



BOOK FORUM

## Places of Mind: A Response

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As the man who more than anyone except for Noam Chomsky brought a political calling to university life; inspired professors to become (like him) public intellectuals; made the humanities matter to the magazines, television news hours, and editorialists; turned the study of imperialism into an intellectually respectable enterprise; invented the critique of Islamophobia; and helped open the university to nonwhite professionals across the disciplines—Said would seem still to deserve significant attention in university circles. But in academia and almost nowhere else an awkward silence prevails. *Places of Mind* was widely discussed in mainstream forums that ranged from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New Yorker* to the *New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, the BBC, Air France, and Al-Jazeera—and was translated or partly translated in Norway, Turkey, China, Germany, the Netherlands, Taiwan, the Arab world, and France. And yet it has been more or less ignored within the university itself and, particularly surprising, by the postcolonial journals (with the exception of the present one). I do not take this as a comment on my biography; it is rather a statement about Said's legacy, or lack thereof, in the present political climate of American academia.

Some of his natural allies living in an intellectual world he largely made pretend to have moved on. Perhaps, as Hosam Aboul-Ela suggests, they abreact to his humanism, his universalism in an era of tribalism, his mode of critique under the sway of various postcritical enchantments or, as Aboul-Ela puts it, his “individual force in changing public perception around the question of Palestine and the problem of Islamophobia.” A vast Modern Language Association (MLA) middle uneasily defends Israel's every move or muted by fear wants its critics to be quiet, be denied fellowships, or simply go away. On a different front, some consider him not radical enough. He bridged differences, built institutions, negotiated with heads of state, created new fields of study. Today they imagine

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a more “sophisticated” politics to be based on affect, indignant memoir, or on an ontological status that stands in for while displacing the underclass. With name, religion, or color one dispenses with shared political commitments. Given that these are the crossroads we now occupy, I am especially thankful for this forum, which I take to be carrying on a conversation with Said himself.

Zeyad el Nabolsy’s wonderfully informed article goes right to the heart of a key Saidian philosophical claim. He scrutinizes with technical precision the epistemological corollaries that Said worked hard to leave vague. He is quite right that 1970s linguistic theory was not as original as its participants thought when measured by experts in intellectual history like himself—a point that Said too thought he was making. Every idea has come before, and one of the principal Vichian dicta is that repetition, although inevitable, can be originally expressed. The point Said was making, on the other hand, and that I tried to amplify, was rather that the linguistic basis of poststructuralism, however familiar, was for all that embraced by its contemporaries as a Copernican shift. Nothing in the eighteenth century precisely reaches the extremes found in the poststructuralist credos that texts are happily uninterpretable, that writing exceeds its intention, or that the hyperreality of the spectacle means the Gulf War did not really happen. The particular conjuncture is what matters here—the concerted efforts of a post-political generation whose mission was to emphasize linguistic structures so that historical agency would be rendered null and void or associated with the hangovers of a despicable humanism. The confusion about Said’s intentions comes in part from my need to express complex arguments in a pared-down way (in El-Nabolsy’s words “[to] reconstruct [Said’s] arguments and lay them out as clearly as possible”). It is, therefore, not this or that formulation of the philosophy of language vis-à-vis reality that should be emphasized, but the constellation of movements, figures, and ideas in this historically specific assault on the organizational left and the attempt to undermine the authority of the engaged intellectual: epistemological doubt as a soothing dogma that fit very ill with Said’s need to establish facts on the ground for the Palestinian cause.

It is important to note, again, that he was applying his literary critical training to the critiques of propaganda pioneered, among others, by Herbert Schiller, Fritz Machlup, Noam Chomsky, and Armand Mattelart. Said’s obsession, therefore, was not so much to focus on “subjective mental states” as distinct from “unmediated cognitive access to a mind-independent reality.” That problematic would belong more with Anglo-American philosophical logism. His focus, by contrast, was on narrative’s tyranny over action and belief. His attractions to, and later rejection of, theories of discourse then raging in the university were largely about the abuses of a criticism ignorant of its own fictions, strategies of social control, the non-autonomy of language, and the status of meaning and interpretation as they affect agency. Elucidating this kind of point (which deviates from the public perception of Said’s project) preoccupied me when quoting from his work and laying out the subtexts of his arguments in *Beginnings; Orientalism; The World, the Text, and the Critic; and Culture and Imperialism*. Delving more deeply into their implications at a cellular level, and discussing at length their sources, was a feature of earlier drafts of the biography that I had to jettison

in later revisions at the request of my editor to avoid making the book too academic. But no reader of *Places of Mind*, I think, can be in doubt about these aspects of Said's position.

Does Said subscribe, as el Nabolsey suggests, to an older "correspondence theory of truth"? No, he does not. I wrote that *Orientalism* "was never about something so vulgar" as that. Literature, Said contended, "muddles the tidy categories." A neat or absolute correspondence between word and thing is not Said's vision of the world, even if he did not subscribe to the deconstructive tenet that reality is "a textual element with no ground in actuality." In short, there is a vast space between these two propositions. They are not an either-or.

Said never proposes, for instance, that there is no such thing as a "real" Orient or that it only has a life in "discourse." It is rather that he does not pretend to describe that brute reality to which he repeatedly refers, and to which he gives priority of place. His is, by contrast, a point about the relative indifference of Western intellectuals to that reality, about the confident building and elaboration of ideas and images that rely on the ideas and images that have preceded them within the same constellation of value. The book, in short, is about how intellectuals create a reality. In other words, narrative does not simplistically mirror the actual, even if it depends on it—partakes of it—to be meaningful at all; on the contrary, it alters it. Words, books, images are physical, after all. In that common-sensical way, they are a part of reality, not merely reflective of it. But more interestingly, the stories we construct modify what we see, remember, and prioritize. No "out there" is inert; it is activated by a subjectivity organized in language.

A similar observation might be made about interpretation. The point is not "that a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds with the relevant element of reality." Trained to respect the elaborate systems of philology, he took his cue from Harry Levin by combatting the notion, rampant in the 1980s–2000s (and still popular), that critics need not detain themselves with histories of composition, social contexts, authorial intent, or contemporaneous debates when conjecturing about a text's meaning. The idea prevalent at the time, against which he positioned himself, was that texts were occasions for improvisation, productively deployed for whatever purpose the critic wished. Then again, he did not fold his arms and declare that only his interpretation was true (which would be theoretically justified if a proposition could be found true by virtue of its correspondence with reality), only to insist that some interpretations are more trustworthy than others. His opponents abandoned in advance even the goal of discovering meaning, whereas he insisted that meaning entailed responsibility—for example, to read all of an author's work, place it in its time, worry about etymologies and connotations, pay attention to internal consistency, and so on. So, there are "facts" about the text: has the critic a grip on the actual words that the text contains? Does he or she know its conditions of composition? Is what the text says measured against the author's total oeuvre or are isolated passages simply ripped out of context to prove the critic's a priori? But even these facts by themselves provide no guarantee of determinate conclusions without triangulation. One does not expect to arrive at indisputable meaning;

one rather takes a position on meaning after demonstrating the right to do so on the basis of exegetical care.

The fact/representation antinomy in Anglo-American philosophy seems an intractable dilemma; it is not intractable, however, within dialectical reason, which sees facts not as independent entities untouched by consciousness but as products of the dynamic interplay of subject and object. Said, as I pointed out in the biography, was hostile to Hegel and never seriously read him, but his points of departure are largely Hegelian Marxists (Adorno, Gramsci, Lukács). Hegel's is the first philosophy to bring productive labor, foreign trade, colonization, and bourgeois society squarely into the problematics of truth, knowledge, and right, which Said partly acknowledges in his introduction to Auerbach's *Mimesis*. This may explain why his take on representation is not congruent with Anglo-American formal logic.

I cannot withdraw my claim that many of Said's critics misread him because they did not take the time to work through his points of departure, not having immersed themselves in the thinkers who inspired him—above all, Vico. But I can say that I never argued that none of his Marxist critics understood him or that their critiques were always off the mark. On the contrary, as one of those critics, I praised many of their critiques in the biography, whose criticisms are ones I had made in the past myself. For example, I agree completely that *Orientalism's* ignorance of the economics of imperialism is a damaging weakness and that *Culture and Imperialism's* definition of imperialism as an “irrational desire” rather than a capitalist imperative is a form of idealism. I agree strongly, moreover, with the note with which el Nabolsey ends his intervention. Agony indeed, and for the very reasons he states.

Hosam Aboul-Ela perceptively hones in on two of the thornier, less obvious aspects of Said's legacy—that in an age when the author-function was placed in doubt—at least as the work of an individual subject—Said struggled to demystify this drift with reminders that living people, the products of families and environments with memories and moods, pressed keys, held pens, and composed prose while reading the books of other living people, all with their own associations, habits, tastes, and projects. They are not together an anonymous melange thereby obscuring authorship; rather forerunners are consciously chosen, creating a tradition. Paradoxically, the claim that the author was dead had gained currency only because a particular living person, Michel Foucault, had popularized the idea—one of poststructuralism's many performative contradictions. The issue that threatened authorial status was, *pace* Foucault, less the anonymity of “discourse” than the tyrannical influence of celebrity. This tension between what *Beginnings* called “will and intention”—that is, agency—of authors and the confusions, misreadings, and flattened nuances that attend celebrity (where a few recycled monikers replace the complexities of what one meant to say) troubled Said throughout his career. Writers define themselves by whom they consciously emulate, or resist—a process that is not in the least impersonal—as Foucault's very public tussle with the somewhat younger Derrida showed. On the other hand, celebrity has a way of queering the pitch by making authorial pull so ubiquitous that choice is obviated, and one perpetually ringing name (say,

“Foucault” or “Said”) colors every act of transgression or conformity as the atmosphere which taints every choice of influence or invented tradition.

The cleverness of Aboul-Ela’s article is that after establishing a verity he circles back round to view its contradiction from the other side. Said, he rightly observes, rejected two of Foucault’s defining features: he, unlike Foucault, believed in “the agency of the intellectual/activist” (in Aboul-Ela’s words); and, in what is really a corollary of the first, Foucault’s politics were quietistic—micrological examinations of the impervious power of institutions to silence, surveil, and normatively manage but without a hint about people’s innovations, resistance, and counter-organizing (a la Gramsci’s use of the “cultural public sphere as ... mobilization against manipulation”).

Foucault eventually became part of the Cold War consensus, was embraced by the *nouveaux philosophes*, and was notoriously (but accurately) dubbed by Habermas a “young conservative.” But, then, Aboul-Ela observes the turn: Said wrote a glowing obit for him late in his career, partly (he implies) because Foucault showed himself at times to be a fighter, bravely facing down police, “his will to rebel against the repressive act.” In general, there is throughout his intervention an alertness to reversals, for example, in probing that inconsistency in Said (as el-Nabolsy also notes) between the Vichian proposition that all races and cultures contributed without priority to civilization and his search for a completely indigenous theory and (in Aboul-Ela’s example) the deliberate universalism of Said’s voice, his concern that he speak in the register of the general intellect bridging worldviews, and yet at the same time his effort to autobiographize his critique by conceding that in *Orientalism* he attempted to write “an inventory of traces” left on his Oriental subjectivity.

In this context I especially appreciated Aboul-Ela’s comment that a non-Arab is not automatically disqualified from capturing Said’s sensibilities, influences, and personal trials as an American immigrant to America and, indeed, also as an Arab intellectual. Naturally, others might have had more insight into the opportunities and frustrations of being Arab in American academia. But would they have necessarily known as much about his intellectual points of departure, his unguarded comments in conversation, classical music? Which differences are different enough to matter? Whatever the merits of the charges issued by a few Arab and Persian critics of the biography, they were often quite severe. In one review (Hussein Omar’s in *The Baffler*), I was accused of promoting a “Carlylean ‘great man’ approach,” as though I did not portray Said as a man of his time, formed by struggles in Algeria and Vietnam, New York belletrism, and the Arab *Nahda* intellectuals under whom he actively apprenticed. I was accused of talking too much about academic debates as though Said were not an academic or as though Said’s decades-long meditation on “plain speaking” in Swift, “hegemony” in Gramsci’s linguistics, or *asabiyyah* in Ibn Khaldun were unrelated to his rhetorical conquests as a talk-show celebrity or his pioneering theorization of Islamophobia.

He wrote that, despite my dedicating the biography to “the Palestinian people,” Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) “activists, officials, and thinkers” were “conspicuous by their absence” in the book, even though I interviewed, and frequently cited, dozens of Palestinian and non-Palestinian

activists in the movement including eye-witness accounts of militants, the most dramatic of which was probably Shafiq al-Hout's *My Life in the PLO*. He claimed that "none" of Said's writing for the Arab press or his passionate defenses of the intifada can be found in the book, whereas I dedicated the better part of a chapter to both. I supposedly had passed over Said's Arab intellectual sources, whereas I dwell on them at length, giving particular attention to the Lebanese statesman Charles Malik, and the intellectual models provided by the great theorist of the *nakba* (disaster), Constantine Zurayk. He found most objectionable, though, my pointing out that Said refused to equate what one knows with what one is, thinking the two indistinguishable.

We all have our pasts, bodies, and family ties. In a class-ridden, racist society, those inheritances obviously condition how we think and what we are moved to know. But does that mean that every African American lawyer knows the history of the civil rights movement by right of birth? The point of education is to project oneself into other experiences to learn what one is not: the Midwest Jewish sinologist, the Catholic woman from Goa who becomes a Milton scholar. There were others who argued along these lines as well, smart enough not to say it openly, but insinuating that no non-Arab can know the "real" Edward Said, which is why they wished to narrow Said's range and make him an Arab intellectual alone. My gratitude to Aboul-Ela for bringing this delicate issue to the fore.

More than a response to a book, Ben Etherington's article originally develops ideas latent in Said's writing, articulating them with an exactness not found in Said himself, perhaps intentionally. Seizing on biographical details from the biography, he focuses on Said's decision as a young New York professor not to return permanently to the Middle East to work as a scholar-activist. He notes that this broke from the typical patterns followed by native intellectuals in acts of resistance in the colonies. For in that model, those trained in the conquerors' schools as administrative elites tended reactively to become fierce nationalists. Said's actual trajectory by contrast was nondenominational, his project akin to Aimé Césaire's in the passage from *Cahiers d'un retour au pay natal* that he often quoted: "and no race holds a monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of strength. There is a place for all at the Rendezvous of Victory." This outlook, Etherington observes, reflected less a surrender to Enlightenment universalism, which he no doubt absorbed under relentless Western tutelage than (in Etherington's fine phrase) a "charismatic counter-hegemony" (the "hegemony" in this case referring not only to the British and American empires but the postcolonial fixation on native being).

Etherington's article captured the contradictions that I believe defined Said's work and that I set out especially to convey—for instance, Said's curious claim that Fanon's prescience when cataloguing the dynamics of the independence movements bore signs of the influence of Lukács (for which there is little evidence), whereas it is better explained by Sartre's elaboration of the "socio-material nexus" behind every political ideology, which in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* he called the "practico-inert" (for which there is much evidence). This devotion on Said's part to a select list of chosen forerunners (among whom Lukács could always be counted) involved remaining silent about Sartre, a thinker from whom Said took a great deal. He could not bear to enlist Sartre

openly, though, because of his equivocations on the Palestinian issue—Sartre’s casting the wholly disproportionate violence, military occupation, and apartheid laws as a tragic refusal of recognition on both sides.

The consistent awareness to this kind of doubling maneuver is everywhere in Etherington’s article, from the crucial observation that Said’s Palestinian-ness was itself a universal in line with the Fanonian principle from *The Wretched of the Earth* that “at the heart of national consciousness international consciousness lives and grows” to the equally Marxian discovery that much of Said’s bobbing and weaving—that is, his calculated ambiguities—had to do with negotiating the backlash against third world Marxism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Perhaps the greatest contradiction, though—and it is really the spine of Etherington’s article—lies in the phrase (again taken from Fanon) “imperialized intellectual.” The initial impression is that it refers to those who have internalized the foreign culture in which they were immersed to such a degree that they believe it superior and set out to “elevate” their people to the new imperial norm. But Etherington gleans from his reading of Fanon a different meaning, where the phrase seems to point to the sheer bother of having one’s intellectual room to maneuver narrowed in advance. Of course, imperialism is rotten, and the eloquence of Said (like Fanon) exposed its crimes beautifully. But would anyone who had the choice really want to spend their life reacting to this system of control, this cultural alienation based on assumptions about levels of civilization and racial hierarchies? One is “imperialized” not in the sense of going over to empire or identifying with it, but simply by having to extricate oneself from its warped story. I learned from each of these articles and am grateful to my colleagues who wrote them. I hope they help push the profession a little closer to recognizing that Said’s work is still alive and that it is speaking directly to them.

**Author biography.** Timothy Brennan’s essays on literature, cultural politics, intellectuals, and imperial culture have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Nation*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *New Left Review*, *Critical Inquiry*, and the *London Review of Books*. He teaches in the humanities at the University of Minnesota and is the author most recently of *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021) and *Borrowed Light, vol I: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* (Stanford University Press, 2014). He is currently at work on the second volume of *Borrowed Light: Imperial Form*.

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