

Not Afraid to Make Connections: Edward Said and Salman Rushdie's Latin American Solidarity

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At the start of an essay on the relationship between Latin American literature and comparative literary studies, the Cuban-American scholar Roberto González Echevarría accuses comparative literature of willful ignorance. Among other eminent figures (Tsvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Jonathan Culler, and Fredric Jameson), he implicates Edward Said:

Said can go so far as to write things like “Central and Latin America,” which on the pages of a State Department communiqué would cause wrath as well as mirth, yet feel that he has the authority to criticize Borges and Mario Vargas Llosa. . . . It seems to me that boldness of this kind, which I am sure my truly admired friends Ed and Fred would not dare display when dealing with the French or English, reveals an overseer mentality that is much more of the colonizer than of the would-be decolonizer. (2004, 91–92, citing Said 1989, 215)

While his tone might suggest otherwise, González Echevarría’s real targets, it turns out, are other critics—especially Marxist and Third-Worldist critics—of Latin American literature who draw on Said and Jameson’s work despite those thinkers’ apparent lack of interest in the region (2004, 92–93). Leaving aside the question of whether it is fair to criticize Said for a copyediting error, or indeed for reading Borges and Vargas Llosa in translation, González Echevarría’s indignation prompts me to consider how and why Said does invoke Latin America, in the region’s admittedly rare appearances in his work, and what it has to do with his far more frequent commentary on Middle East politics and the question of Palestine. Rather than dismissing Said’s engagements with Latin America out of hand, it seems more useful to examine the region’s

significance for Said, as a site that shares with the Middle East a history of U.S. imperial control as well as a capacity for resistance.

Said mentions Latin America only twice in *Orientalism*, in passing, as part of a list of regions that are subject to U.S. intervention as a matter of policy (2014, 46, 348). But in two essays published in the late 1980s, Latin America’s relationship to U.S. neoimperialism is a more central point of reference. These essays appeared at a time when the Iran-Contra affair had made the links between U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Latin America impossible to ignore. In 1987, Said published an essay pointedly titled “Irangate” in the *London Review of Books* (LRB, notably, a non-American publication). The piece is ostensibly a review of Salman Rushdie’s *Jaguar Smile* (1987), which recounts three weeks Rushdie spent with the Sandinistas, and Noam Chomsky’s *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Latin America and the Struggle for Peace* (1985). However, Said spends only the last 1,000 words of an 8,500-word article on these texts. The rest of the essay is an impassioned polemic against the violent and clandestine American interventions that Iran-Contra had exposed, and against the false information about these regions that is regularly conveyed to the American public. Said is particularly scathing of U.S. media representation of the Sandinistas: “To listen to the rhetoric about the dangers of Sandinista government is to have visions of Spanish-speaking terrorists parachuting into Seattle or Atlanta . . . so obscuring of other peoples is the fog of self-confirming cultural power” (1987, para. 26).

Said’s aim, however, is not only to describe the structural connections and continuities of U.S. intervention in the two regions. It is also, in his position as the English-speaking

world's best-known Palestinian spokesperson (a role that at that time he had occupied for less than a decade), to call attention to the relatively high level of domestic opposition to U.S. policy in Central America, in comparison to the critique of its actions in the Middle East:

In relation to Central America and Southern Africa—to name two regions where American policy is prominent and controversial—there is an oppositional constituency in the United States. There has been no one, in the press or on television talk-shows, to represent an Islamic or Arab viewpoint, no one to testify to a reality out there that was independent of American policy. . . . Debate has occurred in the one case, but hardly at all in the other. (1987, para. 13, 35)

Said's goal, then, is not to further public debate about Central America, since it already had a level of visibility among the American left of which the Palestinian movement could only dream. Instead, Said uses the region as a tool of persuasion: if his readers are opposed to U.S. support for the Contras, they should also be opposed to U.S. support for Israel. He would repeat this strategy several years later in a more famous *LRB* piece in which he challenges the liberal consensus of the period by calling the Oslo Accords a "Palestinian Versailles." Here, he invokes the Sandinistas' 1991 electoral defeat, along with the fates of Vietnam, El Salvador, and Haiti, to illustrate the consequences of the PLO's capitulation to American and Israeli demands: "To throw oneself, as Arafat has done, on the tender mercies of the US is almost certainly to suffer the fate the US has meted out to rebellious or 'terrorist' peoples it has had to deal with in the Third World *after* they have promised not to resist the US anymore" (1993, para. 14).

The triangular trade route of Iran-Contra thus provides Said with a triangular model for political solidarity. It indicates a basis for common struggle among Palestinians, Nicaraguans, and their American (and British) supporters, in their shared opposition to U.S. foreign policy. This claim might seem obvious today, but Said was writing at a time of widespread left-wing disillusionment: during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations; in the wake of the decline of anticolonial, Third-Worldist revolutionary energies in the 1970s; and before the growth of the transnational antiglobalization and anti-neoliberalization movements in the late 1990s. It was an especially bleak time for the Palestinians, as is evident in Said's better-known work from the period (Said 1986): the PLO leadership had been in exile in Tunis since 1982, and the first intifada would not begin until the end of 1987. American activists and intellectuals who were already opposed to U.S. intervention in Central America might very well have seemed the most likely domestic constituency, apart from Arab-Americans, to be persuaded to oppose U.S. intervention in Israel/Palestine.

Said may not have been a specialist in Latin America, and he may have gotten some things wrong, but he kept thinking about its place in the imperial past and present. The year after "Irangate," Said published a short piece on Joseph Conrad's 1904 novel *Nostromo* in *Harper's* magazine. *Nostromo*, the only novel that Conrad set in Latin America, is a grim account of the struggle for control of a silver mine in a country that Conrad calls Costaguana. It ends with the triumph of the mine's British and American owners in collaboration with local oligarchs. Said's discussion advances an early version of the argument that he would go on to develop in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) about the

"contrapuntal" relationship between European novels of empire and classic works of anticolonial thought. His emphasis here, however, is on the egregious continuation of Conrad's inability to imagine an end to Western imperial domination in contemporary English literature: "Whereas Conrad may be forgiven—he wrote *Nostromo* during a period in Europe of largely uncontested imperialist enthusiasms—contemporary novelists (and filmmakers), who have learned his ironies so well, have no excuse for their blindness. They have done their work *after* decolonization; *after* the massive intellectual, moral, and imaginative overhaul and deconstruction of Western representation of the non-Western world" (1988, 72).

Said names Graham Greene and V. S. Naipaul as two writers who are particularly guilty of lamenting the violent delusions of Western empires while being unable to imagine that their colonies have their own lives and histories that are separate from colonial domination.

As in the "Irangate" essay, although Said spends most of his time on critique, the trajectory of his argument is toward the necessity and actuality of resistance to imperialist modes of representation. He identifies Rushdie as one of a group of world novelists, including Gabriel García Márquez, whose work gives writers like Greene and Naipaul no excuse for their condescension toward the global South. In the earlier essay, in the three paragraphs Said devotes to *The Jaguar Smile*, he emphasizes the book's challenge to hegemonic American views of the Sandinistas: it is written by a "sympathetic non-expert non-American," it represents the Sandinistas as "interesting and attractive," and it advances a "guarded optimism" (1987, para. 52). Said does

make a rather embarrassing error in Spanish in his discussion of the book—he refers to Rushdie as *l'escritor hindú* (1987, para. 52)—but the error underscores his larger point that neither he nor Rushdie is an expert in Latin American history or politics. Instead, Said, suggests, they are taking on the “political responsibility” to “formulate solutions, ideas, and even utopian hopes” (1987, para. 54) across multiple sites, to imagine the world anew.

Rushdie evidently thought of Palestine and Nicaragua in connection with one another, as he recounts in his lightly fictionalized memoir *Joseph Anton* (2013). Recalling the New York literary scene in the mid-1980s, Rushdie (through the voice of his alter ego Joseph Anton) describes parties attended by, among others, Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Omar Cabezas, and Rosario Murillo. These figures, he says, “articulate[d] views not often heard on American platforms.” At one party, Murillo, standing next to the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, invited “the young Indian writer (and member of the British Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign) to come and see the *contra* war for himself” (2013, 77). Rushdie points out transnational connections that are both coincidental—the relocated Egyptian temple—and deliberate: the Indian writer, resident in London, visiting New York, who chooses a political affiliation with Managua.

The result of that visit was *The Jaguar Smile*, a book that Rushdie reports having written in a “frenzy” in three weeks (2013, 78). The book makes no mention of Palestine, but Rushdie repeatedly compares Nicaragua under the Sandinistas to postindependence India, in both negative and positive terms: he notes the crowded buses, the poverty, and the Sandinistas’ censorship of the press, but also the

Nicaraguans’ love of poetry and their appreciation for Gandhi and Tagore. Every time that Rushdie seeks to situate himself in relation to what he sees in Nicaragua, he does so as an Indian. He writes in the prologue, “I was myself the child of a successful revolt against a great power,” and suggests that he shares with the Nicaraguans “some awareness of the view from underneath, and of how it felt to be there, looking up at the descending heel” (2007, 4).

The triangular relationship that Said and Rushdie sketch out—Said in political and structural terms, Rushdie from a more identitarian perspective—does not stop, then, with the critique of U.S. neoimperialism in the 1980s. It also demonstrates how transnational alliances might be forged, from connections across the global South that could then be extended to the global North. Said and Rushdie had American and British citizenship, respectively, but they identified as Palestinian and Indian nationals in the first instance. The forms of solidarity that they promote—the “energy to comprehend and engage other societies, traditions, histories” (Said 1988, 72)—is aimed at a metropolitan Anglophone readership, to be sure, but both writers set an example of how to practice this solidarity by showcasing their own affiliation with Nicaraguans and with other victims of U.S. global hegemony. They thus position *themselves* as the third point in a triangle, linking the global North to the global South, from their positions as perhaps the most visible “Third World” contributors to mainstream English-language media at that time. Rushdie’s politics have since shifted significantly to the right (Rushdie 2002); this is evident from his introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Jaguar Smile*, in which he suggests that the book is naïve, and that “romance has given way to

. . . the irresistible power of superpower itself” (2007, 2). Yet this later Rushdie should not, as Tim Brennan has argued, overshadow the Rushdie of the early and mid-1980s, who has been “lost in the uproar [over the *Satanic Verses* affair] and [is] in need of recovery” (2006, 82). This Rushdie both influenced and was influenced by Said (Rushdie 2010, 166–186), and like him played a major role in depicting the regions of the global South as places with their own histories, cultures, and ideas.

These figures matter for our understanding of the relationship between Middle Eastern and Latin American studies, then, because of the specific historical links that they made between the two regions, and because of their insistence on the importance of comparison as a form of oppositional political work. Said wrote of Chomsky, in “Irangate”: “Chomsky’s distinction is that he is not afraid to make connections” (1987, para. 50). This was Said’s and the early Rushdie’s distinction too, and it remains a suggestive model for scholars today, even, or perhaps especially, if such connections fall outside our expertise and experience.

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DEBATES: LATIN AMERICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The Death of Alberto Nisman, the Argentine Presidency Unhinged, and the Secret History of Shared United States-Argentine Strategy in the Middle East

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In January 2015, Alberto Nisman’s body turned up with a bullet to the head. In the necropolitical tradition of entrepreneur/organized crime figure Alfredo Yabráñ, who died of a self-inflicted gunshot to the face in 1998, and the still-unsolved severing of Juan Perón’s skeletal hands from his corpse in 1987, Nisman’s death became immediate fodder for a national whodunit. Often guided by the fiercely divisive binary of current Argentine politics, fingers pointed at a range of possible killers from the government of Iran to disgruntled Argentine intelligence agents to angry drug dealers to the president herself, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Iran emerged at the vortex of conflicting interpretations and accusations. In 2006, as a federally appointed special prosecutor, Nisman had indicted eight prominent Iranian government officials in connection with the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) headquarters in Buenos Aires that had killed 85. International arrest warrants had followed for five of the eight. Almost ten years later, Nisman’s death came on the eve of his scheduled appearance before an Argentine congressional committee to present evidence of a purported plot by Fernández de Kirchner and Argentine foreign minister Héctor Timerman, in conjunction with Iranian authorities, to nix the Argentine prosecution of the bombers.

The killing is unsolved. Nisman’s allegations against the president and foreign minister remain tantalizing but undemonstrated, as do many of the charges and countercharges that have been levelled through 2015. Even so, Argentina’s multiple readings of Nisman’s death suggest four keys to both Argentina’s Iran policy over the past 20 years, and policy in the Middle East more broadly. First, the case tells us what Argentina’s policy is not. Since the late 1940s, Argentine Middle East

policy has been framed in Argentine scholarly literatures as an “equidistant” approach to the region, balancing measured support for Israel with its equivalent toward the Arab world. Save as a public diplomatic stance, the equidistance model has never made much sense. It leaves Iran, a non-Arab state, and non-Arab social and political actors, such as the Kurds, entirely out of the mix. It suggests a decades-long policy stasis in the face of evident shifts. And it fails to distinguish between ranging and diverse Arab, Muslim, and other interests in the region, across national boundaries (Klich 1996; Cisneros and Escudé 2009). In addition, the equidistance model belies a rich archival document trove for the years through 1975 in the Archive of the Foreign Relations Ministry.

Second, while the Middle East is a foreign policy tinderbox in many countries, in Argentina it has left leaders open to wild accusations of wrongdoing and irrational behavior, sensationalized by international and domestic media too willing to present arguments without evidence. Third, sensationalized media coverage underlines that Middle East policy has often been founded on domestic policies, strategies, and political circumstances with little specific relevance to Iran or to other countries in the region. Fourth, and perhaps most important, the sensational is a misreading of policy making as erratic and quickly changing. Argentina’s policies in Iran and the Middle East have evolved slowly, with careful calculation, and often (though not always) in alignment with U.S. strategic priorities.

The U.S. journalist Dexter Filkins traced Nisman’s death to what many in Argentina saw as a dramatic policy shift in 2013. After a decade of tense Argentine-Iranian relations over the AMIA bombing, Argentina announced a deal struck with