies, to a final vision of “freedom from domination,” even under the immediate impact of the eruption of a new kind of American imperialism during the first Iraq War of 1991. This progression of themes takes the reader from critical interventions into predominantly monological and homogenous

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¹ As Said specifies in an interview, *Culture and Imperialism* is directed at a general readership (Said 2001a, 196).
² Said states his move from the more combative style of his earlier work to the reconciliatory style of *Culture and Imperialism* in Said 2001a, 202-3. In the same interview he associates his desire for developing a “model of reconciliation” with his use of a “contrapuntal” approach to literary analysis. The contrapuntal approach, he writes, enables the critic to “reconcile the history of the colonized and the history of the colonizer without an attempt to ‘be impartial,’ because there’s always the question of justice” (204).
views of world history and literature, through a myriad of major and minor historical figures raising their voices in an ever more complex colonial and post-colonial chorus, to a final evocation of exile and migrancy as those experiences best suited for developing the kind of critical consciousness necessary to encounter the challenges of the globalized world. Indeed, if this immense chorus of voices were viewed in contrapuntal terms, Said’s book would comply less to the very strict and spare form of a Bach fugue than the enormous orchestras and operas of the mid- to late nineteenth century (some of which he, of course, discusses).

On the pages to follow, I want to explore some of the implications of Said’s concept of the counterpoint and its practical equivalent, contrapuntal reading, as well as his concept of geographical notation. Both, I believe, can be made fruitful for an analysis of early American literature, which uses similar ways of disarticulating the economic and political significance of the slave-based Atlantic as the texts British presented by Said. In addition to the imperial dimensions of American history in the first half of the nineteenth century, I am interested in the frequently underestimated involvement of American citizens, ships and capital in the circum-Atlantic colonial economy. This involvement, which gradually went underground because of the abolition of slavery in the British colonies and the subsequent declaration of the slave trade as piracy, took place as the United States was actively employed in the expansion of its continental empire, as well as preparing its growth beyond the continental confines into the Pacific. Due to the vast and inherently diverse nature of American territorial engagement in the years before the Civil War, American literature’s historical and geographical notations can be seen to include strategies of topographical displacement. These, I argue, are a fictional response to the ideological pressure of generating a national narrative, thereby disarticulating the actual links between America’s colonial (Atlantic) and imperial (continental, Pacific) activities.

1. Geographical Notation

Said exemplifies the two concepts under discussion here – counterpoint and geographical notation – with a reading of Jane Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park* (1814). Claiming that literary interpretation of the novel as a genre has been predominantly preoccupied with the notion of temporality, he underlines the necessity of giving equal attention to the characters’ movements in space, to the geographical dimensions of plot. He reads *Mansfield Park* as a novel delineating various dislocations and relocations in space, with the manor house of the Bertram family occupying the “centre of an arc of interests and concerns spanning the hemisphere, two major seas, and four continents” (Said 1993, 101). More precisely, the novel makes it clear that the rural estate in England, which serves as the setting for the social rise of the heroine, is economically tied to an unnar-

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3 An extended version of this argument, as well as my comments on early American novels, can be found in Mackenthun 2004.
ratified colonial plantation in Antigua, which the absentee owner Sir Thomas Bertram travels to in order to set his finances in order. Something is amiss at Antigua—considering the time of setting, Said assumes that the plantation is suffering from “economic depression, slavery and competition with France” (103). Brian Southam supplements Said’s reading in giving further evidence for the interpretation that the plantation system was at that time, only seven years after the prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade by the British Parliament, and three years after the passing of the Slave Trade Felony Act which declared illegal slaving a crime to be punished with penalties up to fourteen years of transportation (Southam 1998, 496), in a state of severe crisis. Southam also gives further support for Said’s claim that Austen was very aware of these political developments, as her own family had various ties to colonial ventures in the West Indies, an Antigua plantation amongst them (496-7). Said regards the language of domestic order and authority of Austen’s novel as mirrored by the authority exerted over the foreign domain: “What assures the domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other” (Said 1993, 104). Antigua thus holds “a precise place in Austen’s moral geography [...] The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class” (112). Referring to Mansfield Park as an example par excellence for what he terms the “geographical notations” of Western literature (Said 1993, 69), Said is at the same time interested in why these notations have not received the attention from literary criticism they deserve in his view. That the relation between rural domestic center and colonial periphery, crucial to the turns in the characters’ fates, had so far been overlooked by criticism is owing, Said states, first to the marginality of the Antiguan site in the narrative — although it is “absolutely crucial to the action” it is “referred to only in passing” (106) — and, secondly, to the conventions of literary criticism which traditionally privileges temporality over spatiality in the analysis of novelistic writing. Said points out that leading scholars writing on the emergence of the novel as the dominant literary mode of modernity (among them Georg Lukács and Ian Watts, even Erich Auerbach) have concentrated on issues of temporality and identity, with the protagonists’ mental development being less sustained by their movement in space than by their movement in time. He contrasts this view of “temporality as resolving the threats to identity” with a “radically different tradition” which he identifies with the work of Antonio Gramsci and, above all, Raymond Williams (Said

This may be true for general studies of the novel but certainly is not to mean that the spatial organization of novelistic discourse has heretofore gone unnoticed by literary criticism. Let me just recall the whole study of mythical quest structures in literary discourse in the light of T.S. Eliot’s writing (frequently referred to in Culture and Imperialism). What is more important is how these spatial markers were read by literary criticism — whether they were seen, as Said and other ‘postcolonial’ critics do, to point to a socio-economic reality outside the text that nevertheless crucially determines the structure of the text, or whether they were seen in universal mythical terms — as was frequently the case even with the generally more historically-minded American myth and symbol school. – As David Harvey notes, time and development have traditionally been privileged in sociological discourse (Harvey 1990, 20).
Thus the concept of “geographical notation” is inspired by Gramsci’s emphasis on the geopolitical situatedness of knowledge and by Williams’ view, elaborated, for example, in *The Country and the City* (1973), that novelistic discourse is crucially concerned with a “social contest over territory,” both in the more narrow sense of rural against metropolitan interests, but also in a wider sense of struggles over “work, profit, dispossession, wealth, misery” (Said 2000a, 469). It is this “difficult mobility” between diverse cultural centers which interests Said, the way in which “the literature of the country house is different from that of the poorhouse, the factory, or the dissenting churches,” but above all the way in which novels deploy the “counterpoint between England and the overseas territories” (472).

Said’s reading of the geographical notations of *Mansfield Park* could be extended to other European and American texts of the nineteenth century. Indeed some writers of fiction and many critics of colonial discourse have before and since the publication of *Culture and Imperialism* been employed in the task of excavating Western literature’s ambivalent and often contradictory involvement with colonialism’s culture (of which the sumptuous mansions and the conspicuous consumption deployed in *Mansfield Park* or Jane Eyre form a major part). What distinguishes Said’s readings from those of most other critics is his insistence on the high literary quality of the texts he discusses: he considers *Mansfield Park* as a “brilliant” text, a text to be distinguished from “lesser works” which wear their historical affiliation more “plainly” and directly, at times jingoistically. Austen’s novel, by comparison, “encodes experiences and does not simply repeat them” (Said 1993, 116; emphasis added). The reader’s task, Said writes, is to lose neither a true historical sense of the colonial context nor a full enjoyment of the domestic tale. What is important is to view both of them together (116). Said’s aesthetic conservatism is certainly more than a benign nod to his potentially conservative reading public (the implied reader of *Culture and Imperialism*, it seems, is trained in simplistic, at best New Criticist, views of the mutual disconnectedness of literature and life); a survey of the novels he discusses at length quickly reveals that his sympathies rest with the texts of the old Western canon. But contrary to politically conservative critics for whom the admission of texts by women and people of color to university curricula foreshadows the *Götterdämmerung* of Western culture – a culture that must be protected by teaching the sacred texts of the literary tradition –, Said insinuates that these sacred texts at least in part owe their aesthetic complexity to their “difficult mobility” between the metropolitan center and the colonial periphery, that it is their negotiation of empire which gives them their aesthetic complexity in the first place.

I want to further explore Said’s notion of the “geographical notations” found in mainstream texts. Most readers will instinctively think of other novels which could be analyzed along similar lines. The most striking, and most frequently quoted, example is probably *Jane Eyre* (1847), with Rochester’s magnificent country estate Thornfield Hall being entertained at the cost of keeping his raving West Indian wife locked up in the attic. The connection which Brontë draws between
the splendor of British country mansions and the exploitation of the West Indies is at once more explicit than in Austen’s novel and richly associated within various romantic discourses. Employing the discourse of female insanity, the novel justifies Rochester’s immoral actions — keeping his wife shut up like a beast, attempting bigamy. Yet the representation of Bertha Mason is overdetermined with another, racial, layer of meaning: her actions are represented as cannibalistic, and her madness is couched in a discourse of sexual and tropical temptation. Here is Rochester’s metaphorically luxurious description of a wild West Indian night:

“One night I had been awakened by her yells — (since the medical men had pronounced her mad, she had, of course, been shut up) — it was a fiery West Indian night; one of the description that frequently precede the hurricanes of those climates. Being unable to sleep in bed, I got up and opened the window. The air was like sulphur-streams — I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly round the room; the sea, which I could hear from thence, rumbled dull like an earthquake — black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannon-ball — she [the moon] threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest. I was physically influenced by the atmosphere and scene, and my ears were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out: wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language! — no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary than she: though two rooms off, I heard every word — the thin partitions of the West Indian house opposing but slight obstruction to her wolfish cries.” (Brontë 1985, 335)

Confronted with such united force of savage femininity, Rochester decides in this moment to leave this West Indian “hell” and return to Europe. His decision is reinforced by a sudden meteorological intervention into the sulfurous tropical atmosphere:

“A wind fresh from Europe blew over the ocean and rushed through the open casemment: the storm broke, streamed, thundered, blazed, and the air grew pure. [...] The sweet wind from Europe was still whispering in the refreshed leaves, and the Atlantic was thundering in glorious liberty; my heart, dried up and scorched for a long time, swelled to the tone, and filled with living blood — my being longed for renewal — my soul thirsted for a pure draught.” (335-6)

Like elsewhere in the novel, the difference between Europe and America is here expressed in a series of dualistic terms. True to the conventions of Romantic symbolism, Brontë uses the natural scenery as a mirror to the human mind. But her geographical, and meteorological, notation of the fresh breeze of Atlantic liberty unwittingly points to the history of the Black Atlantic that the novel keeps at bay: meteorologically, of course, the trade winds which lift up Rochester’s spirits come not from Europe but from Africa; it is the predominant current used by the transatlantic merchant marine, slavers included. At the time of the novel’s publication, 1847, the Atlantic world indeed sounded with a cry of lib-

5 Shortly before Jane’s crucial encounter with the beastlike and crouching Bertha, Mr. Mason emerges from her den with blood on his throat, exclaiming “She sucked the blood; she said she’d drain my heart” (Brontë 1985, 242).
tery due to recent emancipation; on the other hand the period between 1830 and 1860 is known as the peak of the illegal slave trade which was only insufficiently inhibited by British cruisers and largely carried out under the American flag.\(^6\)

In viewing *Jane Eyre* alongside Austen’s earlier novel, there emerges what Said calls a “distinctive cultural topography,” a “structure of location and geographical reference,” displayed in the cultural languages of literature, history, or ethnography, sometimes allusively and sometimes carefully plotted, across several individual works that are not otherwise connected to one another or to an official ideology of ‘empire’. (Said 1993, 61)

Avoiding the terminology of discourse analysis, Said uses geographical metaphors for describing a discursive phenomenon. And, as he argued in his earlier essay “Traveling Theory,” discourses, whether theoretical or aesthetic ones, constantly adapt to new geopolitical situations. To give an example of how the geographical and meteorological notations of *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* are rearticulated in a different historical setting, we may take a look at Mary Tyler Peabody Mann’s recently republished novel *Juanita. A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago.* Like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Clotel,* and other abolitionist novels, *Juanita* uses a romance plot in order to alert the readers to the cruelties and inhumanity of slavery. Like the former two, it uses the figure of the tragic mulatta in order to show the seemingly inescapable fate dictated by the characters’ racial identity. (The very light-skinned and beautiful mulatta Juanita dies because she returns to Cuba out of love for her white master and is executed along with a group of antislavery rebels.) The protagonist of the novel is not Juanita but the New Englelander Helen Wentworth who visits her schoolfriend on her Cuban plantation in the 1830s and becomes a witness of the cruel system of plantation slavery on the Caribbean island. When her friend dies, Helen returns to New England with her friend’s children. The text ends with the remaining plantation family’s removal to Switzerland, where Helen joins them.

Based on Mann’s personal sojourn to Cuba from 1833 to 1835 and partly written in the late 1850s, *Juanita* was not finished and published until 1887, the year in which Mann died and when Cuba finally abolished the institution of slavery. It transports us back to a period in which the United States and the Spanish colonial regime in Cuba were on close terms due to their common interests in the slave trade. However, Mann’s initial acknowledgement of the centrality of the illegal transatlantic slave trade and the complicity between Cuban slavery and the commercial interests of Yankee entrepreneurs (Mann 2000, 9) gradually gives way to a domestic tale of the devastating psychological impact of plantation slavery on the women and children of the plantation household. This rhetorical process is accompanied by another, in which Cuba increasingly comes to stand

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\(^6\) Due to bilateral agreements, the US flag enjoyed legal protection against British boarding crews. See Du Bois 1986, 144-6. On *Jane Eyre*, see also Meyer 1990, revised in Meyer 1996, chapter 2.
for the evil of slavery, whereas New England emerges as the seat of equality and freedom.

In a crucial scene, Helen and her friends visit a neighboring sugar plantation whose mansion has been turned into a natural science collection by its eccentric inhabitant, the French naturalist Larimon. The plantation at first offers itself as a what Pratt calls a fiction of anti-conquest, a welcome relief from endless tales of cruelty against Africans, but it soon turns out to be the ultimate circle of hell, where both children and adults are being worked and starved to death in order to finance the aesthetic enjoyments of the plantation owners. From the “hell” of the sugar mill, the visitors then pass into the “bland and perfumed air of the gardens,” where the naturalist (who is also a horticulturist) displays an abundance of exotic fruits and flowers. Although his labor force, as he claims, has been ‘thinned out’ by disease and starvation, which necessitates the employment of small children, his gardens are wonderfully maintained. He leads his guests through a botanical labyrinth, where, from the highest elevation, they can observe the “glorious sea” in the distance. The sight causes great emotional stress in the American visitor, “for was it not the only path by which she could regain the lost heaven of home.” Helen then couples the idea of her New England ‘heaven’ with that of the Cuban ‘hell’ in which she is caught when we read that

Helen loved the sea, but the childish voices that sounded across the cane-fields from the pandemonium of the sugar-house drowned to her ear the gentle plashing of the waters on the beach. (Mann 2000, 130-2)

Contrasted with the colonial garden which, due to its geographical vicinity to the scenes of torture, appears like a dark travesty of Mansfield Park, the figuration of the ocean in this scene as a pathway to freedom evokes the very similar imagery used by Brontë in Jane Eyre – with the difference that the ocean’s message of freedom is now associated with the supposedly free and democratic United States. But of course we encounter a difficulty here as the novel seeks to straddle the historical gap between the decade before the outbreak of the Civil War, with its increasing attacks on the legal sanction of slavery and the Cuban slave trade, and the 1880s, when slavery has long been abolished, taking the optimistic spirit of Reconstruction along with it. The ‘freedom’ America offers to black people and mulattos is at worst a dubious social and legal status, at best the comfort of a society increasingly animated by the spirit of racial segregation. Accordingly, as the plot moves from the scene of international slavery to domestic New England, we soon learn that the United States are not such a ‘heavenly’ resort for colored people after all. The formerly established antithesis between Cuba and the United States is at the point of collapse as the mulatto woman Juanita is denied a happy end because the racial barrier is retained even in the land of freedom

7 Mary Louise Pratt defines as “anti-conquest” the representational “system of nature” which, as a descriptive paradigm, claimed no transformative desire but created a “utopian, innocent vision of European global authority” purportedly free from “imperial articulations of conquest, conversions, territorial appropriation, and enslavement” (Pratt 1992, 38-9).
and equality. It is perhaps this fact which necessitates the final removal to ‘neutral’ Switzerland.\(^8\)

Inspired by Said’s thoughts on geography and novelistic representation, we may be tempted to conclude that the formal and aesthetic beauty of a work of fiction dwindles proportionately to the decrease of spatial distance between domestic bliss and colonial violence – that the lack of an ocean between the sites of ‘culture’ and ‘imperialism’ turns the characters into exiles and emigrants who ironically flee to that continent where the historical process from which they suffer was initiated (though certainly no blame can be levelled against Switzerland!).

Unlike her compatriot Mark Twain, Mary Tyler Peabody Mann did not envisage the American West as a safe haven for her fictional family. *Huckleberry Finn*, of course, bridges roughly the same periods before and after the Civil War. Taking up Said’s notion of “counterpoints,” Jonathan Arac has suggested ways of “putting the River on new maps” (Arac 1997, 210). He identifies as the immediate historical moment of Twain’s novel the advent of the 1890s with their various acts toward the “closing of the frontier.” But, as Arac further suggests, the novel, in addition to looking ahead to new frontiers (Huck’s plan to “light out for the Territory”), aestheticizes the former political conflict over the Mississippi River as an ‘imperial route’ (its recent purchase from France, the inhibition of river travel during the Civil War).\(^9\) The effect of this process of aestheticization is that it anesthetizes the reader against a recognition of the uncertainties and complexities of imperial expansion: “By putting historical study to new, contrapuntal use,” Arac concludes, “the element of *Huckleberry Finn* most frequently considered anti-political, anticonventional, oppositional, or primordially natural, Huck’s rafting, comes obliquely against, and is modified by, the national-imperial possession of ‘our’ continent” (Arac 1997, 211). Taking *Huck Finn*’s geographical discourse one step further, Amy Kaplan has recently explored “the unsettling presence, or telling absence, of Hawaii in [Twain’s] corpus, as a text that cannot be written or a forgotten language that might possess him only at the risk of breakdown” (Kaplan 2002, 56). As Kaplan shows in a very intricate and persuasive reading, Twain’s observation, in 1866, of the ravages of colonialism in Hawaii “threatened to shatter the coherence of his national idiom” later deployed in *Huck Finn*. For Mark Twain, Kaplan goes on, “Hawaii [...] became a site of what Ernest Renan called the necessary forgetting, which is a ‘crucial factor in the creation of a nation.’” In the era following Reconstruction, it was necessary for Twain and his nation “to forget the interconnections between slavery and imperialism,” the link that existed between the domestic space and ‘areas of interest’ outside the national and continental boundaries of the United States (57).

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\(^8\) The removal imitates the endings of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Clotel*. In both novels, the promise of safety can only be fulfilled outside the United States.

\(^9\) For the Mississippi as “imperial route,” see Kaplan 2002, chapter 2.
As these examples testify, Said’s suggestion to plow the literature of the colonial powers for geographical ambivalences can lead to fertile results. Early American literature contains numerous instances of more or less domestic settings being both disrupted and determined by events outside the national borders of the United States. Charles Brockden Brown’s use of the crisis-ridden Caribbean as a source of foreign capital and fatal disease in *Arthur Mervyn* comes to mind (see Mackenthun 2004, chapter 3). Even the plot of *Edgar Huntly*, itself a novel predominantly concerned with literally laying out new territories for the emerging national discourse, cannot thrive without infusions of foreign capital (the lost revenue from a transatlantic trade venture by Weymouth which Edgar expects to earn after marrying his sister) and capitalists (Mrs. Lorimer). Then again, if one looks at American literature in the first half of the nineteenth century, a different picture from that painted by Said with respect to the British novel emerges. Because both the literature itself, in particular the frontier novel, and the literary criticism of the American Studies School, are predominantly concerned with issues of space – with literary and cultural metaphors such as the frontier and its various mutations like the “errand into the wilderness,” the “virgin land,” the “machine in the garden,” the “fatal environment,” “the West” and so on. These critical concepts deploy a very strong territorial sense. And yet, I think, a close analysis reveals their, and literature’s, frequent disarticulation of locations and geographies beyond the national and continental boundaries of North America.

Moreover, and contrary to Said’s diagnosis of the European novel, many early American works of fiction can be seen to articulate a confused temporal sense, a historical, rather than geographical, blindness. Charles Brockden Brown again provides an example, as the protagonists of both *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn* are frequently haunted by fits of amnesia and sudden bursts of remembering. Poe’s work, apparently oblivious of both time and space, elsewhere betrays an obsession with geography. But the sheer hybridity and metaphorical overkill of his geographical symbolism, for example, in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, has the effect of removing the action from any possibility of chronotopical reconstruction. These texts, written in a context of internal and second-degree colonialism (plantation slavery, continental expansion, America’s own transatlantic trade network before the Civil War), requires a different critical approach than that of the European classics analyzed by Said, an approach that asks anew the question of temporality, of memory and forgetting, and that detects behind the obvious latitudes of the text the longitudes of other, transoceanic, geographies.

While the spatial dimension in its continental form seems to be well researched in American Studies, American literary criticism has only recently begun to

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10 In more recent times, this becomes most obvious perhaps in the contemporary literature by Native Americans, in which geographical symbolism and setting frequently predominate over all other structural features.

11 I stress continent instead of national because the frontier precisely demarcated the borderline between the political sovereignty of the United States and that of indigenous tribes – with more than 300 treaties testifying to the fact that their domains were indeed regarded as autonomous and not part of the American national sphere.
transgress the continental borders and explore the manifold relations (sociopolitical and fictional) between the United States and realms across the seas – in particular Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Said’s emphasis on this transoceanic aspect is congenial and coterminous with the work of other scholars, notably Paul Gilroy, who revisit the Atlantic ocean as a formative site in the development of British and American culture (see Gilroy 1993, Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, Bolster 1997; also the essays in Klein and Mackenthun 2004). The Atlantic Ocean, far from being merely an empty space to be traversed or a metaphor for romantic evocations of the sublime, is filled with very real historical meaning, which would in turn make its appearance, however marginal and underarticulated, in American fiction before the Civil War. Said’s metaphor of the notation offers a welcome opportunity for describing this ambiguous presence of the Atlantic – especially the Atlantic of slavery and the slave-based colonial economy – in fictional texts written within the United States.

The work of Herman Melville demonstrates that such a ‘notational’ approach was in part generated in direct response to the historical forgetfulness of the antebellum period. As many critics have shown, Melville dissects the commonplace and non-reflective Yankee mind in his novella Benito Cereno by making the reader see the hermeneutic limitations of Delano’s point of view, whose lack of historical insight and whose attachment to popular racial preconceptions blind him toward the real events on the Spanish slaver San Dominick. As we know, Melville produces a narrative situation in which the reader, exposed to Delano’s free indirect discourse, necessarily shares his limited perspective, even though the metaphorical language of the text, as Bruce Franklin, Carolyn Karcher and others have argued, enables the reader to perceive this event within a much larger geographical and historical framework, as part of a continuum of New World slavery that spans the whole western hemisphere (see Franklin 1992, Karcher 1992 and, for a long and superb historical reading, Sundquist 1993, chapter 2). Melville’s carefully executed associative network of historical and geographical markers – allusions to the life of Columbus and Las Casas, the beginnings of the slave trade in the Caribbean, the anticolonial revolution of Haiti, the nascent ethnographic and archeological knowledge about African high cultures –, as well as his use of a circular structure of repetition and thematic variation, indeed give his text the character of a complex musical piece. In Benito Cereno, then, the historical and geographical notations, unlike those in the other novels mentioned so far, form a conscious narrative pattern of their own, a pattern not unlike that of a counterpoint.

2. Counterpoint

In an interview Said explains the origin of his use of the concept of “counterpoint”: he borrowed it, he says, from Bach’s Goldberg Variations:

it’s that structure that I found tremendously useful in writing Culture and Imperialism [...] I wanted [...] to try to organize it in a way that was modeled on an art, rather
than a powerful scholarly form – the idea of a kind of exfoliating structure of variation which, I think, is the way this book was, in fact, organized. (Said 2001a, 184)

Equipped with this “homemade” method (201), he applies it to the interplay between empire and culture:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts. In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, we can read and interpret English novels [...] (Said 1993, 59-60)

This formulation, which at first sight seems to grossly misrepresent the equality of voices in the documents of imperialism – making their equality a matter of competent reading rather than an objective feature – is followed by a rather astounding passage: “We are not yet at the stage,” Said writes,

where we can say whether these globally integral structures are preparations for imperial control and conquest, or whether they accompany such enterprises, or whether in some reflective or careless way they are a result of empire. We are only at a stage where we must look at the astonishing frequency of geographical articulations in the three Western cultures that most dominated far-flung territories. (Said 1993, 61)

The “we” of these sentences excludes a large number of literary critics working on similar projects as Said himself when *Culture and Imperialism* was published, critics, many of them named in his book, who devised various theories of representation that try to explain the complex interaction between the fields of politics and culture. One may refer to various studies written in a Marxist tradition (including those of Raymond Williams whom Said claims as a model) or the more recent theoretical articulations of new historicist and postcolonial scholars who combine methodologies from various theoretical traditions (including marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, deconstruction, discourse analysis) in their attempts to theorize the relationship between culture and politics. The reason why Said prefers a “homemade” method to an active engagement of these more theoretically informed theories and analyses probably has to do with his general suspicion toward monolithic and doctrinaire ways of thinking.¹² Thus, while the notion of

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¹² With eloquent belligerence, Said attacks the tendency among intellectuals to shed a sense of moral responsibility in favor of adhering to the style of certain theoretical schools. American intellectuals, he writes, have “been almost swallowed up” by the professionalization of academic life, their “critical sense” being “conveniently jettisoned”: “As for intellectuals whose charge includes values and principles – literary, philosophical, historical specialists – the American university, with its munificence, Utopian sanctuary, and remarkable diversity, has defanged them. Jargons of an almost unimaginable rebarbariveness dominate their styles. Cults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, neopragnatism transport them into the country of the blue; an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history and individual responsibility” (Said 1993, 336-7). Phrased in such a sweeping way which denies the important work that has come out of these
counterpoint may be regarded as a “defanged” version of dialectics, it is worthwhile taking a closer look at it.

Said’s definition of counterpoint is indebted to the contrapuntal harmonies of Bach and to Adorno’s rephrasing of the classical counterpoint in his theoretical texts on Schoenberg. In both cases, it is a crucial quality of a contrapuntal musical piece that the overall effect reached by the strictly ordered polyphony is that of harmony.\textsuperscript{13} As a positive description of the geographical and ideological ambivalence of colonial texts or colonial culture, however, the metaphor seems less useful. It is ultimately unfit for expressing the tensions, ruptures, inequalities, and dissonances created by the colonial situation. The musical aesthetics of Jazz may have done a better service – and they were indeed put to the task by African American writers such as Langston Hughes and Toni Morrison. It is important to understand that Said thinks of counterpoint less as a positive quality of texts or culture but rather in terms of a critical activity. Because as a positive description of colonial cultures, Said’s harmonious notion comes dangerously close to ‘conservative,’ e.g. New Criticist, notions of a ‘good’ text’s complex unity or, similarly, the later Foucault’s evocation of power as a complex but unified ensemble of discourses which gives equal room to dominant and oppositional voices – a theory which Said harshly critiques in “Traveling Theory” for its abandonment of a place for resistance and which caused his break with Foucauldian thought (Said 1983, 243-7, Said 2001b, 214). As a critical perspective, however, the concept of counterpoint serves as a synonym for “comparative”: A comparative or, better, a contrapuntal perspective is required in order to see a connection between coronation rituals in England and the Indian durbars of the later nineteenth century. That is, we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others. (Said 1993, 36; emphasis added)

In two interviews, Said underlines the processual nature of “counterpoint” by explaining his intention to “make them [the novel and the ‘historical experience of domination’] work together contrapuntally” and to “transform the works into the enabling conditions of a decolonising critique” (Said 2001a, 193, Said 2001b, 211; emphasis added). Said’s move of turning (or tuning) the counterpoint into an analytical tool, a comparative perspective, resonates with Adorno’s description of Schoenberg’s use of counterpoint:

\begin{quote}
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\end{quote}

fields (as well as his own indebtedness to some of these studies), this harangue is symptomatic of Said’s aversion against the formation of schools of thought and their internal pressures, against the ossification of thinking as a result of theoretical abstractions (see his famous critique of the later work of Foucault in “Traveling Theory” (Said 1983, 244-7). He always conceived of the true intellectual as a free-thinker and of the critic as a skilled craftsman whose choice of tools is always subject to a moral sense in the humanistic tradition.

\textsuperscript{13} Adorno describes the classical contrapuntal procedure as “eine in sich relativ homogene, stationische und geschlossene Gesellschaft, die sich im viellstimmigen Gesang repräsentiert und diszipliniert” (Adorno 1978, 149) – thereby interestingly using a sociological language for describing a musical phenomenon while Said retranslates the musical concept into the social realm.
Aller Kontrapunkt hat auch eine analytische Funktion, die Zerlegung des Komplexen in distinkte Teilmomente, die Artikulation des Gleichzeitigen nach dem Gewicht seiner Bestandstücke und nach Ähnlichkeit und Kontrast. (Adorno 1978, 153)

As a metaphor for the critical activity of retrieving the imperial subtext of classical Western novels and for claiming its thematic equality within the larger field of culture, counterpoint is the name given to a counterhegemonic analytical practice otherwise known as colonial discourse analysis.

And yet it seems important to differentiate between colonial texts that have themselves contrapuntal qualities and those that lack this level of historical reflection. It may be useful in this context to associate Said’s counterpoint with Bakhtin’s concept of hybridity. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin distinguishes between an “organic” form of hybridity (or heteroglossia), an unconscious mixing of languages that is not recognized but effects change, and “intentional” hybridity, the conscious construction of semantic conflict employed in most forms of narrative, especially the novel. Bakhtin draws a line between monological or authoritative discourse which forecloses hybridisation and dialogical discourse in which two “socio-linguistic consciousnesses [...] come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance” (Bakhtin 1981, 358-60). The need to distinguish between different kinds of texts and their dependence on specific socio-linguistic circumstances is crucial to Bakhtin’s thinking but frequently gets lost in modern adaptations of his work. Bakhtin is less explicit than Said about the impact of the critic on the hybridity of a work of art. Certainly the marginal (“unconscious”?) references to empire in *Mansfield Park* or *Jane Eyre* require a more skillful contrapuntal reading than the “intentional” reference to empire in *Heart of Darkness*. By the same token, the oblique mention of transoceanic trade relations in Brown’s novels, although they can be shown to be more than a dispensable plot ornament, are certainly less significant features of the novel to most readers than the pervasive thematic presence of colonial slavery in *Benito Cereno*. Thus, while Brown’s novels must be read contrapuntally against their grain to reveal their position within a transnational cultural and historical setting, Melville’s novella, which is itself organized quasi-contrapuntally, forces the perceptive reader to take a ‘contrapuntal’ view on American history. Or, to give yet another example, Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym* will only give away its colonial subtext to those readers able and willing to cut through its layers of ethnographic and geographic symbolism and to read its claustrophobic fantasies in larger historical (not just biographical) terms. Martin Delany’s novel *Blake; or the Huts of America*, by contrast, displays a dialectical plot structure par excellence, thus suggesting the multiple connections between southern plantation life, northern capitalist ventures, and the illegal slave trade to Cuba, as well as establishing a link between the domestic concerns of American citizens and the revolutionary and anti-colonial activities of Cuba’s multicultural creole society. Geographical mobility is a dominant feature of both Poe’s and Delany’s novels, but in contrast to Poe’s geographical meandering, Delany’s very precise geographical notations cut to the heart of America’s amnesiac narrative of national identity. Some
American texts are indeed so obsessed with spatial relations that they explode the category of contrapuntal reading. Barely held together by plot lines of oceanic travel, both *Moby-Dick* and *Arthur Gordon Pym* ultimately defy the conventions of novelistic plot structures and expose the reader to a cacophony of geographical and historical allusion that would seem to demand an altogether different method of analysis.¹⁴

Even within a literature as concerned with space as that of the United States, then, Said’s model of reading a text geographically and contrapuntally offers new perspectives on American fiction by placing it within other spatial coordinates. Again and again we encounter within and between the lines of early American fiction, purportedly dealing with the imaginative conquest of continental space, the traces of the oceanic past and present – sometimes neatly separated into different kinds of novels as in the case of Cooper (the founder of both the American frontier romance and sea fiction), but more often ‘fighting out’ their semantic antagonism ‘on the territory of the utterance,’ as Bakhtin has it.

3. The Contrapuntal Critic

Said’s metaphor of the counterpoint as a critical method for analyzing Western literary texts prepares the scene for the postcolonial critic. It makes her unpack her analytical tools designed to excavate cultural meanings which the text is unwilling to reveal. The method Said proposes and practises is quite close to the symptomatic readings of colonial discourse by Peter Hulme who, in *Colonial Encounters*, is relentlessly aware of the geographical notations of these texts, or to the evocation of the ornate absences of American writing stated by Toni Morri-
son, a quotation from whose *Playing from the Dark* provides the motto to the first chapter of *Culture and Imperialism*. Like Hulme and Morrison, Said is interested in breaking through the silences of colonial texts and the critical tradition which has taught us to disregard their worldly references. In one of his last essays, Said points out that the question about the real America “and who can lay claim to represent and define it” is now much more at the center of academic debate than it was ten years ago when *Culture and Imperialism* was published (Said 2000b, 579). This is obviously the result of a heightened awareness among ‘contrapuntal’ critics for the ideological affinities of literary texts.

For Said, the most important task for this form of contrapuntal criticism is that the reader seeks to stay adrift between comfortable shores and remain aware of the dangerous lure of landed fundamentalisms and theories. Again and again Said emphasizes his ideal of the critic as an intellectual in exile, an unhoused figure who “will not make the adjustment, preferring instead to remain outside the mainstream, unaccommodated, uncoopted, resistant” (Said 2000c, 373). This resonates with his much earlier description of critical activity as a movement between worlds in his influential essay “Traveling Theory.” As Said outlines here, he conceives of the work of the critic as a spatial activity, a capacity for locating or situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the place and the time out of which it emerges as a part of that times, working in and for it, responding to it; then, consequently, that first place can be measured against subsequent places where the theory turns up for use. The critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. (Said 1983, 241-2)\(^{15}\)

Clearly taking ‘exile’ to be a “*metaphorical* condition” rather than necessarily a real one (Said 2000c, 373), Said can thus be seen to pave the way toward an internationalization of literary studies, toward a *mutual* kind of literary and cultural criticism conducted from points outside one’s home culture – a need that has similarly been formulated by Günter Lenz, Paul Bové and others. As Bové noted some time ago (but the situation has not changed much since then), “‘American Studies’ [...] has not yet reached the point of ‘exile’ in relation to itself and its nationalist projects” (Bové 1992, 63).\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Theory, according to Said, should be able to account for the “the essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social institutions” if it does not want to become an ideological trap (Said 1983, 241).

\(^{16}\) Günter Lenz argues along similar lines when he states that “[r]aising the question of post-national narratives cannot mean only referring to a reconceptualization of the workings of national identity and counter-identities in the United States, but must also mean asking for a much more elaborated critical redefinition of the meaning of ‘America’ and of the transnational effects and entanglements of United States culture(s) on a global scale” (Lenz 1999, 14). John Rowe portrays Said as one of the instigators of post- and transnational scholarship such as the New American Studies (Rowe 2004).
4. Coda

In the light of the emergence of a greater internationalization, multiperspectivity, and sophistication in the analysis of British and American literature, it seems preposterous (as Said may have said) to observe the largely unscathed survival of fundamentalist thinking among leading representatives of the political elite. As Huntington’s influential theory of the “clash of civilizations” seems to adopt the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy (which is probably what it was intended to be), it becomes more and more important to remember the message of humanism which Edward Said promoted until the very last, both in prose and deeds – not unaware of its shortcomings and the “tragic flaw” of its incompleteness and provisionality (Said 2004, 12), yet convinced that the humanist ideal is really the only weapon we have against fundamentalist fanaticisms of all kinds. In an early response to the catastrophe of 9/11, Said reminds us that the Western world is the result of a century-old process of cultural interaction and cross-fertilization – that for the past 1000 years or so Islam has never been “at the fringes of the West,” as Huntington’s static cultural geography would make us believe, but at its very center. If Huntington’s model gained the upper hand, the victims of this partly self-produced “clash of ignorance” between Arabian jihads and Christian crusades will be “stranded in the middle of the ford, between the deep waters of tradition and modernity” (quoting Eqbal Ahmad). “But,” Said concludes, we are all swimming in those waters. Westerners and Muslims and others alike. And since the waters are part of the ocean of history, trying to plow or divide them with barriers is futile. These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis. ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ thesis is a gimmick like ‘The War of the Worlds,’ better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for a critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time. (Said 2001c, n.p.)

Even when surrounded by adversarial forces of all kinds, Edward Said has always stood his ground (admirably for a self-declared exile). Apprehensive of the many dangers of postmodernity – “the pauperization of most of the globe’s population,” the revival of ethnic and religious fundamentalisms, the “decline of literacy” due to electronically based modes of communication, “the fragmentation and threatened disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment,” Said never tired to evoke “[our] most precious asset in the face of such a dire transformation of tradition and of history” which is “a sense of community, understanding, sympathy, and hope” (Said 2000b, 589). Edward Said dedicated the last years of his life to helping to realize this sense of community and hope by calling into being, together with Daniel Barenboim, the West East Divan Orchestra, which unites young musicians from Palestine, Israel, Germany and different Arab countries. In their book Parallels and Paradoxes, the two talk about the initial difficulties in bringing these diverse artists together and about how the common fascination with music and the rehearsals together trans-
formed the young people, how it made them overcome their former prejudices (Barenboim and Said 2002, 9-10). Said was well aware that the activities of just one orchestra could not substantially contribute to the peace process in Palestine. He quite modestly believed with Aimé Cesaire that “the work of man is only just beginning / and it remains to man to conquer all / the violence entrenched in the recesses of his passion” (Said 2000b, 589). There is much to be learned from such a lifelong commitment.

Works Cited


