Counterpoints
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume is based on but not limited to contributions from the Counterpoints Conference held in Ottawa in October - November 2008. The conference attracted forty panellists from twenty-two different universities from North America, Asia and Europe. All through the conference, many participants expressed their appreciation for the engaging intellectual space fostered during the event. It is this same type of intellectual space – a space where an Orientalist examination of video games meets discussions of humanism, exile and politics of subjectivity on the same intellectual ground – which we hope to offer in this volume. Contributions from two eminent scholars, Ella Shohat and Bill Ashcroft, were added to the twelve chapters selected from the conference papers. We are deeply grateful to all contributors for their valuable research and for their tremendous efforts in framing contrapuntal perspectives in Said’s work.

The interest for Edward Said’s work started with a small group of enthusiastic and brilliant Ph.D. students from both the University of Ottawa and Carleton University. Our gratitude goes especially to Darryl Leroux and Erica See for their devotion to the project and for their generous and unconditional support. In April 2008, professor Nahla Abdo from Carleton University generously accepted to join the organizing committee of the conference and tremendously contributed to the academic and sociable success of the event. In this regards, we wish to also thank professor George Lang, former dean of the Arts at the University of Ottawa and professor John Osborne, dean of Social Sciences at Carleton University for their immediate support. Without University of Ottawa and Carleton’s combined support of encouragement, funding, time and efforts from faculties, departments and student volunteers the conference would have never been a reality, and ultimately this book would have not existed.

We would like to express particular gratitude to Mariam Said for the generous contribution of her keynote address “Edward Said and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra” to the preface of the Counterpoints volume. We also extend thanks to Gregory Starett, Editor of the Middle East Studies
Association Bulletin for his copy editing and agreement to republish Ella Shohat’s MESA address and also to Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi and the editors of Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East for allowing us to republish Mark Ayyash’s work.

Our appreciation goes to Walid El Khachab (York University) for his insightful comments on different sections of this book; to Carol Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their help in reviewing and editing the manuscript from proposal to publication, and to Batoul Hussain for her help in editing sections of the final manuscript.
I am honored to be participating in a conference dedicated to exploring the legacy of my late husband Edward Said and to be able to share some of my experiences with you regarding this legacy. I wish to thank the organizers (the University of Ottawa and Carleton University) for inviting me to address you and to listen to the many new ideas on Edward’s work.

As I have said before, Edward stood on the shoulders of many giants and looked beyond, and now former students, scholars and admirers are doing the same, taking intellectual risks and building on what he has given us. That is exactly what he would have wished.

When Edward was writing *Orientalism*, he was invited to give the Gauss Lectures at Princeton University. This was the first opportunity he had to discuss what he was writing about in a serious academic atmosphere. The lectures presented new ideas and explored unchartered territory. The feedback he received was very valuable: A few suggested he pursue further the ideas he had presented. Many posed troubling questions. Some were not sure where he was going but seemed interested in his theory. Others were outright hostile and tried to reinforce the dominant theories. Edward would say to me many years later that he would like to see more series similar to the Gauss lectures. He felt that as a young scholar he benefited immensely from such a forum and wished that more venues of this nature existed for scholars.

As some of you know I am involved with a part of Edward’s legacy that is based on many of the ideas he discussed in *Orientalism* and elsewhere. It explores the ‘idea of knowing and understanding the other’ equality and co-existence. I refer here to the work of the Barenboim-Said Foundation. In a little while you will be watching the film *Knowledge is the Beginning* which describes this endeavor.

Edward Said’s friendship with Daniel Barenboim, the world re-nowned
pianist and conductor, resulted in a book of conversations *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*. They wished to extend their shared experience to their people. Music was the language that brought them together and through music they wished to bring their people together; that is how the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra was born. For those of you who are not familiar with this project, the orchestra consists mainly of Arab and Israeli musicians.

Here I would like to share with you an excerpt from a speech Edward gave at SOAS in January 2003 entitled “Memory, Inequality, and Power: Palestine and the Universality of Human Rights”, where he describes one of the programs of The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and Workshop.

But the main story I want to tell concerns what we have called the Weimar project or the East-West Diwan. In early 1999 shortly after Weimar had been designated a European cultural capital for that year I happened to be in Berlin visiting Barenboim, when he was offered the chance to perform in Weimar that summer. After a short discussion between us and with YoYo Ma, who happened also to be there, we decided to use the opportunity instead to do something different, namely in facilities generously provided by the Weimar and federal governments, first to audition a whole set of young musicians, ages 17-25 (with one exception, a 10 year old Palestinian piano prodigy who happened to be my great-nephew) all across the Arab world and Israel. By the end of the auditions we had the makings of several excellent chamber ensembles as well as a fine orchestra made up of instrumentalists from 7 or 8 Arab countries and Israel. We convened in August of that year, and for three weeks they were drilled and rehearsed and fashioned into a remarkably proficient orchestra by Barenboim who devoted six or seven hours a day to the task, as well as going back and forth three times a week to conduct Wagner operas at nearby Bayreuth. My role was to lead nightly discussions in which everyone participated, on every subject from music to literature, history and of course politics.

In Weimar we were not only generously taken care of by the Cultural Capital’s auspices, but figuratively speaking we were under the wing of Goethe, Weimar’s most famous inhabitant, who had written there his great mature masterpiece the West-Ostlicher Diwan, an extraordinary act of homage to Islam generally, and to Hafiz in particular. Goethe was, I believe, the first great modern European to attempt some kind of artistic synthesis and involvement between what in those days were called the Orient and Europe. His accomplishment was the magnificent Diwan itself, as well as for our purposes the use of art, so to speak, to create an imaginative re-ordering of polarities, differences and oppositions, on the basis not of politics but of affinities, spiritual generosity and aesthetic self-renewal. We also exposed our students to Buchenwald, one of the most notorious of the Nazi death-camps which lies only about six kilometers
outside Weimar, thus serving us to point out how very close together the
great heights of culture can easily co-exist with the deepest and basest evil.

The point of all this is that a new paradigm emerged for us and our
students who were, it should go without saying, from differing and
sometimes jarringly antagonistic backgrounds and whose interests,
ambitions, histories, and commitments during the three weeks were
suspended, as it were, in the interests of music. Music, I don’t need to
insist on this too much, is a silent art: what and how it articulates in sound
are totally independent of the world of ideas, concepts and words
themselves. Yet also dependent on them in that those very things
suspended by music’s enactment are paradoxically the very worldly
circumstances that bring musicians together. But that opposition and
symbiosis between music and the world, so to speak, proved amazingly
fertile. We did another summer in Weimar the next year, 2000, in 2001 we
went to Chicago, and last year and for the next few years, our East-West
Diwan has been adopted by the Andalusian government as well as a private
foundation of three cultures. Seville has become our new home.

From Weimar to Seville is, I deeply believe, a totally different
trajectory and paradigm for Arabs and Israelis. There is no political
program to what we do, since everything is subordinated to music, which
for three weeks possesses everyone, in addition of course to the practical
matter of living and working together.

The point of telling you this story is to suggest how despite the
incredibly polarized, antagonistic and discordant world in which we live,
there is always the possibility of another alternative type of social model.
Barenboim is no ordinary Israeli of course, and I like to think perhaps I’m
not an ordinary Palestinian either. But in our work and commitment to our
friendship and to music-making and to the ongoing Weimar-Seville project
there has been an amazing crossing of borders and a disruption of the rigid
lines that have circumscribed and organized our public as well as private
lives. If it weren’t for the rich emblematic status of Palestine and Israel
none of this would have been possible since it is because the complex issue
itself, whose core from my point of view is the struggle for Palestinian
human rights in a land sanctified by the three great monotheistic religions,
is so fertile with possibilities, ones that reach into culture, history, politics
and personal relations that we have been able to do what we do. Presiding
over our efforts, students and teachers alike, has been the spirit of music
which, I would want to insist, is neither a sentimental panacea nor a facile
solution for every problem, but rather a practical utopia whose presence
and practice in our riven world is sorely needed and, in all sorts of ways,
intensely instructive. At least, therefore, another world emerges as a result
against the backdrop of Andalusia, itself an alternative model for
coexistence between the three monotheisms, and if it isn’t immediately
available on the world stage it can at least signal the arrival of a new
attitude whose example might soon provide us with many others, many
salutary changes, many profound new interpretations of what is now only
an appallingly polarized, completely inhuman conflict.

In our work and planning and discussions our main principle is that separation between peoples is not a solution for any of the problems that divide peoples. And certainly ignorance of the other provides no help whatsoever. Cooperation and co-existence, of the kind that music lived as we have lived, performed, shared and loved together, might be. I, for one am full of optimism despite the darkening sky and the seemingly hopeless situation for the time being that encloses us all.

Unfortunately Edward was not able to accompany the orchestra on its 1st European tour which included Morocco in 2003. I attended the concert in Rabat, Morocco on his behalf.

What Edward and Daniel created in this turbulent world of ours, a world full of hatred, enmity and contradictions between many peoples, is a new space that has no direct connection with politics, official governments or the current solutions. This does not annul the identities of the participants. On the contrary, the results have been intellectual, educational, peaceful, human and musical.

Edward’s wish was to have the orchestra perform in the Arab Capitals and Israel. He lived to know that the orchestra performed in Rabat, Morocco. This was the beginning of my involvement in this project. During the past five years since his death, the work of the foundation has developed in many ways and the results are enormous. The main programs of the foundation are:

1. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and Workshop in Spain followed by a summer tour.
2. The Barenboim-Said Music Centre in Ramallah, Palestine whose aims are to create a Palestinian Youth Orchestra, to develop music education infrastructures and to contribute to the growth of musical and artistic activities.
3. The Edward Said Musical Kindergarten in collaboration with United Palestinian Medical Relief.
4. The Barenboim-Said Conservatory in Nazareth, Israel.

The sponsor of our project is the Regional Government of Andalusia and Spanish musicians represent 20% of the orchestra. Andalusia’s history as a model of coexistence between the three monotheisms is a central feature in the choice of this location.

Marina Warner in a panel discussion at Columbia University on
Edward’s book *On Late Style* thought that the idea of the West-Eastern Divan is Edward’s own late style. She was trying to implement complex theoretical ideas that Edward wrote about in his many publications and to translate them into reality. For Edward this project was a new beginning and a turning point in the Palestinian Israeli conflict. This project is not about peace. We are dealing with two parallel narratives. It is about mutually acknowledging what is most painful and it is also about coexistence.

In elaborating how music works as a language, Edward used the word “contrapuntal,” a musical term which describes two contradictory themes playing at the same time and creating a harmonious melody. Daniel, when talking about producing music, reminds us that all of the instruments in an orchestra are equal. When one instrument leads a theme, the other instruments listen and follow. When another instrument leads, the one that had been leading has to listen and follow. Thus members of an orchestra learn to play in concert by leading and listening, which is crucial in interacting and forming relationships in society.

Last but not least this is a humanistic project which encompasses all the ideas he tackles in *Humanism and Cultural Criticism*. When Edward was alive he led the workshop discussions. After visiting the concentration camp at Buchenwald he led a discussion on evil. In the film you find him talking about identity. The workshop continues to be a forum for reflection, discussions and mutual understanding on and of various subjects. His absence left a huge void. Before he died he said unequivocally that this project is the most important thing that he had done in his life.

We have gone a long way since this project started. The level of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra has acquired a mature sound and year after year their performance is enhanced thanks to Daniel Barenboim’s talent, devotion and perseverance. Since 1999 the orchestra has performed in Europe, the USA, North Africa and Latin America. In 2005 the apex of the tour was the concert in Ramallah, where the members of the orchestra showed great courage and dedication in making a reality of Edward and Daniel’s dream to perform in the occupied territories. In 2006 the orchestra was invited by the UN to give a farewell concert to Secretary General Kofi Anan. In 2007 the orchestra was invited by the Salzburg Festival to be in residence in Salzburg. This was a great honor and privilege for the musicians and the project. The tour in 2008 was extraordinary. The program performed was very difficult; it included Wagner and world renowned singers. The response of the audiences was spontaneous and magnificent. Musically the orchestra has been extremely
successful. In January there will be a winter tour which will open with a concert in Doha Qatar. In my opinion, the most important non musical achievement has been a by-product of the original goal, the breaking of the wall of separation not only between the Arabs and the Israelis, but between the Arabs themselves. Since 1970 there has been very little contact between the various Arab countries. Also in Palestine/Israel the Palestinians have been separated since 1967 from the other Arabs, and before 1967 from the other Palestinians inside Israel. There are many levels of knowing and understanding the other in this endeavor.

We still have a long way to go. The road is rocky but I am positive we are on the right track.

—Mariam C. Said
New York, October 2008

Notes

1 Keynote address by Mariam Said at the international conference “Counterpoints: Edward Said’s Legacy”, held at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University (30 October – 2 November 2008).
2 Knowledge is the Beginning (dir. Paul Smaczny, 2006) won international acclaim and was awarded many prizes including an International Emmy Award in 2006. This film is one of many documentaries featuring Edward Said. The list includes Edward Said: On Orientalism (dir. Set Jhally, 1998); Selves and Others: A Portrait of Edward Said (dir. Emmanuel Hamon, 2003); Edward Said: The Last Interview (dir. Mike Dibb, 2004); and Out of Place: Memories of Edward Said (dir. Sato Makoto, 2005). (the editors)
INTRODUCTION

CONTRAPUNTAL PERSPECTIVES

MAY TELMISSANY
AND STEPHANIE TARA SCHWARTZ

Revolving around the theme of counterpoint extensively used by Edward Said as the interplay of diverse ideas and discrepant experiences, this book aims to explore Said’s contribution to the fields of comparative literature, literary criticism and postcolonial theory. Overshadowed by his legitimate political positions in support of the Palestinian cause (The Question of Palestine, The Politics of Dispossession, After the Last Sky) and by his criticism of the United States foreign policies which led to the rise of Islamophobia long before 9/11 (Covering Islam), Said's intellectual and philosophical achievements in the humanities should equally be acknowledged and celebrated.

Throughout his intellectual career, Said was criticized by both his opponents and his admirers on the question of method, especially in his groundbreaking book Orientalism (see Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism”, 1982 and Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory. Classes. Nations. Literatures, 1992). In Counterpoints, we wish to illustrate Said’s understanding of method as being inherently contrapuntal, comparative and secular. Said believed in comparative literature, in the constant exploration of its potentialities and the true awareness of its limitations. Over the years, the field developed in various directions, overcame many pitfalls and concealed difficulties, notably the conventional nation-based approach which was targeted by the discipline’s critics¹. Yet it is this specific form of negotiation, this transdisciplinarity as a ceaseless movement of borrowing back and forth, and these scholarly attempts to cross the boundaries of nations and cultures that seem to have captivated Said.

“For the trained scholar of comparative literature, a field whose origin and purpose is to move beyond insularity and provincialism and to see several
cultures and literatures together, contrapuntally, there is an already considerable investement in precisely this kind of antidote to reductive nationalism and uncritical dogma: after all, the constitution and early aims of comparative literature were to get a perspective beyond one’s own nation, to see some sort of whole instead of the defensive little patch offered by one’s own culture, literature and history.”

Said’s method was developed and formulated within the framework of two major veins that kept nourishing his intellectual life: literature and music. In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, he argues against literary theory that isolates textuality from the events and circumstances that make it possible. His own reading of Joseph Conrad and Jane Austin for example demonstrates his critical method which insists on the relationship between texts and the realities of the world. What is considered contrapuntal in Said’s literary criticism is the fact that he brings forth - following Bakhtin, Lukács and Gramsci - extradiegetic voices and discourses as inseperable from the fictional text. Despite the liberating potential of his philosophy, Said seldom took his method beyond the limits of the European realistic canon in literature. He never really concentrated on minor literatures in the Deleuze and Guattarian sense, although unclassified experimental works that undermine literary conventions or problematize worldliness might have expanded the inherent polyphony of his criticism.

In *Culture and Imperialism* he repeatedly confirmed his indebtedness to the musical concept of counterpoint as a tool for understanding, comparing and discussing the relationship between culture and imperialism, culture and the world:

“As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.”

It is in this book that Said most poetically composes a contrapuntal method which becomes his way of amplifying the whispers of other experiences rendered invisible by the dominance of colonialism. Here Said suggests different potential lines out of the crisis of representation. By reading together, listening to and actually hearing other voices, he shares similarities with the discourse produced and sustained by French postmodernism in the 1970s (François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne*, 1979), a discourse which deconstructs the univocal mode of speaking in the name of others and the monolithic understanding of Truth. However,
dissociating himself from the postmodern realm altogether, he offers his own solution to the debates and tensions between complete relativism and complete universalism, as well as a vision of how to approach the study of others, minorities, colonized or postcolonial peoples:

“we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with each other.”

His search is not a search for a single authentic representation of humanity’s cultural archives but rather a commitment to listen to and think through experiences outside of one’s own. This commitment has a humanistic purpose that attempts to move beyond the “destructive politics of confrontation and hostility.” Said views all types of identities as contrapuntal ensembles, always informed by what is negative or opposed to them. A ‘contrapuntal reading’ involves a practical engaging with this interplay of different voices, identities and texts in the broader socio-historical contexts of both colonialism and post-colonialism.

The ethical as well as the hermeneutical dimensions of a contrapuntal reading of the cultural archive are seminal to Said’s conception of the role of the intellectual (the university professor, the literary critic and the author) in the public sphere. The set of lectures collected in Representations of the Intellectual demonstrates how the contrapuntal approach can be applied pedagogically and publicly, beyond the confines of the written word. The impetus for a contrapuntal approach comes from an ethical mission to confront prejudices. As Said writes in the book’s introduction: “One of the tasks of the intellectual is the effort to break down the stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication.” Challenging the clichés and misconceptions inherent to all fixed interpretations of the human experience at large, Said draws on hybrid, exiled, marginal and multiple existences to construct a universal standard of human behavior where the recognition of the polyphony of voices and the contrapuntal understanding of self and other pave the way to his poignant work on the limitations and the shortcomings of History.

Said’s exploration of the musical dimension of the contrapuntal method highlights both the creativity of the composer and the awareness of the interpreter, an assemblage which always informed his own work of comparative criticism:

“Polyphony, the organization of more than one voice, is what really interests me. I’m attracted to the combination of voices, the way one voice
becomes subordinated by another. I’m interested in the possibilities for the interpreter to bring out voices, which to the author or to the composer may not have been apparent. Bach, for example, had a fantastic capacity for predicting what combinations of sounds could come out of a single phrase. In the interpretation of polyphonic compositions, there is no predictability.”

Polyphony, present in the musical as well as the literary genres, has become Said’s inspiration and source of challenge. Music and literature assert their influences on the development of Said’s worldly mission and method: multiple voices share a common ground where prominence changes continuously from one voice to another, not in a disordered chaotic way but rather in a mutual attuning style that restores harmony - in the musical rather than the ethical sense of the word. This method reflects not only the moral insight of the intellectual, but first and foremost the phenomenological credo of the free thinker.

**Music and the Intellectual**

In his essay “The Virtuoso as Intellectual”, Said raises the very interesting connection between classical music and the intellectual, and laments that:

“Today’s literary or general intellectual has little practical knowledge of music as an art, has hardly any experience playing an instrument or studying solfège or theory, and except for buying records or collecting a few names like Karajan and Callas, does not as a matter of fact have a sustained literacy – whether that concerns being able to relate performance, interpretation, and style to one another, or recognizing the difference between harmonic and rhythmical characteristic in Mozart, Berg, and Messiaen – in the actual practice of music.”

What a deeper knowledge and understanding of classical music provides for the intellectual is an intimate connection to the spirit and the affect of the contrapuntal at work. In Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one. Yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and structure, an organized interaction that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work.

In *Late Style*, Said (following Adorno) subverts the principle of invention according to which creativity is measured in terms of innovation and rupture. This principle, derived from his knowledge of classical music, is the rediscovery and return to a theme, rather then the creation of something entirely new:
“Invention in this older rhetorical meaning of the word is the finding and elaboration of arguments, which in the musical realm means finding a theme and developing it contrapuntally so that all of its possibilities are articulated, expressed, and elaborated...Invention is therefore a form of creative repetition and reliving.”

The grounded and worldly concept of invention as a secular reworking rather than as a completely detached and original innovation is consistent with Said’s reading of Vico’s idea of “human history as something made by the unfolding capacity of the working human mind.” Human history - musically and poetically conceived as a ‘suite’ or variations on a theme - clears the ground for finding and developing the polyphony of human experiences on a horizontal (rather than a hegemonic) plane.

Invention is also understood as an aesthetic subjective experience claimed and asserted within a constant movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of thought and affect by the secular nomadic intellectual. Said demonstrates that reading literatures, cultures and socio-political discourses contrapuntally, highlights the socio-aesthetic relationship between disparate experiences and achieves some sort of victory over taboos, like the so-called ‘Wagner taboo’ that Barenboim and Said fought against.

Kiyoko Magome’s essay “Edward Said’s ‘Counterpoint’” (2006) reminds us of the importance of this specific aesthetic experience to the intellectual. The essay also explores Adorno’s and Said’s views on counterpoint through their common intellectual cross-cultural standpoint: “the counterpoint Adorno and Said deal with is not just an aesthetic, metaphysical model but rather a practical, descriptive way of exploring the world through our aesthetic experiences.”

Interestingly, we find out from his daughter Najla, that Said was largely ignorant of Western popular music. This elitist stance, in favor of the structure and rationality of Western Classical music, to the exclusion of other forms of playing, narrowed his contrapuntal approach to the world’s cultural archives. We believe that the subtleties, harmonies and cacophonies of various genres of popular music can also be enlightening for the intellectual. Najla’s play Palestine is in fact an example of what Said might have missed: the broader potentialities that other forms of music can inspire in the intellectual endeavor. In her play Najla juxtaposes lyrics of American singer/songwriter Tori Amos’ “Crucify” with a monologue that weaves her own personal suffering because of anorexia, with her father’s illness and with the struggles of Palestinians in Gaza.

In line with Said’s thinking of the socio-aesthetic role of counterpoint and polyphony in building some sort of democratic society, it becomes
possible to structure the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians contrapuntally, in order to bring forth invisible facts and suppressed voices. For Said, counterpoint is the expression of dissidence, transgression and “respect for Difference without Domination, within a shared Harmonic system” as Rokus de Groot puts it. Therefore, music becomes one of the major components of the politics of hope elaborated by Said throughout his work. Said was actually following Adorno in this respect by asserting the intimate connection between the aesthetic and the realistic as well as the tension between music as an autonomous form of expression and society. While Adorno dramatizes this tension which is experiential rather than metaphysical, Said expands it to the experiences of the Israelis and the Palestinians which he sees as irreconcilable in the same way that music is in permanent tension with society.

The Question of Palestine

In his 1984 essay “Pioneering in the Nuclear Age. An Essay on Israel and the Palestinians”, Eqbal Ahmad insightfully summarizes Said’s position regarding the question of Palestine:

“Edward Said once talked of why the question of Palestine so stirs the emotions of people throughout the world. He spoke of the animating role of ideas and values of liberation, equality, and fraternity; of the power of the simplicity of a people’s quest for a home, the right to live outside of refugee camps free from the daily terror of settlers and soldiers; of the persistence of a people’s inalienable claim to dignity, equality, and self-determination. One might add that the Palestinian experience, like the South African, affects a majority of mankind at a deepest, more primordial level. Our painful colonial past, neo-colonial present, and the dangerous perspective for our future converge on the question of Palestine.”

Drawing on the same line of thought expressed by Ahmad, one can not fail to see that Said’s numerous writings on the issue of Israel-Palestine do not only stem from his awareness of his own people’s suffering, but from a rather rhizomatic sense of “affiliation”, where belonging to a set of critical, humanistic and paradoxically Western-ideas takes precedence over ethnic and linguistic “filiation” to the Palestinian root. In his collection of essays The Politics of Dispossession, Said defines different moments of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, from the late sixties to the early years of the nineties. His radicalism in criticizing the State of Israel, Zionism and the Western support of this ideology was at the time of the publication of this book (1994) unprecedented. His informed positions
against Zionism along with his unsparing critique of the Arab states are shaped within a larger discussion of the concept of difference. In the chapter titled “An Ideology of Difference”, Said underlines two congruent and complementary facts: one is the total erasure of any possible traces of Arab Palestinians in the imaginative geography of the Jewish settlers and state founders; two is the emergence of new forms of recognition of the Palestinian Other as basically “different” and rightfully dispossessed. This new Palestinian Other whether he or she lives in the occupied territories or lives in Israel as an Israeli citizen, has no claim to the land; he or she is a non-Jew in a Jewish state, a mere alien with no or with inferior rights, a present-absentee, and a second-class citizen frequently exploited as cheap labor by his fellow citizens. His or her fate is to remain either invisible or instrumentalized. Said’s stylish and informative discussion of “difference” paves the way to a new understanding of the politics of hope developed and supported by his humanistic approach to the historical setback in the Middle East. The conclusion of the chapter on the ideology of difference underscores how the problem of difference is seminal to the strategic move toward a potential (perhaps utopian) one-state solution of the question of Palestine:

“I do not think as Palestinians that there is even a remote possibility that we can return to a pristine, undivided past. For us, the only hope is a community with Zionist and non-Zionist Jews on the land of historical Palestine. We have yet to find the way to achieve this goal, especially since conflicts and hostility are imposed on us by our far more powerful opponents. (…) The only way to do this, I believe, is to grasp and understand the problem of difference, as exemplified in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, and to do so as radically, as fully, and as variously as possible.”

Said’s philosophical approach in “The Ideology of Difference” is truly compelling because it transcends, without ignoring, the historical and factual aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by reflecting on the concept of difference.

Yet the most powerful and poetic account of Palestinian lives remains by far Said’s *After the Last Sky*. As Said strives toward the assertion of the very existence of Palestinians, defending them against erasure and reductive ideologies of difference, this book is another Palestinian story told from scratch, or so it seems. Said’s subtle account of the Palestinian dilemma is accompanied by photographs by Jean Mohr which restore through the visual medium fragments of the Palestinian memory, and therefore give meaning to discontinuity, “marked by the artificial and
imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations
and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time” as if “all events are
accidents, all progress is a digression, all residence is exile.”

Notwithstanding this, the voice of hope and the optimistic longing for a
better future becomes louder and clearer than the voice of pessimistic
lament over loss and dispersion as Said concludes:

“A part of something is for the foreseeable future going to be better than all
of it. Fragments over wholes. Restless nomadic activity over the
settlements of held territory. Criticism over resignation. The Palestinian as
self-consciousness in a barren plain of investments and consumer appetites.
The heroism of anger over the begging-bowl, limited independence over
the status of clients. Attention, alertness, focus. To do as others do, but
somehow to stand apart. To tell your story in pieces, as it is.”

Even in today’s most controversial identitarian issues, where the identity
of the Palestinian people is relegated to a lesser or inferior status inside
and outside the boundaries of nation-states and global legitimacy, the
words written by Said resonate with what Eqbal Ahmad rightfully depicts
as the convergence of the colonial wound past and present and the concern
for the future of human kind. The sheer denial of this identity for
ideological reasons is problematized by the fact that Said himself does not
seem to be keen to assert it. Said’s positions remain in fact clearly secular;
the separation between dogmatism (be it religious or nationalistic, western
or eastern, imperial or postcolonial) and liberal positionality, freedom of
expression and belief, is the exact antithesis of the ideology of difference
criticized by Said. This ideology purposely avoids possible comparisons
between human experiences and routinely denies striking similarities and
illuminating connections. In Said’s works as well as through his public
appearances, only a secular comprehensive understanding of the question
of Palestine can lead to true liberation: “Better our wanderings, I
sometimes think, than the horrid clanging shutters of their return. The
open secular element and not the symmetry of redemption…”

Difference did not and should not prevent the two peoples from living together
despite their irreconcilable experiences. This very irreconcilability reflects
in fact the tensions that never quite disappear in contrapuntal, secular and
critical readings of the world.
Nomadism and Secular Criticism

Said’s position in regards to the relationship between the critic and the world is unambiguous: critics are bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession) or affiliatively (by social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstance or voluntary effort). Both patterns of filiation and affiliation can easily metamorphose into systems of domination and power, and should be rejected by the critical consciousness. Said examines both patterns of Eurocentric criticism and condemns them for their tendency that “reinforces the known at the expense of the knowable.” Secular criticism instead, he argues, should be nomadic.

Nevertheless, criticism is always situated, linked, contextualized; it is situated in the world (texts and essays are actually events) and it is situated in the essay as a privileged form of writing adopted by critics and by Said himself. It is also situated in the involvement of the critic (Swift for example) with power, in the refusal to be labeled, and in the systematic demystification of isms. Criticism, as Said conceives of it, draws on the world as its context, and nomadic thought leads beyond the narrow confines of ethnicity, nationalism and partisanship.

There are many possible lines of connection between the exilic condition endorsed and analyzed by Said and his theoretical elaboration of nomadic criticism. In Beginnings (1975) Said borrows from George Steiner the image of the literary critic as “a wanderer, going from place to place for his material, but remaining a man essentially between homes.” Said uses this image to argue that today’s literary critics find it hard to root themselves in a single tradition, a single canon without some kind of engagement with the writer’s own place. Said learns from Michel Foucault that history and tradition are not necessarily communicated in a sequential narrative passed from an individual source through a chain of narrators faithful to an original story.

“All sort of writing establishes explicit and implicit rules of pertinence for itself: certain things are admissible, certain others are not. I call these rules of pertinence authority – both in the sense of explicit law and guiding force (what we usually mean by the term) and in the sense of that implicit power to generate another word that will belong to the writing as a whole.”

Each work creates its own rules of pertinence, its own authority. Counterpoint thus works on two levels in Said’s oeuvre: on one level it is an explicit, overarching method of engaging with external authors who each play by their own rules of pertinence. On a second level it reflects the
implicit ongoing dialogue between Said’s own writings, a dialogue that arguably creates and disrupts the “Saidian style” from the theoretical stammering of *Beginnings* to the succinct conclusions of *Late Style*.

Movement across boundaries, homelessness and distance are what allow Said to establish a secular criticism that relies on “the body and the senses of sight and hearing, repetition, and the sheer heterogeneity of detail” rather than a set of canons or “a collection of cultural generalities.” A secular reading of Said’s legacy restores the distance he himself created and maintained between his own “contrapuntal style” on the one hand and dogmatic nationalism, identitarian sectarianism, and self-congratulatory historiography on the other hand. Said’s motto “Never solidary before criticism is the short answer” can indeed be viewed as one of Said’s major arguments against ideology. Said extends this idea to argue that a true secular intellectual must worship no God. In light of Bill Ashcroft’s criticism of Said’s dismissal of the sacred in this volume, we might reinterpret this to mean that the secular intellectual must interrogate all affiliations, especially ones with claims to transcendence. In *Representations of the Intellectual* Said compels readers to think beyond their narrow political or professional goals and consider how their contributions as humans, writers or intellectuals can impact or create meaning -different meanings- in the world.

“It is a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them.”

The choice to side with the weaker, the less-represented, the forgotten or the ignored rather than to side with the powerful is a stance in opposition to transcendent ideologies; a choice Said encourages the public intellectual in particular to take.

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Although Said considers his journey as a journey “out of place”, his intellectual achievement is both grounded in worldly convictions and deterritorialized thanks to his constant movements outside of the beaten paths. His presumably active (rather than activist) role in the public sphere does not diminish or alter his exilic and consistently revolutionary thinking. Said’s intellectual and political positions unfold in various forms and directions; they encompass the ambiguous position of a free mind,
where out of place means also out of reductive partisanship (bestoyed upon him on both sides of the East-West divide), and out of territorialized expressions of nationalist and religious dogmatisms.

Said’s legacy is comparable in many respects to the legacy of great Muslim thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldun. Like the three of them, he was appointed in highly strategic positions in politics and in academia, yet he kept his autonomy as a scholar and a university professor, as a thinker and as a public spokesman and writer. Like the three of them, Said should be remembered for his profound and significant contribution to the history of thought. Farabi and Ibn Rushd introduced and commented on Plato and Aristotle, Said introduced to the American readers the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, and engaged an outstanding dialogue with Foucault’s work, namely on the archeology of power. And while the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun is considered the founding book of the new science of sociology in the fourteenth century, Said’s seminal book Orientalism is an outstanding work of scholarship, undeniably foundational in the fields of comparative literature and postcolonial theories.

This book is not only meant to celebrate Said’s works and thought. It is also an attempt to challenge the general expectations in regards to Said’s legacy. We believe that this legacy goes far beyond the reductive role of the politicised post-colonial intellectual whom many have chosen to convey a narrow message, regularly and repeatedly, while criticizing, commenting or using Said’s works. In Said’s books as well as in his social and political activism there was no separation between political positionality and philosophical thinking, except in terms of intensities and negotiation of meaning. Both the political and the philosophical should be viewed, in Said’s terminology, as discrepant and overlapping experiences of knowledge. A way, sometimes twisted and unbeaten, some other times smooth and open, that leads towards the understanding—or the surpassment—of all binarisms.

Works Cited


Notes

1 See Gayatri Spivak, Death of a Discipline. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Here Spivak charts an urgent renewal of the field out of the encounter with area studies and cultural studies, hoping that the field could break free from the traditional national and linguistic anchoring.


3 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Taking Kafka as an ultimate example, Deleuze and Guattari establish the new concept of minor and revolutionary literature. It is a literature written in a major language, which has a political nature and a collective value, but which undermines language and escapes mimetic representation and destroys rhetorical enunciations.

4 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 52.
5 Ibid., 32.
6 Ibid., 18.
11 Ibid., 128.
12 Ibid.
13 Both Barenboim and Said called for an immediate subjective experience of Wagner’s music despite the anti-semitic accusations bestoyed upon Hitler’s favorite composer. In the summer of 2001, Barenboim played an excerpt from Wagner’s opera *Tristan and Isolde* in the annual Israeli festival as an encore. He received a standing ovation from the audience, ending decades of an unwritten ban on Wagner’s music in Israel.
20 Ibid., 150.
21 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 16.
27 Ibid., xvii.