



BOOK FORUM

## Edward Said and the Dialectic of the “Imperialized” Intellectual

Ben Etherington 

Western Sydney University, Australia

Email: [b.etherington@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:b.etherington@westernsydney.edu.au)

This essay responds to Timothy Brennan’s recent biography of Edward Said by delving into Said’s relation to Frantz Fanon, who became an important influence in the second half of his career. Particularly, it considers whether Said’s readings and misreadings of Fanon signal a wider break with the latter’s notion of the “colonized intellectual.” Said, it emerges is more an “imperialized” intellectual, whose post-nationalist anti-imperialism is an attempt to sustain the Marxist anticolonial legacy in an era of neo-imperial consolidation. The article also considers how Said’s anti-imperialism is shaped by the idiosyncrasies and unique challenges of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle.

**Keywords:** Edward Said; Timothy Brennan; Frantz Fanon; colonized intellectual; theories of imperialism

One of the many revelations in Timothy Brennan’s *Places of Mind* is a sliding-doors moment in Edward Said’s career in 1974. Prompted by his mother-in-law, Said contacted Constantine Zurayk at the American University of Beirut to inquire about a permanent position. Said, Brennan writes, “was at a turning point and tilting east.”<sup>1</sup> In the letter to Zurayk, or Consti as he called him, for Zurayk was married to Said’s wife’s aunt, he laid bare his misgivings about being based in New York: “Whatever knowledge of the Middle East I now possess is being pressured into the service of the American Empire, and why not put it to *our* service?”<sup>2</sup> At the time, Said was the author of a well-received monograph on Joseph Conrad and some influential essays that showcased his fluency with emergent poststructural theory. He had also begun to publish critiques of American imperial hegemony in the Middle East, most notably “The Arab Portrayed.” Said evidently was a rising star, but there was perhaps a note of

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (New York: Picador, 2021), 190.

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 190.

presumption in the suggestion that his intellectual efforts were of special value either to the American empire or Palestinian resistance to it.

Said eventually was offered the position of head of research at the Institute for Palestine Studies. Had he accepted, his day-to-day would have shifted abruptly from teaching comparative literature and humanistic thought to a full-time focus on Palestine. And, by returning to the region after a period of training in the metropole, his career would have fallen into the dialectical pattern of the “colonized intellectual” memorably outlined by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. (This figure usually appears in English as the “native intellectual” owing to Constance Farrington’s unhelpful translation of “l’intellectuel colonisé.”<sup>3</sup>) Colonized intellectuals, according to Fanon, are the progeny of the colonized elite who have been reared to serve the colonial state. Sent to the best metropolitan institutions, their exposure to critical ideas omitted from the colonial curriculum combined with their experiences of racialization in white society transform them into opponents of the imperial culture with which they hitherto had identified. They now extol in absolute terms their own culture, which imperialism had denigrated. For Fanon, this second nativist phase also proves fruitless. True “national culture” entails a further negation that leads to a secular national consciousness. The colonized intellectual joins with the broader mass of people who undergo a transformative fusion through their active participation in decolonizing struggle.

Fanon’s account does not perfectly match the biography of any anti-colonial politician or intellectual, but it does capture the broad outlines of the development of figures like Mohandas Gandhi, John Dube, Jomo Kenyatta, Hastings Banda, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Léopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, Eric Williams, Aimé Césaire, Robert Mugabe, Amílcar Cabral, Wole Soyinka, and Fanon himself. (This dialectic was memorably given narrative form by Talib Sayeh in *Seasons of Migration to the North*.) Had Said relocated to Beirut, it’s not difficult to imagine him joining their ranks, the youngest of whom were only a few years his senior. Rather than *Orientalism*, perhaps Said’s signature contribution would have been something more akin to Fanon’s praxis-led theory of decolonization or Cabral’s speeches.

Said declined the American University of Beirut (AUB)’s offer, largely due to his wife Mariam Said’s misgivings about him giving up a tenured position to leap into “the quagmire of Middle East politics.”<sup>4</sup> I raise the counterfactual of Said’s Lebanese career not because it points to unrealized potential as an activist intellectual—*Orientalism*, after all, was followed by *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam*. Rather, I want to consider whether Said’s decision is indicative of a broader break with the Fanonian model of the colonized intellectual. By the mid-seventies, the prospects of a successful internationalism propelled by a critical mass of national liberation movements had been quelled by neocolonial

<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963). The figure of the “native intellectual” features throughout the text, first appearing in the first chapter “Concerning Violence,” 47.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 190.

interference, persistent economic dependency, and the consolidation of the new imperial hegemons of the United States and Soviet Union. At the same time, postcolonial partitions, separatist movements, civil wars, and one-party and dictatorial regimes had shown that the contradictions of the colonial state had hardly been swept away. The Third World Project no longer appeared to pose the world systemic threat that it had a decade earlier. Fanon, of course, foresaw this, apportioning blame principally to the complicit “national bourgeoisie.” (And Brennan points out that Said too was mindful of the “class role of the intellectual” and the failures of the “Arab ‘national bourgeoisie.’”)<sup>5</sup> If the Bandung era had been one of hope, the 1970s revealed that the global systems established by European imperialism had not dissipated but evolved. Said’s decision to remain at the heart of the new imperium made sense not just for his career but as a strategic political calculation.<sup>6</sup>

Turning down the AUB position also needs to be understood in the specific context of the movement for Palestinian decolonization, especially in the light of the idiosyncrasies of the Zionist colonial project—what Said would come to characterize as “late style” settler colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Palestinian self-determination involves contending with Zionism’s toxic mix of unyielding territorial expansion, its claims to pseudo-racial membership and mythic territorial origins, its righteous sense of victimization, and its sponsorship by major powers willing to make all kinds of moral and political exceptions for its apartheid system. Said came to recognize the profound implications for anticolonial theory of coming up against a colonial power that is not an imperial state. Ongoing colonization by Israel had to be grasped in the broader context of the imperialism of the United States whose vectors of power did not have the clean lines of, say, Britain’s Colonial Office. This meant taking ever more seriously the workings of culture in the production of imperial reality, a focus that emphatically was not idealist. As Brennan puts it, “[for Said] ideas, images, and stories do not reflect reality in a secondary way but are its very ligaments.”<sup>8</sup> If para-institutional formations like the Israel lobby in the United States pour funds and resources into naturalizing the Zionist settler narrative, attacking its cultural ligaments constitutes a direct engagement with the political economy that upholds Zionism.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 266.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that other metropolitan trained Palestinian intellectuals of Said’s generation—figures like Hanna Mikhail (Abu Omar) and Elias Shoufani—did return to the region to join the Palestinian resistance. I’m not suggesting that Said’s example takes precedence over them, only that the iconic status he acquired as a colonized intellectual speaking from the heart of the imperial metropole of the United States points to a broader shift following the peak of the internationalist project. I’m grateful to Ihab Shalbak for pointing to these other examples.

<sup>7</sup> In a 1999 interview with Moustafa Bayoumi, for example, Said directly compares Adorno on Beethoven’s late style (“the most intransigent, the most unreconciled, the most irreconcilable music”) with the “irreconcilability [that] has always been essential as a way of characterizing the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians.” Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, eds., *The Edward Said Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 427.

<sup>8</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 209.

<sup>9</sup> See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).

So perhaps Said's counterfactual career at the AUB would have led to the same destination anyway. Whether near or far to Palestine, his trajectory necessarily was that of an *imperialized* intellectual: the displaced colonial subject who recognizes that the fight for sovereignty is caught up in dispersed and complex imperial arrangements and structures of feelings. Said's championing of "exile" as a mode of consciousness and basis for political praxis makes all the more sense in this light. It is a standpoint that can combine a sweeping critique of empire in its late-twentieth-century form with combatting the particular colonial activities it enables. The latter might involve classic territorial conquest, as per the Six-Day War, but it also encompasses things like the proliferation of military bases, proxy and "pre-emptive" wars, and "humanitarian" interventions. The two main tracks of Said's career so lucidly reconstructed by Brennan are thus shown to be a unified project forged in necessity. And the humanistic polemic and dogged secular universalism that arch over his writing look less like a concession to European universalism, more a charismatic counter-hegemony.

As Brennan has repeatedly commented over the years, there is some irony to the notion that Said was the founder of postcolonial studies.<sup>10</sup> His critical project is perhaps better characterized as a post-nationalist anti-imperialism or, more concisely, *disimperialism*, a term that had briefly vied with *decolonization* in the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Summarizing the historiography that employs the former, John Darwin defines it as a "process of mutual 'disimperialism' in both Imperial core and colonial periphery."<sup>12</sup> In Said's case, being located in the United States's financial and media capital afforded him the visibility needed to corrode its benign self-perception while forming a key node in Palestinian political networks. He cultivated a unique capacity to appeal to the American public's moral self-image while reminding it that it is in fact imperial. (Similarly, one of *Culture and Imperialism's* main objectives is "to describe how it was that the imperial European would or could not see that he or she was an imperialist.")<sup>13</sup> He thus belongs more to the cohort of mobile anti-imperialists like Shapurji Saklatvala, George Padmore, and C. L. R. James, whose careers largely unfolded in imperial capitals, than he does colonized intellectuals like Nkrumah and Fanon. As Priyamvada Gopal puts it, these imperialized intellectuals mediated "the resistance of the colonized" as they expanded the "scope of humanism in the metropole."<sup>14</sup> Said did not engage nearly as much as Padmore and James in the hard graft of political organization, though, and it's not surprising to discover that he struggled to find common ground with the Trotskyist James when visiting him in Brixton in 1987.<sup>15</sup> James's

<sup>10</sup> See, especially, Timothy Brennan, "The Illusion of a Future: *Orientalism* as Traveling Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 26.3 (2000): 558–83.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, John Strachey, *The End of Empire* (London: Gollancz, 1959), 214.

<sup>12</sup> John Darwin, "Decolonization and the End of Empire," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V: Historiography* eds. Robin Winks and William Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 550.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 162.

<sup>14</sup> Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 313–14.

politics were overtly proletarian, and his anti-imperialism articulated within the frame of a workers’ world revolution.<sup>16</sup>

If Said is a post-Fanonian “imperialized” intellectual, what then of his direct engagements with Fanon’s work? Fanon does not make an appearance in *Orientalism*, though he does figure briefly in *Beginnings* as one in a list of theorists who represent an “adversary epistemological current.”<sup>17</sup> This includes Vico, Marx and Engels, Lukács, and Chomsky, as well as Foucault and Deleuze. As Brennan has argued in several essays culminating in this biography, Said’s engagement with the latter two, and Foucault in particular, sits on a bedrock commitment to what he elsewhere dubs the “Vichian tradition.”<sup>18</sup> For Brennan, Said did not so much turn away from Foucault, discourse analysis, and deconstruction in the late 1970s as double-down on his prior theoretical commitments. This meant a renewed emphasis on stalwarts like Vico, Gramsci, Lukács, and Raymond Williams. It also led to an increasing preoccupation with Fanon, whose existential-materialist account of the colonial situation and dialectic of anti-colonial revolt became indispensable as Said looked “to move from the negative to the positive”—from a critique of imperial hegemony to counter-narratives emerging from the third world.<sup>19</sup> By 1993’s *Culture and Imperialism*, the Martinican had become Said’s historical and theoretical lynchpin. In the book’s “contrapuntal” case studies of the imperial imagination in Austen, Verdi, Kipling, Conrad, Forster, and Yeats, Fanon is repeatedly cast as the key anti-imperial “stretto” voice—the “surreptitious counter-narrative to the above-ground force of the colonial regime.”<sup>20</sup>

When Said comes to engage directly with Fanon’s work toward the end of *Culture and Imperialism*, we see clearly how, as an imperialized intellectual, he recasts the ideas and legacy of the colonized intellectual:

If I have so often cited Fanon, it is because more dramatically and decisively than anyone, I believe, he expresses the immense cultural shift from the terrain of nationalist independence to the theoretical domain of liberation. This shift takes place mainly where imperialism lingers on in Africa after most other colonial states have gained independence, e.g., Algeria and Guinea-Bissau. In any case Fanon is unintelligible without grasping that his work is a response to theoretical elaborations produced by the culture of late Western capitalism, received by the Third World native intellectual as a culture of oppression and colonial enslavement.<sup>21</sup>

It’s important to understand why Said should distinguish so sharply between “nationalist independence” and the “theoretical domain of liberation.” After all,

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Detroit: Facing Reality, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 378.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 301.

<sup>20</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 268.

most readers of Fanon would consider the former to be the principal theater for the latter. Said, though, wants to treat Fanon as the hinge between a reactive anticolonial nationalism and a liberation theory whose scope is “trans-national.”<sup>22</sup> To do this, he goes on to claim that Fanon’s critiques of the regressive tendencies within national liberation movements constitute a critique of *all* forms of nationally oriented struggle: Fanon “forcibly *deforms* imperialist culture and its national antagonist in the process of looking beyond both towards liberation.”<sup>23</sup>

There are two problems with this account. The first is that it misrecognizes as “trans-national” an argument that is internationalist.<sup>24</sup> Fanon couldn’t be clearer that it is only through local national struggles that global third worldism can be successful: “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.”<sup>25</sup> Second, it misses the theoretical thrust of Fanon’s account of the *transformative* capacities of national liberation. To understand this, it’s worth revisiting some of the theoretical resources Fanon calls on in *Wretched*. For his part, Said was convinced that Lukács’s theory of reification underpins Fanon’s account of the colonial city’s material objectification of the “native.” He repeatedly speculated that Fanon must have read the 1960 French translation of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* when writing *Wretched*. Although there is no evidence that Fanon read Lukács, there is copious evidence that he enthusiastically read Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.<sup>26</sup> The *Critique* develops a transhistorical Marxist theory of revolution.<sup>27</sup> For Sartre, class-based hierarchies are just one form that reified social relations can take. Any given social order operates within material constraints that condition and reproduce it. Sartre calls this social-material nexus the “practico-inert.” For example, coal-fired power stations and fuel-burning combustion engines are central to the practico-inert now referred to as the carbon economy. They don’t just create energy—their use, associated infrastructure, and the exigencies of their upkeep also produce social relations and determine social horizons. When contradictions arise that destabilize a practico-inert order, it allows those caught within it to become conscious of

<sup>22</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 269.

<sup>24</sup> In saying this, I am not suggesting that all forms of internationalism are necessarily prosecuted within the framework of movements of national sovereignty, only that this was Fanon’s principal focus. The following comment from Josep Maria Antentas usefully describes the way internationalism works among different “scalar levels”: “Internationalism attempts to articulate a dialectical relationship between different spatial scales (local-national-international). Thus understood, internationalist practice implies not only solidarity between/with national struggles, but also the articulation of joint cross-border initiatives. The scalar levels should not be analyzed as opposing terrains, but as complementary frameworks for action.” Josep Maria Antentas, “Global Internationalism: An Introduction,” *Labor History* 63.4 (2022): 426.

<sup>25</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 247.

<sup>26</sup> I go over the evidence in detail in Ben Etherington, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Decolonization? Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*,” *Modern Intellectual History* 13.1 (2016): 159–61.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso Books, 2004).

alternatives and, thus, their capacity to intervene materially in that order to create the conditions for new social forms. Those who band together to realize this potential constitute a “group-in-fusion.” A revolution, for Sartre, is the group-in-fusion’s abrupt radical reshaping of the material world.

*The Wretched of the Earth* is full of concepts borrowed or adapted from *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. One sees immediately the attraction of Sartre’s account for Fanon, a Marxist who was keenly aware of the limitations of a narrow class analysis for colonial contexts where race plays such a decisive role. Fanon’s description of the Manichean colonial city aims to establish how the colony’s material constitution, or “practico-inert,” produces and reproduces the colonial racial order. His subsequent account of how spontaneous local uprisings bring dispersed and alienated communities into a single coherent national group clearly draws on Sartre’s dialectic of “serial collectives” and the “group-in-fusion,” particularly the notion that armed national struggle constitutes “totalizing praxis.”<sup>28</sup> For Fanon, the problem faced by the national group-in-fusion is not “nationalism” in the abstract, but the manipulation of nationalist sentiment by the former colonized elite as they seek to preserve colonialism’s social-material order to secure their interests. This is where Fanon’s account necessarily acquires an internationalist dimension. As the national bourgeoisie leverages the investments and military support of former and current imperial powers, the decolonizers realize the need for a counterbalancing third world political economy. Thus:

The building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows.<sup>29</sup>

The conclusion that international consciousness necessarily follows from “the building of a nation” is a far cry from where Said takes Fanon in *Culture and Imperialism*:

In the obscurity and difficulty of Fanon’s prose, there are enough poetic and visionary suggestions to make the case for liberation as a *process* and not as a goal contained automatically by the newly independent nations. Throughout *The Wretched of the Earth* (written in French), Fanon wants somehow to bind the European as well as the native together in a new non-adversarial community of awareness and anti-imperialism.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “But it so happens that for the colonized this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. This violent praxis is totalizing [*Cette praxis violente est totalisante*], since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence surging up in reaction to the first violence of the colonialist. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible.” Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 73 (translation modified).

<sup>29</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 247–48.

<sup>30</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 274.



I point to Said's misreading of Fanon not to rebuke him for betraying internationalism or for diluting Fanon's militant and dialectical conception of national liberation with strained notions like "non-adversarial community of awareness." Rather it is to reveal his priorities as an "imperialized" intellectual operating at a time of severe backlash against third world Marxism. As Brennan puts it: "Much of the ambivalence of *Culture and Imperialism* came from Said's attempt to fit the square peg of the militant liberation movements into the round hole of the new postcolonial consensus."<sup>31</sup> Said wants to draw on the force of Fanon's account while directing it toward more elusive targets and complex geopolitics.

His attempt to mobilize Fanon's mid-century anticolonialism for a late century anti-imperialism points to the ongoing need for collectives and alliances capable of organizing at the scale of imperialism. As Fanon recognized, the national struggle is so tangible, its objectives so clear that it pushes from view the complexity and messiness of the wider imperial world. After the "unreal, idyllic light" of its initial phases, comes "a penumbra that dislocates consciousness ... the people find out that the iniquitous fact of exploitation can wear a black face, or an Arab one."<sup>32</sup> To forge ahead with simplistic accounts of national identity is to create the conditions for religious and ethnic nationalism, a regressive tendency that has only gathered momentum since Said's death. The unfortunate truth is that spiraling global inequality, the total commodification and destruction of nature, and the return of zero-sum imperial competition have yet to prompt the kinds of political thinking and organization capable of a global anti-imperial program. The last decade has seen the remarkable proliferation of local movements mobilized under the banner of "decolonization" or the "decolonial." Brennan's biography is an urgent reminder that such initiatives need to be articulated within the framework of anti-imperialism and that we sorely need anti-imperial intellectuals capable of mediating between the local and the international.

**Author biography.** Ben Etherington is Associate Professor in postcolonial and world literary studies at Western Sydney University. He was an Edward W. Said Fellow at Columbia University in 2019 and is currently Chief Investigator of the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, Creole Voices in the Caribbean and Australia: Poetics and Decolonization. Publications include *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford University Press, 2018) and "World Literature as a Speculative Literary Totality: Veselovsky, Auerbach, Said, and the Critical-Humanist Tradition" (*Modern Language Quarterly*, 2021). He's currently writing a history of poetry in Anglophone Caribbean creole languages between abolition and decolonization.

<sup>31</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 300.

<sup>32</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 145 (translation modified).

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