

*Said and Political Theory**Jeanne Morefield*

In his 2003 poem, “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading,” Mahmoud Darwish reflected on Said’s intellectual and emotional struggles with identity, politics, and the fact of living in exile. The poem, written on the occasion of Said’s death, is an imagined conversation of sorts between Darwish and Said in which, at one point, the fictional Darwish asks the fictional Said about a visit to his childhood home in Jerusalem, now occupied by Israeli Jews. The Said of the poem – Darwish’s Said – explains that he did not enter the house and, instead, stood at the door, wondering what the current residents would think of him:

Would they ask:  
 Who is that prying foreign visitor? And how  
 could I talk about war and peace  
 among the victims and the victims’ victims,  
 without additions, without an interjection?  
 And would they tell me: There is no place for two dreams  
 in one bedroom?<sup>1</sup>

I have chosen to begin a chapter on political theory, imperialism, and the importance of Said’s thought with Darwish’s poem rather than with a straightforward unpacking of Said’s method because I am interested in cultivating this approach as a *disposition* toward critique rather than a theoretical framework into which we can fit aspects of empire, like puzzle pieces, and make sense of the whole. Beginning with Darwish’s contrapuntal reading allows us to back into this disposition through the eyes of another, waking up to its complexities and contradictions through the to and fro of dialogue. And it is deeply complex. For instance, Darwish’s questions about Said’s return to his childhood home and Said’s answers appear initially to be about the possibility of peaceful cohabitation in Israel/Palestine. Importantly, however, the Said of the poem doesn’t ask

whether it is possible for Jews and Palestinians to coexist – for two dreams to find a place in one bedroom – because Darwish knew that for Said, the long, multiethnic history of Palestine obviated the feasibility of such a future. Rather, the poet's Said questions whether others – the victims and the victims' victims – can imagine this possible world. This latter question, so evident in the trepidation Said expresses about his reception, is not only more complicated than the former but also goes straight to the necessary tensions – between domination and resistance, identity and narration, history and the present – at the heart of what Said called *counterpoint* and the democratic form of humanism that accompanied this critical vision. These complexities are also precisely what makes a Saidian approach so potentially valuable for political theorists interested in questions of empire and imperialism.

I realize full well that suggesting Said might be useful for thinking about imperialism will no doubt strike anyone outside the deeply isolationist subfield that is political theory as absurdly obvious. This is a man whose 1978 book, *Orientalism*, ignited a scholarly movement dedicated to the study of imperialism, inaugurated the field of post-colonial studies, and became for many scholars of comparative literature, history, cultural studies, and anthropology, a virtual classic learnt “by osmosis.”<sup>2</sup> Said was also an astonishingly productive scholar and his work has been the subject of sustained attention for decades by some of the most well-known scholars of our era.<sup>3</sup> And yet, aside from passing references, political theorists have largely ignored Said's writings, a strange lacunae given that over the last 15 years, increasing numbers of them have become interested in imperialism.<sup>4</sup> In opposition to this trend, I make the case here that political theorists would do well to embrace Said's approach because it speaks precisely to the kinds of analyses political theory does well by pushing theorists toward what they often avoid: interdisciplinarity and a willingness to engage what Said called “untidy” modes of inquiry that engage multiple political visions and identities – multiple dreams – simultaneously. Moreover, I argue, a Saidian disposition can help bridge what is often an unfortunate gap in political theory scholarship between historical analyses of imperialism and contemporary critiques of American power. The chapter first touches on the “turn to empire” in political theory, moves to an analysis of Said's interdisciplinarity, and concludes – with Darwish – by reflecting on some of the frustrations and promises of this critical disposition.

### Political Theory, Imperialism, and Said

In her important 2010 review essay, Jennifer Pitts notes that political theory “has come slowly and late to the study of empire,” only turning its full attention to an area of inquiry that, for decades, has preoccupied scholars in other disciplines, after September 11, 2001.<sup>5</sup> While political theorists may be showing up slowly and late to empire, however, they have not yet arrived at an appreciation of Said and continue to ignore almost entirely the work of a man whose influence on the study of imperialism in nearly every other academic field is incalculable.<sup>6</sup> A scholar of astonishing breadth, Said wrote about literature, culture, ideology, history, philosophy, and all these at the same time, as well as dozens of books and articles on the political question of Palestine and the mechanisms by which Palestinians were denied “permission to narrate” their own experiences.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as a Palestinian exile – constantly negotiating the space between the history of imperialism, the Palestinian present, and the global impact of America’s militarism – Said brought an acute sensitivity toward the relationship between culture, politics, imperialism, and resistance to nearly all his writings. As Akeel Bilgrami notes in his loving introduction to *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, because of his commitment to Palestinian freedom and because politics was so integral to his most important writing, “Edward Said’s intellectual legacy will be primarily political – not just in the popular imagination, but also perhaps in the eyes of academic research.”<sup>8</sup> The centrality of politics to Said’s work makes it all the more ironic then that the majority of political theorists have remained so steadfastly immune to his charms.

What accounts for this lack of engagement? In many ways, Said’s critical disposition runs perfectly counter to the two modes of political theorizing that have dominated the North American academy for the last 70 years: a canon-oriented approach to the history of political thought, on the one hand, and a normative approach that abstracts questions about justice from analyses of actual politics and history, on the other.<sup>9</sup> More to the point, even for theorists interested in questions of empire, Said’s “nomadic” orientation toward critique – his radical interdisciplinarity, the expansive palate of genres he investigated, and the breadth of interpretive strategies he employed – simply flies in the face of the subfield’s general resistance to methodologies and orientations that pull from too many theoretical approaches at once or appear to lack systematic rigor. Some of Said’s most important critical interventions regarding the study of imperialism, however, flow precisely from developing the insights of,

in his words, “people who are unsystematic.” As he explained, one “cannot derive a systematic theory” from Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, or C. L. R. James precisely because they were “involved in culture, in political struggle” and in the adaptation of conventional disciplines and genres to the study of politics.<sup>10</sup> And yet, from Said’s perspective, creative engagement with culture and politics was absolutely essential for interrogating a global phenomenon as culturally and politically complex as imperialism. He thus cultivated a perspective that straddled what he identified in his critical evaluation of Frederick Jameson’s work as the “dichotomy between two kinds of ‘Politics’”: a politics “defined by political theory from Hegel to Louis Althusser and Ernst Bloch” and a politics “of struggle and power in the everyday world.”<sup>11</sup> Such an approach is inherently interdisciplinary and engaged with history in ways that provide neither normative solutions to political/ethical problems nor the conceptual scaffolding political theorists often desire to explain political phenomena in systematic terms. Indeed, from the perspective of political theorists interested in conceptual clarity, Said’s intellectual “nomadism” (as he called it) can seem hopelessly muddled or, in Iskander and Rustom’s words, “untidy and spatially fluid.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, because political theorists are often trained to *think through* a particular theorist’s mode of inquiry into the world – to provide a Rawlsian perspective on global justice for instance – following the diverse theoretical influences that exit and enter through the revolving door of Said’s prose (from Vico to Foucault, Adorno to Fanon, Auerbach to Césaire) can feel like an exhausting form of intellectual whiplash.

In addition, political theory’s avoidance of Said might also be related to one of the main institutional impediments to its engagement with imperialism in the first place: the relationship of the subdiscipline to political science. As a field, political science – particularly in North America – not only segregates thinking about domestic politics and political theory from international relations but it has also been notoriously reluctant to study global politics through the lens of imperialism. Indeed, even critics of American hegemony are loathe to utter the word *empire* aloud.<sup>13</sup> When political scientists do analyze the politics of empire, these analyses tend to be couched almost entirely in a state-centric language that views imperialism, in Michael Doyle’s terms, as “simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.”<sup>14</sup> The parsimony of this definition presents two problems for scholars interested in how imperialism circulates historically or in the contemporary world. First, there is nothing simple about “establishing or maintaining an empire” because the process entails constantly asserting, reasserting, rationalizing, and expanding differences in

power and status between the colonizers and the colonized and among the colonized.<sup>15</sup> To sustain this scalar world, imperialism – as an ideology and political practice – must function on a number of different registers simultaneously. Cultivating an intellectual orientation committed to understanding these complexities thus requires the critic to challenge political science’s fixation with the state and focus, instead, on unknitting the tangled set of connections between imperialism and the culture sustaining it.

Second, and relatedly, a definition of *empire* or *imperialism* that does not consider the dense ideological and cultural assemblage necessary to rationalize and naturalize domination cannot adequately grapple with the way imperialism functions in a putatively postimperial age. In other words, any definition of *imperialism* that stops at the level of state control will necessarily fail to fully account for the means through which the terminologies and institutional structures associated with our contemporary global order have been determined by former empires. Political theorists have largely emulated political science’s blind spots in this regard, only recently and slowly turning their attention to what Pitts calls the “discursive features of empire,” those ideological/cultural/rhetorical practices that reflect the historical presence of imperial sensibilities in contemporary American and international discourse but that frequently go unseen or misidentified because they aren’t couched in explicitly imperialist language.<sup>16</sup> Terms such as *structural adjustment* and *development* and institutions like the World Bank mirror what James Tully describes as the “complex network of unequal relationships of power between the west and the non-west” that have persisted since the onset of European imperialism.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Said argued, while it is largely true that direct colonization ended in the middle of the twentieth century, “the meaning of colonial rule was by no means transformed into a settled question,” and spirited intellectual debates over imperialist practices and their sustaining ideologies continue unabated within the formerly colonized world.<sup>18</sup> Imperialism, in this contemporary context, necessarily overflows its definitional floodgates, filling up postcolonial space. Any theoretical approach wanting to grapple with both the presence of the imperial past and contemporary imperialist practices has to be able to think in more capacious ways about what the word *empire* means in the world now.

Said approached imperialism precisely in this spirit as a “constantly expanding,” “inexorably integrative” ideological formation that buttressed domination in the past, rationalizes imperial politics in the present, and renders the impact of the former invisible on the latter.<sup>19</sup> For Said,

imperialism was/is a dynamic process, ordering the world spatially and temporally through, first, the discursive and political construction of what he famously called “imagined geographies,” forms of knowledge and cartographic common sense that naturalize fundamental differences between the Orient and the West, the colonizing and the colonized. The developing and the developed.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, *Orientalism*’s most profound innovation was its assertion that understanding how the West came to dominate the East politically requires a deeper understanding of this geographic thinking and of the ways the West studied, imagined, quantified, and described the Orient. Moreover, Said’s inquiry also exposed the discursive mechanisms through which imperialism orders the world by telling developmental stories about peoples and places, narrowing the narrative aperture of history such that alternative accounts of colonization, precolonial time, and resistance simply disappear and “history” becomes the history of colonization alone.<sup>21</sup> By this logic, active traces of the imperial past on the present (including the grotesque inequality of resources between the Global North and South) appear *sui generis*, untethered from a history of imperialism, dispossession, and resource extraction – the natural order of things.

In essence, for Said, culture “works very effectively to make invisible and even ‘impossible’ the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force on the other.”<sup>22</sup> Rendering such affiliations visible – writing back to the densely skeined, discursive landscape that was and is the relationship between the politics of modern imperialism and its culture – required, for Said, a commodious intellectual disposition capable of moving between the social/cultural/political context of colonialism in the past and present and the broad geographic and military systems that sustain(ed) it. In this sense, Said argued, the “[W]ork of theory, of criticism, demystification, deconsecration, and decentralization [is] never finished.” Rather, theory must commit to exceeding its boundaries in the same way as does imperialism, “to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile.”<sup>23</sup> Such an orientation entailed, first and foremost, a rejection of specialized disciplinary attachments that produce increasingly narrow “constituencies and interpretive communities,” reifying and privatizing the otherwise untidy landscape of history.<sup>24</sup> In an intellectual environment where academic fields tend to “subdivide and proliferate,” scholars often fail to perceive the astonishingly complex overlap of the discourses, politics, and cultural formations buttressing imperialism.<sup>25</sup> Said preferred

instead what he called a “worldly” approach to inquiry committed to reading texts as objects that are “produced and live on in the historical realm,” always leavened by the “insinuations, the imbrications of power” and the multiplicity of cultural and political expressions woven into the imperial experience.<sup>26</sup> Such an approach requires that the critic situate texts within the whole “economy” of discourses that give empire life and to expand the boundaries of what counts as “texts” worthy of inquiry to include, for instance, the rhetorical utterances of public intellectuals, travel narratives, and educational manuals. Theory must be capacious enough to travel across areas of expertise, between high and popular culture, while scholars must be willing to “make connections across lines and barriers.”<sup>27</sup>

Making “connections across lines and barriers” was also fundamental to an approach Said called *counterpoint*. Drawing conceptual inspiration from Western classical music, he described counterpoint as the interplay of “various themes” with “only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one.”<sup>28</sup> The “resulting polyphony,” Said argued, cautioned against approaching the West’s “cultural archive” as the univocal efflux of one, unsullied source flowing into the world, touching and reshaping the inert cultures of the non-West along the way. Rather, he maintained, it is essential to analyze these texts contrapuntally, “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history” narrated by Western authors and “those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.”<sup>29</sup> Reading nineteenth-century British novels in this manner, for instance, means reading them with an awareness of how they were shaped by the often-hidden or suppressed presence of the West Indies or India. Moreover, extracting cultural forms from the “autonomous enclosures” in which they are usually analyzed and placing them back into the “dynamic global environment” created by imperialism required, for Said, that we read Western culture in the context of anticolonial revolt and the competing discourses of domination and resistance within which nationalist and liberationist movements circulate. Such attention to “the continuity of resistance” requires reframing imperialism as a multivocal, “contested and joint experience.”<sup>30</sup>

This contrapuntal emphasis played a crucial *political* role in Said’s critical vision. On the one hand, reading imperialism for both domination and resistance disrupts universalizing narratives that locate progress and “development” in the West alone, reducing the rest of the world to passive recipients of enlightened discourse. For Said, imperial history is fissured throughout by “overlapping” experiences of resistance and relationships forged between participants in protest movements in Africa, India, “and

elsewhere in the peripheries.”<sup>31</sup> As such, it was simply never the case that the imperial encounter “pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native” because “there was *always* some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.”<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, Said argued, imagining power purely through the lens of domination (as he sometimes accused post-structuralists of doing) allowed critique to draw “a circle around itself” and eschew the search for political change.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, he understood “critical practice as a form of resistance” whose goal was to further the emergence of “non-dominative and non-coercive modes of life and knowledge.”<sup>34</sup> Taking his inspiration from Gramsci, Said believed intellectuals to be uniquely positioned to challenge orthodoxy and dogma, to raise embarrassing questions for the power elite, and to fight for people and causes that are perennially forgotten or “swept under the rug.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Said argued, given the global reach of American military, political, and economic power, intellectuals who benefit from that power have a “particular responsibility” to analyze the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world from “within the actuality” of those relationships, not from the perspective of “detached outside observers.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the global fight for justice and against imperialism was, by Said’s lights, “the functional idiom of the intellectual vocation,” an idiom that could only be sustained if scholars coupled inquiry into domination with inquiry into resistance: past, present, and future.<sup>37</sup>

### Counterpoint and Humanism

While it is generally agreed that the 1978 publication of *Orientalism* provided the inspiration for postcolonial studies as an emerging mode of inquiry and critique, Said was not, as Rosi Bradioti puts it, “very keen” on the field that “nonetheless celebrated him as a foundational figure.”<sup>38</sup> While he shared with postcolonial scholars an enduring interest in the critique of universal theory and an appreciation for the discursive apparatus enabling imperialism, he did have two major *political* complaints about much postcolonial scholarship. One way to begin unpacking Said’s political thought, then, is to examine these moments of departure more closely.

Said’s first objection to postcolonial studies lay in an affiliation he sometimes observed between postcolonial scholarship and identity politics, an approach to the “politics of knowledge” that, he argued, often substituted “approved names” for the kind of contrapuntal theorizing he cherished as an intellectual.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Said was uncomfortable with what he



saw as a similarity between identity politics and nationalism's tendency to read domination and resistance through a singular interpretation of oppression that eliminated multiplicity and hybridity. Fixed approaches to origins and identity, he argued, imposed "constitutive limitations" on historical experiences which were actually "polarized, radically uneven" and "remembered differently," transforming these experiences into primal, unhealable wounds.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, he maintained, lassoing the experiences of dispossession associated with the historical overlap of the "metropolitan and ex-colonized worlds" to immutable identities resulted in a "politics of blame" that vitiated possibilities for solidarity.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, Said took inspiration from the experience of exile, arguing in a 1992 interview that, as an exile, "you always bear within yourself a recollection of what you've left behind and what you can remember, and you play it against the current experience." From this perspective, he continued, "the notion of a *single* identity" becomes especially fraught because it mutes the tensions and contradictions of the exilic experience, demanding "simple reconciliation" between competing visions of home and identity that, from the perspective of exile, can never be made to cohere.<sup>42</sup> Said's own exilic and generous understanding of identity rejected simple reconciliation and embraced the "many voices playing off against each other," insisting on the need "just to hold them together."

At yet, at the same time Said argued against fixed identities and a "politics of blame," he also resolutely refused to forget the historical and ongoing forms of imperial domination that shaped the contemporary world. His call to reject the insistent return of identity politics to fixed and univocal narratives of imperial oppression thus differs profoundly from the presentism of many in the foreign policy commentariat who refuse to see the current global political environment in terms of its imperial past. He took direct aim at this dangerously bland species of amnesia in 2002's "Always on Top," wherein he challenged the post-September 11th trend of nostalgically praising classical imperialism. How convenient, Said argued, "after years of degeneration following the white man's departure, the empires that ruled Africa and Asia don't seem quite as bad" to imperial apologists like Niall Ferguson, pundits who insist that the cessation of formal European rule in the 1960s implies that the problems faced by residents of the formerly colonized world today are entirely of their own invention.<sup>43</sup> Said was troubled by this dismissal of the "enabling rift" between black and white, colonized and colonizing that was the essence of formal imperialism at its height, a dismissal that leads (at best) to a form of "just get over it" politics

and (at worst) to a Ferguson-like neo-imperialism. “Who decides,” Said demanded to know, “when (and if) the influence of imperialism ended?”

Additionally, even as he critiqued nationalism and the “politics of blame,” Said was profoundly sympathetic to the conditions in which anticolonial nationalism resonated precisely because he was attentive – in ways Ferguson and his ilk are not – to the relationship between the *ongoing* trauma of imperial occupation and the construction of national identity. Moreover, he was also well aware that his own experience – as an exiled Palestinian academic at an Ivy League, American university – allowed him to step back from trauma. As he put it in *After the Last Sky*: “I write at a distance. I haven’t experienced the ravages. If I had, possibly there would be no problem in finding a direct and simple narrative to tell the tale of our history.”<sup>44</sup> Here Said is both open to the experiences that make sense of nationalism while still resisting nationalism’s capacity to reduce competing experiences to a single “plot of a logically unfolding conspiracy against us.” “Holding” these two perspectives together without feeling compelled to reconcile them allowed Said to both tell imperial history through lenses focused on the “enabling rift” of occupation, dispossession, and settler colonialism *as well as* on those moments of polyphony and connection that trouble simplistic nationalist accounts of the present. It is particularly important, he argued, to hold together these competing visions when analyzing works of art and culture. For instance, he noted in “Always on Top,” Kipling’s *Kim* “is a sympathetic and profound work about India, but it is informed by the imperial vision just the same.” The real problem, he continued, “is to keep in mind two ideas that are in many ways antithetical – the fact of the imperial divide, on the one hand, and the notion of shared experiences, on the other – without diminishing the force of either.”<sup>45</sup>

For Said, a criticism that assumed such “holding and crossing over” between imperialism, postcolonialism, and resistance also assumed a “common enterprise shared with others,” or, as he put it in his early defense of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, a deep awareness that, “although it contains many spheres, the contemporary world of men and women is one world.”<sup>46</sup> It is precisely in this commitment to a “common enterprise” that we find Said’s second major disagreement with much postcolonial scholarship. Thus, while the deconstructive impulses of his work resisted universalizing theories claiming to reconcile all difference – be they Orientalist geographies or Enlightenment notions of civilization – Said was also critical of the tendency he identified in postcolonial studies to abandon the

very idea of “humanity” as a unifying principle in the first place. By contrast, he argued, it was possible “to be critical of Humanism in the name of Humanism” if, as scholars, we remain aware of the extent to which this historically Eurocentric conception was used to justify imperialism, civilizational improvement, racism, sexism, settler colonialism, and so forth. He thus argued for a form of humanist critique that was both explicitly cosmopolitan and “text-and-language-bound,” attuned to history while remaining resolutely open “to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial and unhoused.”<sup>47</sup>

For Said, the key to fostering a humanism capable of escaping Eurocentrism’s yawning maw – always poised to swallow up difference through appeals to reason – was to keep its conceptual assumptions narrow. In other words, rather than nesting his attachment to the category of “human” in some ideal moral theory, or in a list of human attributes cobbled together from European high culture, Said was inspired by Vico’s commitment to the “secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women and not by God.”<sup>48</sup> For Vico, Said explained, human beings are fundamentally makers of history and “we know what we make” or, rather, “we know how to see it from the point of view of its human maker.” Limiting humanism’s definitional reach to “making history” frees it from the expansive set of specific requirements attached to Enlightenment conceptions of “reason” or “dignity.” Moreover, understanding human beings as united by their shared “capacity to make knowledge” pushes back against the poststructuralist tendency to imagine people as inescapably bamboozled by power, capable only of “passively, reactively, and dully” absorbing its weight. Finally, the flip side of this definition – that we know how to see what we make from the point of view of another because we understand each other as makers – opens up humanistic practice to more expansively generative forms of reading and politics.

Said contrasted this approach with the bland universalism found in so much liberal imperialist thought and policy making. Rather than write “prescriptive articles for ‘liberals,’ à la Michael Ignatieff, that urge more destruction and death for distant civilians under the banner of a benign imperialism,” for instance, Said suggested liberals concerned with foreign policy would do well “to imagine the person whom you are discussing – in this case, the person on whom the bombs will fall – reading in your presence.”<sup>49</sup> Imagining the person on whom the bombs will fall as a reader and thinker shifts the intellectual authority away from the policy makers at Harvard, Princeton, or the Council on Foreign Relations, to the person being discussed. Said’s insistence that we understand human beings first

and foremost as *makers* of history acknowledges the person you imagine in your presence as having alternative histories to tell and – because they are also readers and therefore interpreters of experience – having different prescriptions to offer and analyses to relate. Understanding this reading person as *like you* and yet as someone who potentially reads/theorizes/imagines history and the world *differently* from you, necessarily evokes a sense of counterpoint: of familiarity and remoteness. Said's democratic humanism thus urges the critic to begin thinking about specific events like the invasion of Iraq, or seemingly irreconcilable conflicts such as in Israel-Palestine, contrapuntally by looking for “what has been left out” (which histories, which voices) and then reading these absences against the dominating discourse, “recovering what has been left out of peace processes that have been determined by the powerful, and then placing that missing actuality back in the center of things.”

Said modeled this kind of reading in both his scholarly and political writings. For instance, he argued, a contrapuntal reading of Israel-Palestine similarly refused to empty the current conflict of its history, specifically, its imperial history. In *The Question of Palestine*, he thus combined contemporary analysis with a historical critique of Zionist discourse during the period leading up to the creation of the state of Israel, focusing in particular on narratives that imagined the future state as emerging from the nearly empty ruins of an older, Arab Palestine. Said examined the way this discourse mirrored conceptions crucial to “high European imperialism”; Orientalist ideas of lazy Arabs who were passing into obscurity, rationalized plans requiring European ingenuity to make the barren desert bloom, descriptions of Palestine as a virtual *terra nullius*.<sup>50</sup> The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British (soon to be the Mandatory power in Palestine) declared that they viewed “with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” was, Said argued, similarly imperialist in its logic and execution.<sup>51</sup> Here and in many of his political writings, Said braided these evolving acts of dispossession, disclosure, and disappearing into an account of the way Palestinian voices are rendered invisible in the dominant iteration of whatever “peace process” currently consumes world leaders.<sup>52</sup>

Again, however, Said's exilic commitment to hold together the “polyphony of many voices playing off against each other” rather than resolve them into a single historical plot meant that the kinds of counternarratives he routinely told about Palestine were committed to revealing the lived world of the Palestinian people as a discrete nation without ever essentializing nationalism. In the wake of the failed Oslo Accords – of which he was

tremendously critical – this contrapuntal vision evolved into support for a politics of “binational” citizenship that did not require either “a diminishing of Jewish life as Jewish life or a surrendering of Palestinian Arabs.”<sup>53</sup> For Said, however, “real” as opposed to “simple” reconciliation could not take place in a context in which apartheid and denial structured everyday life but, rather, required both reciprocal recognition and a commitment to equality between Palestinians and Jews, as well as a discursive environment in which the ongoing history of Palestinian dispossession was acknowledged. In contrast to the “prescriptions” of liberal academics like Ignatieff, Said did not reach his “binational” solution through the imposition of an ideal theory. Rather, as a scholar who believed humans make and interpret history and who understood that history produces contrapuntal realities, Said found his binationalism, in part, in the history of Palestine:

Palestine is and has always been a land of many histories; it is a radical simplification to think of it as principally or exclusively Jewish or Arab. While the Jewish presence is longstanding, it is by no means the main one . . . Palestine is multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious. There is as little historical justification for homogeneity as there is for notions of national or ethnic and religious purity today.<sup>54</sup>

A critical engagement with Palestine’s polyphonous history, Said concluded, allows us to imagine a future in which “real reconciliation” between Palestinians and Jews is possible, a reconciliation rendered invisible to liberal pundits who bunker themselves within prescriptive circles of their own devising. Such an approach requires the critic to step outside of their circle, look around, and ask: “Who is allowed to narrate this situation? Whose experiences are obscured by dominant narratives? What forms of connection are being denied by fixed identities? What practices of resistance have been ignored? What futures remain unseen behind the wall of modular solutions?” In the end, this humanist attention to the other reading in your presence – and the contrapuntal critique such attention generates – not only exposes the provincialism of some ideas but also it opens our horizons to the broad possibilities of others.

### Conclusion

At the end of the day, a Saidian disposition toward imperialism and politics asks political theorists to do two things at once: resist specific identity narratives that mute polyphony while challenging universal narratives that obscure historical and contemporary forms of domination. For Said, humanism was both a “technique of trouble” that disrupts fixed

identities and an instrument for imagining human comity found in our shared capacity to make/interpret/read history and in the fact that Western and non-Western experiences belong together “because they are connected by imperialism.”<sup>55</sup> Reading history and politics through Saidian lenses thus demands we restore our analyses of cultural works and political phenomenon to “their place in the global setting” through an appreciation “not of some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world, but of the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole.”<sup>56</sup>

This many-windowed disposition, I argue, deserves the enthusiastic attention of political theorists because it both allows us to paint richer accounts of the complex imperial pasts and suggest ways of thinking through that past to the politics of the present. There is nothing, however, straightforward or easy about embracing this disposition. What political theorists will *not* find in the work of Said is either a well-articulated method for deconstruction that ends at the moment of disruption or a conceptual framework providing ideal solutions to political problems. Not only can this unfinished quality be deeply frustrating, the sheer breadth of knowledge necessary for writing contrapuntal history is so overwhelming, but also it’s enough to drive even the most interdisciplinary political theorist back into the sheltering arms of Kant or Arendt to mull overwell-contained questions about justice and “the political.” Said’s “method” is thus neither methodologically complete nor always intellectually coherent and his unremitting insistence on having it all – polyphony and unity, resistance and solidarity, recognition of the victims and the victims’ victims – can be exhausting. Even more maddening is Said’s insistence that “the task” of humanist, contrapuntal inquiry is “constitutively an unending one” that resists conclusions even as it demands we continue the search for solutions to injustice.<sup>57</sup> Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, Darwish concludes his poetic ode to Said by similarly resisting conclusions, imagining Said’s final farewell as both a directive and a puzzle:

And now, don’t forget:  
If I die before you, my will is the impossible.

In the end, it is Said’s impossible will – his refusal to abandon or resolve opposed visions and experiences but, rather, to just “hold them together” – that makes this disposition so crucial for approaching the complex, overlapping, ethically charged history and contemporary politics of imperialism. These are the two dreams in one bedroom and as much as they may fight to push each other out, Said wouldn’t let either of them go. And neither, I argue, should we.

## Notes

- 1 M. Darwish, "Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading," trans. by Mona Anis, *Cultural Critique* 67 (2007), 175–182.
- 2 Eqbal Ahmad, "Introduction to the 1994 Edition," in *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with Edward Said*, ed. by David Barsamian (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2010), p. 7.
- 3 See, for instance, the recent collection of essays edited by Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy, *Conflicting Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), whose contributors include Gayatri Spivak, Akeel Bilgrami, and Judith Butler.
- 4 See Jennifer Pitts, "Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010), 211–235.
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- 8 Akeel Bilgrami, "Foreword," Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. ix.
- 9 See John Gunnell's description of how the history of political thought is predominantly framed by the discipline in, "Dislocated Rhetoric: The Anomaly of Political Theory," *Journal of Politics* 68.4 (2006), 771–782. The normative approach is best captured in the work of John Rawls and Rawlsian liberals since the 1970s.
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