

## Introduction

### EDWARD SAID: A MEMORIAL ISSUE

**Patrick Deer,  
Gyan Prakash,  
and Ella Shohat**

This special issue of *Social Text* pays tribute to the work of Edward Said, an admired colleague and friend. The almost three years since Said's untimely death (September 25, 2003) have made his achievements and interventions only more relevant. Though his work represents both monumental scholarly activity and tireless public intellectual energy, it refuses to be monumentalized. Instead, in an increasingly bleak political landscape, Said continues to inspire a rich variety of oppositional practices and committed scholarship. As befits his remarkably productive and multivarious career, this tribute offers contributions that cross geographical and disciplinary boundaries, and pursues Said's stubbornly out-of-place critical practice, which displayed an intense awareness and frequent suspicion of the politics of knowledge. Indeed, for Said, the intellectual was defined by his or her refusal to accommodate to the agendas of state power. As he declared in a 1995 interview collected in *The Politics of Dispossession*, "The intellectual must maintain a margin of independence and must be an instrument of resurrecting 'lost memory.'"<sup>1</sup> This oppositional logic also characterized his ambivalent relation to the disciplinary fields and practices in which his work found its greatest resonances. While *Orientalism* (1979) was a founding intervention in what came to be called "postcolonial studies," Said maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the field's institutionalization within the U.S. academy. Though Said produced a rich body of theoretically sophisticated criticism of the European novel and its relations to colonialism, he remained ambivalent both about the novel as a genre and about the domestication of critical theory within literary studies. While his role as a public intellectual was a frequent inspiration to practitioners of cultural studies, he was apt to proclaim himself, jokingly, a "high culture guy." Yet this humane, secular critique applied as much to his work on literature, music, or theory as to his tireless advocacy in print and other media of the Palestinian cause. Said's dazzling erudition was often subjected to his own alienation of the knowledge he possessed, insisting on the need to cross discursive and institutional boundaries, to take up the burden of rigorous theoretical and political challenges, to write from our own displaced positions with precision and clarity.

*Social Text* 87, Vol. 24, No. 2, Summer 2006. © 2006 by Duke University Press.

For well over a decade, postcolonial theory has been visible even beyond the Anglo-American academy. Many articles have invoked Said as preeminent in postcolonial studies, but that field seemed somehow disconnected from public debates about Palestine, where Said's name has also been prominent. The animosity of some critics since the late 1970s toward Said's "trilogy"—*Orientalism*, *The Question of Palestine*, and *Covering Islam*—reached its paroxysm a decade later. This panicked hyperbole was partially a response to Said's prominent position as a Palestinian National Council member, one who could legitimately communicate with powerful government officials like George Schultz. But orientalist scholars and die-hard defenders of any and all Israeli policies showed little interest in or knowledge of anticolonial writings and post-structuralist theories—intellectual currents at the heart of Said's contribution. This was in sharp contrast to the way intersecting debates on race, colonialism, and representation helped shape the emerging field of postcolonial studies. Said's intervention opened up the intellectual and political horizons of English and comparative literature while also powerfully influencing diverse other disciplines.

The dissemination of Said's critique of orientalism, meanwhile, helped transform the field of Middle Eastern studies itself. The impact of *Orientalism* there is distinct from its impact in postcolonial literary and cultural studies programs, where post-structuralist methodologies are more widely practiced than in Middle Eastern studies departments. At the time of *Orientalism*'s publication, the critical scholars of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA)—many of whom contributed to *Middle East Report* and the *Journal of Palestine Studies*—were politically and intellectually allied with Said's critique. Having themselves challenged the essentialist and Manichaeic thesis of "Islam and the West" promoted by Bernard Lewis and more recently by Samuel Huntington, critical scholars over the past two decades gradually came to occupy center stage at MESA. This kind of transformation, it should be noted, was not without precedent in the American academy. It was foreshadowed by another form of area studies—Latin American studies—which had, since the 1970s, produced an impressive corpus of work critical of neocolonial policies and imperial discourses; and where the writings of figures such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Eduardo Galeano, Gundar Frank, Henrique Cardoso, Ariel Dorfman, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Herbert Schiller, and Armand Mattelart played a crucial role, becoming a kind of lingua franca in progressive circles. Said's own intervention thus should also be seen as part of a larger epochal shift in academia beginning in the late 1960s, with the establishment of ethnic studies and women's studies programs, and the emergence of diverse critical fields of inquiry—Marxism, third worldism, semiotics,

feminism. The diverse area studies programs largely bypassed or rejected the post–World War II Department of Defense’s vision of scholarship in the service of Cold War geopolitics.<sup>2</sup>

Yet in Middle Eastern studies that shift came later and was much more contested, leading to an array of well-oiled foundations and institutes that began to take aim at the entire field from without. In the post-9/11 landscape of “patriotism” and “homeland security,” hawkish Zionists, neocons, and orientalists found the time opportune to launch the reconquest of what had been up to then “their” ivory towers. The longtime critics of the field of Middle Eastern studies could now enjoy a powerful observation post as self-anointed monarchs surveying from above these “un-American” activities, without having to bother to respond to the rich intellectual corpus on orientalism, Islam, and Israel/Palestine. The current assault on Middle Eastern studies has escalated from the familiar journalistic and pseudo-scholarly “exposés” to the 2004 congressional hearings targeting the field’s Title VI funding. The names denounced included the usual critical Middle Eastern studies scholars, Said most prominently, yet for the first time an entirely new field of knowledge—postcolonial studies—began to “scan” on the neocon radar. But the case against Middle Eastern studies relies on classic McCarthyite tactics of distortion and misrepresentation. Contrary to the democratic principles of self-representation, the congressional hearing was based on the testimony of a single person, Stanley Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institute and a contributing editor to the *National Review*, who represents a narrow neoconservative constituency. But the critics never bother to ask, as Joel Beinin puts it, “whether scholars who study the Middle East might actually know something that would lead them to think that the world is not simply divided between the forces of good (us) and evil (them).”<sup>3</sup>

In his work as a literary and cultural critic, in *Beginnings, The World, the Text, and the Critic*, or *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said stood outside the West’s seemingly transparent and beloved narratives and insisted on their complicity with state power and imperial domination. Indeed, one of the most striking things about Said’s lifelong engagement with both the European and postcolonial novel is his sustained skepticism about the genre’s centrality to “modern Occidental culture.” Writing in disarmingly lucid and elegant prose, he was instrumental in making French post-structuralist theory, especially the work of Michel Foucault, accessible to an Anglo-American audience. Yet Said was an early critic of the apolitical formalism of U.S. deconstruction and “American ‘Left’ Literary Criticism”: “In acting entirely within this domain, then, the literary critic effectively confirms the culture and society enforcing those restrictions; this confirmation acts to strengthen the civil and political societies whose fabric

*Social Text*, in  
a sense, began  
its career with  
Said's work. In the  
1979 inaugural  
issue, the journal  
published Said's  
groundbreaking  
essay "Zionism  
from the  
Standpoint of  
Its Victims."

is the culture itself."<sup>4</sup> Thus the literary critic participates in producing a "liberal consensus": "The formal, restricted analysis of literary-aesthetic works validates the culture, the culture validates the humanist, the humanist the critic, and the whole enterprise the state" (175). A decade later in *Culture and Imperialism*, Said pursued the same critique of culture defined as a "protective enclosure" for which the price of admission was "check your politics at the door."<sup>5</sup> This self-declared sequel to *Orientalism* is structured around a critical "counterpoint": between European novelistic discourse, whose "incorporative, quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form" (71) had intimate ties to the "consolidated vision" of imperialism, and the decolonizing counternarratives of "liberationist anti-imperialism" (279) he locates in the work of decolonizing historians and intellectuals like C. L. R. James, Ranajit Guha, George Antonius, or Fanon and in postcolonial literature. Though its textual analyses remain largely within the orbit of the literary, Said operates here with a strong sense of the self-contradictory genealogy of culture that informs the cultural studies of Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall. Said's sustained exploration of lateness and endings in the last years of his life, in which the work of Theodor Adorno and the corpus of Western classical music took center stage, was accompanied by a return to the critique of theory and an insistence on the continuing relevance of the humanist intellectual tradition. But this was an engaged, politicized humanism that insisted on its worldly ties, which for Said meant an unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause. It remained very clear that, for Said, humanism produced an oppositional stance for criticism; just as in his earlier use of Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, this *longue durée* conception of humanism allowed him to critique the narrowness and aestheticizing tendencies of a liberal or conservative culturalism all too easily compatible with an era of neo-imperialism and permanent war.

*Social Text*, in a sense, began its career with Said's work. In the 1979 inaugural issue, the journal published Said's groundbreaking essay "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims," a version of a chapter that would appear that same year in his book *The Question of Palestine*. Such a move at the time, when it was nearly impossible to utter the word "Palestine" in the public sphere, was vital for the opening up of the debate in leftist academic circles. Two issues later, however, the journal ended up publishing a critical response titled "Never Again? Zionism and the Holocaust." Describing his dilemma as both a Marxist and a Jew, the author Ronald Aronson applauded *Social Text* for publishing Said's "moving and beautiful account," seeing the publication itself as reflecting "the same process whereby the Palestinians have finally emerged on the world stage as a people."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, the article focused on the Holocaust as an answer to the Palestinian perspective, reproducing a rather common

rebuttal. In many ways the article failed to imagine or dialogue with a Palestinian narrative in relation to Zionism, one that is not always already simply subordinated to the Holocaust.

The journal's decision to publish a response that placed the Holocaust at center stage and marginalized the unfolding history of Palestine in the wake of Zionist settlement was indicative of the anxiety, tensions, and contradictions among leftists about the question of Palestine and Israel. The application of anticolonialist and third worldist analytic paradigms to the Middle East has provoked much debate in leftist circles. Scholarly work on the subject, written from within such critical perspectives, has often been deemed "controversial"; its authors, of diverse ethnic or national backgrounds, often end up having to pay a high price professionally and politically. Although not a monolith, *Social Text's* collective courageously introduced a debate into the heart of the intellectual Left but also manifested a certain ambivalence toward that very decision. In the ensuing years, the journal's editorial focus often reflected this tendency to shy away from addressing Zionism, Palestine, and the Middle East. While Latin American issues were prominent in the journal's early days, it was not the case for the Middle East, despite the ongoing and devastating U.S. impact on the region. *Social Text* published a number of essays on the region: Eqbal Ahmed ("What's Behind the Crises in Iran and Afghanistan," issue 3, fall 1980), Norman O. Brown ("The Apocalypse of Islam," issue 8, winter 1983–84), Barbara Harlow ("Return to Haifa: 'Opening the Borders' in Palestinian Literature," issue 13–14, winter–spring 1986), Yerach Gover ("Were You There, or Was It a Dream?: Militaristic Aspects of Israeli Society in Modern Hebrew Literature," issue 13–14, winter–spring 1986), Yerach Gover and Ella Shohat ("In Defence of Mordechai Vanunu: Nuclear Threat in the Middle East," issue 18, winter 1987–88); but a shift was long overdue. By the fall of 1988, a special double issue, titled "Colonial Discourse," included essays on the Middle East framed in relation to the post/colonial debate—this was clearly a moment of shifting editorial tendencies.

Once again *Social Text* featured Said in its pages. Bruce Robbins conducted an interview with Said on American intellectuals and Middle Eastern politics, while the opening essay took off, as it were, from the journal's inaugural issue with an essay referencing Said's early contribution, titled "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims."<sup>7</sup> Around this period of the beginning of the first Intifada, the journal also invited Said to speak at a plenary session it organized titled "Resistance and National Liberation in the Middle East" at the 6th Annual Socialist Scholars Conference.<sup>8</sup> Nearly two decades later, and almost three years after his death, Said's work remains a frequent intertextual reference for contributors to

the journal. In the fall of 1994, *Social Text* dedicated its fortieth issue to Said's *Culture and Imperialism* with essays by Bruce Robbins, Mary Louise Pratt, Jonathan Arac, and R. Radhakrishnan, followed by Said's response to his critics.

These various strands in Said's work inform the contributions to the current special issue of *Social Text*. Locating *Orientalism* in the open-ended horizon of Said's "secular criticism," Stathis Gourgouris reconsiders the challenge of this now "classic" work to comparative literary studies. Arguing that it continues to provide "a brilliant armory for engaging the institutions and structures of our historical present," he explores Said's secular strain of critique on the level of both the "historical-geographical" and the "allegorical-epistemological." Sura Rath pursues another aspect of the ethical and the political by engaging Said's politicized, postcolonial humanism in the context of a century of orientalism and U.S. imperialism. Rath explores the seemingly untimely theme of tradition in the name of "a proper archaeology of critical theory" in order to offer one possible answer to the haunting and urgent question: "What would Said say?"

Responding to Said's contribution to literary studies, Iveta Jusová and Dan Reyes offer a reading of Amy Levy's treatment of Victorian Zionism in her novel, *Reuben Sachs*; just as Levy is self-consciously responding to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, they contend their own essay offers both counterpoint and extension to Said's reading of Eliot in *Culture and Imperialism*. Tracing an arc from *The Question of Palestine* in Said's critique of Zionist ideology for its tendency to keep hidden or to disappear "the literal historical ground of its growth, its political cost to the native inhabitants of Palestine, and its militantly oppressive discrimination between Jews and non-Jews," Jusová and Reyes argue that Levy's novel offers a gendered critique and an insistence on its historicity qualitatively different from Eliot's more canonical work. Gil Hochberg looks at the meaning of "Jew" and "Palestinian" in relation to Said's position on the "peace process." Contrasting his insistence on the complexity of memorialization with the fixities of national history, Hochberg argues that Said's perception of Zionism as a form of colonialism—related to yet different from European colonialisms—is directly informed by his views on the politics of memory. Hochberg counterpoints Said's memory work with Nietzsche's more ironic critique of "excessive memory" and contends that "if the call to forget ('and go on') is associated with the advocacy of separation and a politics of partition, Said presents memory as the only valid means for creating an inclusive Israeli-Palestinian society."

This special issue of *Social Text* also offers perspectives that expand the range of Said's work. In a wide-ranging historical analysis of the sta-

tus and struggle over “al-Andalus” and the Moorish presence in Spanish culture and historiography, Hishaam Aidi extends the work of Middle Eastern studies to the Iberian peninsula. Given special urgency by the 3/11 attacks in Madrid, current debates over the relationship between Spain and its Arab minorities are located in a longer history of Spanish colonialism, Catholicism, orientalism, and anxieties over national identity and Europeanness. As both emergent democracy, economic success story, and bastion at the borders of “Fortress Europe,” Aidi argues, Spain, in its long history of ties to the Islamic world, has found itself at the cutting edge of the current so-called culture wars. Nerissa Balce extends Said’s work in a different direction by analyzing the visual culture and erotics of U.S. imperialism in representations of the Filipina. In the vein of feminist critical readings of imperial discourse (Anne McClintock, Ann Laura Stoler), Balce traces a “porno-tropics” that figures colonialist representations of indigenous femininity in the “imperial archipelago” of the Philippines. Reading travel literature, photography, and imperial ethnography with a postcolonial eye, Balce seeks to imaginatively reconstruct the violence of American rule in the Philippines since 1898, connecting this eroticizing, subjugating visual archive to the current imaginary of the era of globalized exploitation, migrant labor, and sex tourism.

The last two contributions to this issue explore Said’s own experiments in visual culture and autobiography. Taking as her point of departure *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), Said’s collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr, as well as his reportage on returning to Palestine, Ana Dopico traces a Saidian inventory of secular mourning and “late return.” Her essay explores how Said’s “humanistic narration of besieged nationalism and resilient national character” integrates Palestinian politics, “working against their segregation and dispersal.” Dopico connects this insistence on the making of an inventory, and on literal and symbolic rituals of mourning and burial as part of humanist practice, to Said’s lifelong, seldom melancholy, dialogue with the work of Giambattista Vico and Gramsci. In the closing essay, Iona Luca considers Said’s more recent exercise in autobiography, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999), as a *lieu de mémoire* in which different temporalities, personas, and histories create a space to coexist. The urgency of this effort at personal and historical reconstruction was heightened not only by Said’s illness but also by the vicious, mendacious pseudoscholarly attacks on his credibility as a personal witness to the violent uprooting and exile of the Palestinian people. Reconstructing the reception of *Out of Place*, and paying particular attention to its representations of childhood, Luca explores the memoir’s dangerous “double edge,” its intense representation of people and places as “moments . . . turned

The war on Iraq  
has confirmed  
the truth of Said's  
arguments.

away from the movement of history and then returned, through personal recollection, to the pages of his memoir, thus becoming a Palestinian 'site of memory' so much feared and criticized by his opponents."

Edward Said carried out his persistently critical work with such great passion and determination that his work stands as the model of oppositional criticism. This *Social Text* special issue offers examples of the diverse and complex critical commitments that Said's work continues to inspire. By oppositional criticism we do not mean the sort of sniping and finger wagging that often occurs in the name of politics, but something more profound and trenchant. It is an order of criticism that emerges uncannily from the way Said engages with texts, not as a political add-on, not as an ideological adornment that can be attributed to a sociological outside, but as readings that gain oppositional force by outlining the historical location of texts, by underscoring their geographical notations, by bringing into view the worldliness of representations. It is perhaps because Said practiced this kind of oppositional criticism with such force that we were lulled into thinking that the orientalist discourse had been backed into retreat. His *Orientalism*, after all, inaugurated a whole tradition of scholarship that challenged orientalist scholarship. But Said returned again and again to connections between authoritative representations and empire. In articles and books, including *Culture and Imperialism*, he resolutely and vigilantly reminded us of the tenacity and ever-changing forms of imperial knowledge and power.

The war on Iraq has confirmed the truth of Said's arguments. There was something very infuriating and depressing about the praise heaped on Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (2002). As we know, Lewis was a central figure in the ties forged between the warmongering crew of the American administration and orientalists. His role brought into view the vital role that orientalist thought has played in unleashing the imperial intervention by the United States. Orientalism stands at the center of imperialist aggression; the war is orientalism by other means. It is a brutal assertion of the claim that "we" know who "they" are; "we" know that the Arabs will use weapons of mass destruction, but the Israelis can be trusted; "we" know that military force must be applied to secure Iraq's compliance with UN resolutions, yet Israeli violations of UN resolutions on occupation and illegal settlements require no action but only understanding and sympathy. Ironies abound and half-truths are heaped upon half-truths: invasion was redescribed as liberation, and the killing of civilians was rationalized in the name of civilization. How do we square the manufactured image of the war as liberation with the reality of American and British guns pointed at terrified



Iraqi children kneeling on the ground, their cheeks caked with dust, hands raised, whimpering with fear?

Where do we turn when confronted with this ugliness of the war on the Orient? Here it is once again instructive and inspiring to turn to Edward Said. Through his work as a scholar, as a critic, as a political commentator, Said asked insistently: Who speaks? For what and whom? How does an intellectual articulate his or her various objects of affiliation? What is his or her place in the West? Or in the third world? What is the specific contribution and intervention to be made by the intellectual, displaced from a “native” culture, and at odds with the metropolitan culture and society? He challenged established authority and identity with these questions, and chalked out a culture of criticism composed through critical affiliations and appropriations. Out of this acute sense of the intellectual’s worldliness and affiliations, there emerged his haunting question: “When will we resist?”

## Notes

1. Edward W. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 183.

2. For more on reading Said’s *Orientalism* in the context of the changing academic landscape since the late 1960s, and its impact on the “traveling” of Said’s work into the debates over the Middle East, see Ella Shohat, “The ‘Postcolonial’ in Translation,” ed. Rashid Khalidi, special issue, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 3 (2004): 55–75.

3. Joel Beinin, “The Israelization of American Middle East Policy Discourse,” *Social Text*, no. 75 (2003): 125–40.

4. Edward W. Said, “Reflections on American ‘Left’ Literary Criticism,” *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 175.

5. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), xiv.

6. Ronald Aronson, “Never Again? Zionism and the Holocaust,” *Social Text*, no. 3 (1980): 60–61.

7. Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text*, nos. 19–20 (1988): 1–35.

8. Along with Edward Said, the speakers were Amiram Efrati (MAPAM Party, Israel), Sheila Ryan (*Middle East Report*), Yerach Gover (*Social Text*), with moderator Ella Shohat (*Social Text*), Borough of Manhattan Community College, 9 April 1988.

