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Traveling with Said (in 2013)

2013 marked not only twenty years since the publication of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* in 1993, but also ten years since the Palestinian-American scholar's passing in 2003. This is one of the reasons why so many events were planned in Europe and the US to celebrate this extraordinary man, literary theorist and public intellectual, and why we wish to engage with his important work in the present issue of this journal.

Further 'Saidean' anniversaries may also be mentioned, remembering it was 1963 when a young Said joined Columbia University in New York City, as a member of the Departments of English and of Comparative Literature, and that thirty years have passed since the publication of his powerful reflections in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). These dates are listed not just in a celebratory mood, but rather to stress the unavoidable presence of Edward Said on the world's intellectual stage over the last forty years. For someone belonging to my generation, who grew up intellectually and academically in the 1980s-early 1990s, Said has been a constant presence, an accompanying hand, and an infinite source of intellectual wonder and inspiration.

Culture and Imperialism was chosen as the reference point for the essays that follow not only to pay homage to the author of a book that has been seminal to the way we read literature and study culture, but also to ask how that book has travelled with us, in what way it has fertilized our thinking, and how the upshots of that book's inspiration have in turn fostered reflections on the original work.

The question of course has to do with a number of things: with reading practices, with the life of cultures, and with theory itself and how it travels. What I have always admired in Said's work is the continuous dialogue with the intellectuals that preceded him and also with those who shared his own time; his

constant reminder that ideas are not just in the air, they are not just there for us to pick them up and use whenever or wherever we find them, but that they have an existence of their own, they come from somewhere, and what we do with them must necessarily be accompanied by that knowledge, that awareness of their presence in space and time and in the work of others.

Talking about 'traveling theory', Said points out that the movement of ideas from one culture to another is never 'unimpeded'. It involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin, which complicate any account of transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of original thoughts and concepts. In a sort of generalization, in his famous essay on "Traveling Theory", Said identifies a recurrent pattern in the movement itself, four stages common to the way any theory or idea travels:

First, there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance traversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea [...] Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place (Said 1983: 226-227).

Keeping that in mind, the following critical contributions look at both local uses and revisions of Said's work for contemporary time in Italy and Europe, and also at a number of geo-political spaces that a Saidean perspective has helped to open up globally or trans-culturally; they discuss how we can now draw a new cartography, unstable and dynamic, of the planet. But this has not occurred,

does not occur, without adjustments or critique, as Said notices in the above quote and as the collected papers show.

The history of Said's own work travelling to many places of the globe has not been unimpeded, as happened in Italy for example, where the reception of his books has often involved resistance. The orientalist scholar Francesco Gabrieli was very critical of Said's method and results in *Orientalism*, while *Culture and Imperialism* was received with suspicion and sometimes with open refusal on the part of philosophers and historians, though of course both texts have been central to the work of postcolonial and cultural studies scholars, particularly dealing with Anglophone literatures and cultures.

In recent years, the work of Giorgio Baratta (see his preface to the Italian edition of *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* and afterword to *Culture and Imperialism*), Miguel Mellino (2009) and Marco Gatto (2012), among others, have done much to appraise Said's work for the local academic community and readers. They have discussed lights and shadows in his contribution, but definitely shown how inevitable his voice is for anyone interested in literature, music and the arts, the workings of culture, the role of the intellectual, and for world politics too. Most importantly, the weight of Said's radical humanism has now come to the foreground for many Italian scholars, as well as the implications of the linking of poetics and ethics, philology and political responsibility.

One of the things I would like to add about Said in this context is that I am very grateful not only for his travelling ideas, but also because he made other thinkers' ideas travel. I think it is possible to say without risking hyperbole that it was Edward Said who made Antonio Gramsci's philosophy travel not only worldwide, but back to Italy, too, for many of us.

As we can see in the work done at various centres, particularly in the South of Italy, Said and Gramsci, or Gramsci through Said, have fostered new studies on our own culture and of cultures from the global South. I will just

mention the work done in Naples by Iain Chambers and his group (2006) or at the University of Bari, for example, by Bruno Brunetti and Roberto Derobertis (2009). Said has had the merit of moving Gramsci out of a rather stale institutional location in Italian politics and philosophy, and has offered him up to new intellectual usages, signalling, along the way, how the position of the intellectual and his work is always, and possibly must be, predicated between inside and outside.

Because to travel with theory means to be in transit, to be always out of place, to be of and not of a country: it means to see the complexity of every place and every language, as they come under scrutiny from different angles, and as they are exposed to the interrogations that come from elsewhere.

I am not saying that Said is the only intellectual who has worked like this, nor is he the only figure whose work has been so momentous for us all in recent years. Alongside *Culture and Imperialism*, for example, another crucial volume came out in 1993 that has since had a tremendous impact on the way we think about modernity: I am referring to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, which is another 'traveling' book, born out of displacement and movement, and first sounding an important field of inquiry for a great number of scholars to follow. In many ways the last two decades have gifted us with models of intellectual and cultural inquiry which are nurtured by travelling, by exile, and by a network of multiple epistemological linkages and traditions, which keep inspiring our academic efforts and vision, and also inform the scholarly work in this selection of critical essays.

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