




BOOK FORUM

Places of Body: On Authors, Lives, and Agency

Hosam Aboul-Ela 

University of Houston, Texas, USA
Email: habouel@central.uh.edu

Abstract

Edward Said's life's work illustrated the very argument for individual agency that became a theoretical focus for him beginning with his classic 1978 study, *Orientalism*.

Keywords: Said; agency; biography; Arab-American; Foucault

Timothy Brennan references in the opening of his rich new biography of Edward W. Said his own relationship with the renowned critic, who directed his early work as a doctoral candidate at Columbia University and maintained a mentor-like friendship with him as Brennan went on to establish himself as a prominent scholar of Latin American and postcolonial writing. As if this inventory were a challenge, many of the reviewers of the work have included mention of their own direct contact with the great critic—the time they met him at a conference, rode with him in an elevator, or talked with him on the phone. These personal anecdotes ostensibly function as a legitimizing device by suggesting a propinquity to the monumental figure on the part of the reviewer. But they also call attention to the way Said's career evolved as a particular type of struggle with vocation. In the work of one of Said's early and most powerful influences, Michel Foucault, authorship has been simultaneously enhanced out of all proportion and diminished in the modern west. Successful authors become celebrities, and at that moment, the material experience of an embodied person writing becomes elusive. As Said focused increasingly over the last three decades of his life on (at times Swiftian) polemics and activism—while never abandoning his *métier* as a literary critic—his struggle to resist the loss of agency that comes with status as a celebrity author accelerated. This phenomenon is both a central motif in Brennan's book and the answer to the question behind it: *Why a biography of Said?*

Rather than evade the trope of detailing any direct contact, I will start with my own inventory. I first met Edward Said when he came to give a lecture on

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literature and history at Cairo University in 1995. I had finished my PhD, moved to Cairo, and entered a phase of underemployment. I then met him several more times over the last eight years of his life at dinners, parties, or conferences, mostly by virtue of the fact that his son became my close friend during this time, and in spite of the very divergent positions in the hierarchy of academic power between the elder Said and myself—for example, at a Modern Language Association conference, where he was the president of the organization and I a desperate job seeker—he always managed when we met to put me at ease and make me feel worthy of a conversation. In sum, I knew him better than those who remember passing him once on the street, but not nearly enough to claim a long-standing or notably deep friendship. The primary effect Said had on me was through his body of work and not through any personal relationship.

My first memory of exposure to his work is from my days as an undergraduate student in Texas. As I worked my way through a very traditional curriculum of literary studies, with heavy doses of the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, Northrop Frye, and even some Latin and Greek, the work of Said operated as a disruptive force around the edges of my university experience. My older brother discussed with me a book he was reading called *Orientalism*, which presented a different point of view than that readily available in literary or Middle Eastern studies at universities in the United States. When I visited the teaching assistant in my massive lecture hall introduction to political science class, she asked me where I was from, mentioned her recent reading of Said's work, then closed the office door and told a long story about having given up on her ambition to study Middle Eastern politics from an Arab point of view after relentless hostility from supervisors. She had decided to write a dissertation on the Federalist Papers instead.

Then Said came to my university to speak in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. In this talk before a very large crowd, he deftly parried jeering hecklers as he laid out a systematic case for an anti-imperialist approach to the politics of the region that centered on Palestinian human rights. I sat in the back of the auditorium, an anonymous sophomore who would not meet and talk to Said until more than a decade had passed and the venue had moved across the Atlantic, but this talk constituted the first time that I heard political views regularly expressed in the home where I grew up presented persuasively in public before a large group of Americans.

Today, Said is often thought of as a widely admired celebrity who hobnobbed with elites. Much of what is written about him reinforces the author function that critical discourse has created. But it is important to have books like Brennan's *Places of Mind* that do not fall into this trap. Said made the decision to speak out about the question of Palestine at a time when there was a rock-solid pro-Israel consensus in the US public sphere. If, today, discussions that see Palestinians as humans with agency appear only rarely in the most influential American media, primarily being relegated to corners of online, social, and alternative media, in the 1970s, there was no social or internet media and alternative media was relegated to the fringe far more definitively than it is now. Today, the consensus among the political class in the United States sees the Palestinian cause as a loser at the ballot box and on the fundraising dial, but a few

disruptive forces like Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar bring along a group of allies reluctantly willing to observe obvious realities. At that time, there were no disruptions and politicians marched in lockstep. Even university campuses, which today offer space for diverse views (to the pronounced chagrin of Trumpists and right-wing governors), were hostile spaces for those critical of settler colonialism and the rights of Palestinians. My teaching assistant's experience was typical. Progressive groups on campuses took up any cause but Palestine; Middle Eastern Studies centers routinely settled for faculty focused on Israel, Iran (until recently at that time a US ally), and Turkey, circumventing the Arab perspective entirely lest the question of Palestine be slipped into the conversation surreptitiously.

It was in this atmosphere that Edward Said made the decision to advocate publicly for Palestinian rights, a decision that was by no means embraced and applauded by commentators. Edward Said was the first person of Arab origin who understood the language and history of the region to manage to force his way onto the main stage of the US public sphere to speak for the humanity of ordinary Arabs, in general, and displaced Palestinians, in particular. The mainstream outlets that grudgingly gave him this space—*Time* magazine, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Nightline*—less grudgingly criticized him and the positions he took. The moniker “professor of terror” stuck to him. The right of center journal *Commentary* published a long attack piece arguing that he had fabricated his connection to Palestine just before publication of his magnum opus *Culture and Imperialism*. And most oddly in this vein, a public campaign to have him fired from Columbia for throwing a rock during a family trip to Lebanon caused a stir. Brennan is correct to highlight this moment, and he adroitly catches its strangeness, including the murkiness around what actually happened. In early 2000, after the publication of his most important works and his elevation to the position of University Professor at Columbia, Said was traveling with family and friends in Lebanon shortly after occupying Israeli forces had pulled back from Lebanon's south. To the vacation was added a guided tour of the newly liberated area. In a moment befitting of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, Said was goaded for reasons everyone there remembers differently to throw a rock from a great distance in the direction of an Israeli guard tower near the Lebanon/Israel border. A photograph capturing his windup was picked up by news services, and quickly a campaign had started to have him stripped of his endowed chair, his tenure, and his very job at Columbia. If the campaign ultimately failed, its enthusiastic and virulent momentum was telling. The strangeness of the incident stems from another of its inherent tensions. The idea that an elderly literature professor, whose body was debilitated by leukemia and chemotherapy and who wouldn't have been able to project even a pebble, represented any sort of threat to the mightiest military machine in the region speaks volumes to the uneven discursive playing field in the United States around Israeli colonialism. Brennan calls attention to the pointed cruelty of the attacks that inadvertently highlighted his illness: “When the stone-throwing incident hit the papers ... a student wrote a tasteless letter to the *Columbia Daily*

Spectator mocking him for being fat, not realizing that the midriff bulge was a tumor.”¹

Although the figure of Said is now held with a certain reverence among particular cross-sections of US society—scholars, activists, Arab and Palestinian Americans—in many corridors even today, the most unfounded attacks on his person are routinely mobilized, so deep is the resentment toward this most important individual force in changing public perception around the question of Palestine and the problem of Islamophobia. The legacy of these types of attacks is most obvious today in “comments” and online messages that routinely criticized Timothy Brennan for not “taking Said’s critics seriously,” with “Said’s critics” serving as code for pro-Israel ethno-nationalist attacks.

Even among literary critics and other scholars who have engaged with Said’s academic work, his emergence as one of the most prominent figures for study in several disciplines is complicated. At the same time that he was being routinely attacked in the public sphere for his principled defense of Palestinian rights, a more academic set of questions was being raised around his scholarship. In subtle ways, these debates turned on the question of the embodied individual as much as the public sphere discourses found in the anti-Palestinian punditocracy piling up on a lonely individual or even the admiring reviewer passing the charismatic celebrity on the street. A primary line of attack directed at Said’s scholarship turned on his commitment to continental theory, in general, and, in particular, his status as a major interpreter of the work of Michel Foucault in the United States. Said’s commitment to Foucault’s work, like his advocacy for the Palestinian cause, emerged after he had established himself as a prominent literary critic, highly invested in phenomenological readings of canonical British works from the long nineteenth century. American critics who advocated for an engagement with French theory in the US academy during the 1970s and eighties were the disruptors of their moment and, in this sense, Said’s engagement with the critical movement coincided with his general turn toward serving to disrupt received wisdoms in American thought. Still, as his own work became more influential among literary critics, commentators at times caricatured Said as a strict partisan of European anti-foundationalism. In fact, in his introduction to *Orientalism*, Said makes a point to distinguish himself from Foucault, his greatest French influence: “Yet unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous body of texts constituting a discursive formation like *Orientalism*.”²

Almost certainly, Said has in mind here one of Foucault’s most famous titles: the essay “What Is an Author?”³ Foucault argues therein that the European

¹ Timothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2021), 350.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 23.

³ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 101–20.

Enlightenment created the category of the great literary master who rises above the actual contents of the work. As a result, literature's complexity is subjugated in contemporary readings to a comparatively simplistic discourse of heroic individuals. As both Foucault and Said struggled with the demands of celebrity in tension with their commitments to rigorous thought, the distinction made by Said at the beginning of *Orientalism* should be read as far from straightforward. The statement here deals with the individual authors who wrote from Europe about a so-called Orient: Sir Richard Burton, Edward William Lane, Ernst Renan, and so on. But in retrospect, it connotes two other important trajectories in Said's own career as a thinker.

First, it is the beginning of a long movement in Said's thinking away from Foucault, in particular, and the French theory movement, in general. In 1982's "Traveling Theory," for example, he ends the essay with a critique of what he reads as Foucault's closed system and, thereafter, emphasizes in his work the agency of the intellectual/activist—in key passages of *Culture and Imperialism* including its discussion of Antonio Gramsci's "Some Aspects of the Southern Question"⁴ and its comparison of two generations of third world intellectuals struggling to find a voice under the shadow of "metropolitan culture."⁵ Said does not dump Foucault; in fact, he writes a major review for the *New York Times* of a new volume of English translations of his work shortly before his own death. But his writing after *Orientalism* increasingly shows an attention to theoretical approaches that incorporate the intellectual's political agency.

This is the second way in which the passage from *Orientalism* is predictive. Two pages after the comment distinguishing his view of authorship from Foucault's, Said writes:

Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an "Oriental" as a child growing up in two British colonies. All of my education in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted. In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals.⁶

Said's engagement with the discourse of Orientalism is systematic, erudite, and lengthy, yet—particularly for Arab Americans like myself—these sentences at the beginning of the book affect an emotional response. They are preceded by the study's most extended reference to the work of Antonio Gramsci, who would become an increasingly pervasive presence in Said's work after *Orientalism*, particularly in *Culture and Imperialism* and *Representations of the Intellectual*.

⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 49–51.

⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 209–20.

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 25.

Although both Gramsci and Foucault made the political impact of cultural institutions a primary focus of their work, important variations distinguish their approaches. These are several, and include a widely accepted reading of Gramsci as a thinker interested in exposing the power of the cultural public sphere as a step toward mobilization against its manipulation. With few exceptions, Foucault is read as much less interested in the power of activism to confront the pervasive power of discourse in the post Enlightenment west. Considering an embodied Foucault does not erase this distinction, but it does reinforce the fact that in varieties of cultural Marxism and post-Marxisms of, for example, the French left, the issue of the political response to new manifestations of social control through culture continually challenged the thinkers who engaged this problem. One of Foucault's most important biographers, the French journalist Didier Eribon, documented the way Foucault did not practice quietism, but rather protested ferociously on a number of issues and in various countries in his later life, such as when he traveled to Spain in 1975 with a group of French intellectuals and celebrities to protest executions carried out by Franco's fascist government. This trip famously included a physical struggle between Foucault and a Spanish policeman, when the former refused to relinquish pamphlets he was circulating denouncing the government's actions. Eribon cites the film star Yves Montand's eyewitness account: "Foucault's physical bravery was also among Montand's strongest memories of this Spanish expedition. This trait appears again and again in every account of Foucault's militant action—his force of refusal, his will to rebel against the repressive act, against police action; against 'disipline.'" ⁷ This example suggests that Foucault himself did not live out his life committed to the negative principle of difference as an erasure of all possibilities for a subjective agent. A less extreme reading of this problem might be exemplified in a study like Lois McNay's *Gender and Agency*: "When this exclusionary logic is extended to explain all aspects of subject formation, it results in an attenuated account of agency which ... leaves unexplained the capabilities of individuals to respond to difference in a less defensive, and even at times a more creative fashion." ⁸ Said's borrowing with distinction in 1978, Eribon's complication through biography in 1989, and McNay's qualification through feminist theory in 2000 all suggest that a continuum of responses necessarily emerged to resist the growing pervasive stultifying effect of contemporary culture that Foucault identified so clearly.

Some of the most important reviews of *Places of Mind* have been written by reviewers of an Arab background with specialties in the region's history and politics. These reviews have at times suggested that Brennan as a non-Arabic speaker and a nonspecialist in the Arab Middle East could never manage to capture the way Said's Arab heritage shapes his work. I do not agree with this assessment, which seems to ignore Said's reminder to us that "All of my

⁷ Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 265.

⁸ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

education in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been western.” Yet the commentaries themselves signify something about the writerly choices Said engaged. These choices have made him a much contested “founder of discursivity,” to borrow from Foucault’s phrase.⁹ Although this perception of Said is present beyond the cultural discourse of diasporic Arabs, the phenomenon is felt among them particularly keenly, as evidenced both by the reviews in question and by our experiences. I offer two examples.

The first time I carefully read Said’s *Orientalism* from cover to cover, I went with my brother’s recommendation in mind to the library of Youngstown State University to check out a copy. Throughout, the text was covered with persistently indignant and critical marginalia. I have forgotten almost all of it, with the exception of the note “HE MISPELLS MUHAMMAD!” but the level of emotional engagement with such an academic study remains with me. I experienced *Orientalism* on that first occasion as a scholarly inquiry with potential to shape my thinking for a time, even if, in fact, I would later see fit to dispute aspects of its method. At the same time, the marginalia suggested that discovering Said and the disruption he provoked had an emotional valence for me as a person that went to my very motivation for pursuing a life of critical inquiry.

The last time I carefully read Said’s *Orientalism*, I was a much older tenured professor working on the final draft of a chapter-length genealogy of Arab intellectual critiques of the link between Orientalism and colonial politics from Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani to contemporary thinkers influenced by Said, what is now chapter 2 of my *Domestications: American Empire, Literary Culture, and the Postcolonial Lens*.¹⁰ Realizing I needed one last careful read of the text to complete my final draft, I picked up a physical copy of the book with its iconic cover and walked to my local coffee shop on a crowded Saturday morning. At about page 5, a young man with a harried, graduate student manner rushed across the café, pronounced to me, “You know that book has been debunked,” and unceremoniously rushed off in a manner so arresting that a stranger sitting next to me asked me, “What’s the deal with that book?”

This level of notoriety does suggest an author function has taken hold, but it also suggests the text’s agency; certainly, the conclusion to be drawn from this scene of a book cover’s provocation should not be that there is no point in writing oppositionally given we are all trapped in discourse. Said’s more sympathetic readers today regularly comment on the surprising relevance of his work, even so long after his death: on Palestine/Israel, on representation, on secular criticism, or on the humanities and radical humanism. In Brennan’s account, Said was both a human, who when crippled by cancer, dealt with hair loss and a tumorous stomach bulge, and an author/activist who changed the direction of discussions of Palestine and Arab culture in the United States. These two contradistinctive themes

⁹ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 114.

¹⁰ Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Domestications: American Empire, Literary Culture, and the Postcolonial Lens* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 47–79.

are appropriate for a retrospective look at Said, especially at the turn in his career that led to the writing of *Orientalism* and a later career filled with strategies of disruption, for in this turn inheres the issue of individual agency in the face of a late capitalist onslaught of discourse, an onslaught that has intensified, making the question of agency the most current of all Said's emphases.

Author biography. Hosam Aboul-Ela is Professor of English and AAEF/Burhan and Misako Ajouz Professor of Arab Studies at the University of Houston. His most recent publications include *Domestications: American Empire, Literary Culture, and the Postcolonial Lens* (Northwestern University Press, 2018) and his translation of *Warda*, a novel by Sonallah Ibrahim (Yale University Press, 2021).

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