

Edward Said and Memoirs of Palestinian Exile

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Abstract: This article focuses on English-language memoirs of 1948 Palestinian exiles, with emphasis on Edward Said's *Out of Place*. The article draws on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literatures, in which the French theorists argue that the social pressure on the minority turns all individual and private dilemmas into expressions of collective and political predicaments. Arguing that this is eminently the case in Palestinian literature, the article focuses on notions of home, identity, and belonging in several Palestinian memoirs, arguing that those works differ significantly from those of other Arab immigrants in the U.S. who celebrate coming to America as a story of self-realization and self-fulfillment. Instead, Palestinian American memoirs express nostalgia for the lost homeland and mixed feelings about their new country, which is the chief sponsor of the State of Israel. Said's memoir weaves such complexities into a theory of exile-as-home that disposes of unitary conceptions of identity.

Keywords: Palestinians, exile, memoirs, Arab-Israeli conflict, Arab American literature

Nowhere is the truth of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's observation on the conjunction, in the literature of ethnic and racial minorities, of the private and the collective, the personal and the political, more evident than in the memoirs of Palestinians exiled in 1948 (Deleuze and Guattari 17-18). It is also no coincidence that the first Arab writers to challenge Orientalist discourse directly and unapologetically in the United States were Palestinian exiles. For Palestinian Americans, the logic that defined Europe's relations with its colonies, and which continues to define U.S. public opinion at home and foreign policy in the Middle East, reached a catastrophic conclusion with their collective expulsion from Palestine and creation of the State of Israel. While for many European Jews it was the answer to anti-Semitism, Zionism combined elements

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of biblical nostalgia, Orientalist discourse, and colonialist attitudes into a narrative of the Jews' "return" to Palestine, a country described in a popular Zionist slogan as "a land without a people for a people without a land." Taking no notice of the Palestinians, Theodor Herzl argued in The Jewish State, Zionism's founding text, that Jewish European settlers would form a state that would be "a portion of the ramparts of Europe against Asia, a outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism" (Herzl 96). Whereas Palestinian society was ancient, complex, multi-confessional, and highly structured, Zionist advocates imagined only nomads roaming the desert, hardly an obstacle to the creation of modern, European-style state by civilized settlers. When this myth collided with the reality that Jewish immigrants found on the ground in Palestine, a two-pronged strategy was devised: the eviction of the Palestinians from the land and, following 1948, the insistence that the refugees were not Palestinians per se—i.e. not a society with a distinct culture that can have any claim to national self-determination—but Arabs, indistinct from the inhabitants of surrounding Arab countries, which should, therefore, absorb them. "Who are the Palestinians?," Golda Meir notoriously asked. "They do not exist" (quoted in Turki 1974, 44).

In the decades after 1948, therefore, the question of representation was for Palestinians one of survival. If Orientalism denied the humanity of Arabs through stereotype, Zionism as a particular mutation of Orientalism negated the very existence of Palestinians. For Palestinian exiles publishing in the U.S., the chief sponsor of Israel and where Zionism has acquired a monopoly on public opinion and the foreign policy establishment, writing and speaking has been a far more urgent—and sometimes perilous—task of cultural translation than it ever was for Arab Americans who wrote and spoke against settler colonialism in Palestine during the 1910s-30s, such as Ameen Rihani and Abraham Rihbani. After 1948, the year known in Arabic as that of the Nakbah (or disaster), the task for Palestinian American writers was to construct a counter narrative that would not only prove that they exist, but also expose the racism and the terrorist tactics used to cleanse Palestine ethnically so as to fulfill the fantasy of a land without a people. This Palestinian perspective was familiar not only in Arab countries, but also around the world, shared by Third World revolutionaries and their supporters, from Mahatma Gandhi to Che Guevara and Jean-Paul Sartre, and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in its Resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism. Yet the challenge for Palestinian American writers lay in presenting the Palestinian case effectively to a U.S. public whose views on the conflict have been shaped almost entirely by Zionist propaganda, and whose government

has been the chief sponsor of the Jewish state, and further to do so at a time when anti-Arab racism reached unprecedented proportions as a direct result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially after the Six Day War of 1967. In such an environment, the Herculean task was to demonstrate how the “independence” of one people was another’s “disaster.”

This radical act of translation was already in the making even before Edward Said’s definitive critique of Orientalism. The first and best-known Palestinian activist writing in English before the emergence of Said was Fawaz Turki, author of no less than three memoirs: The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile (1972), Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary (1988), and Exile’s Return: The Making of a Palestinian American (1994)—in addition to two poetry collections, Poems from Exile (1975) and Tel Zaatar Was the Hill of Thyme (1978). Of course, Said contributed more than any other scholar to the emergence of a collective Palestinian narrative, and his Out of Place: A Memoir (1999) provided the personal dimension. Other Palestinian American memoirs include Jamil Toubbeh’s Day of the Long Night: A Palestinian Refugee Remembers the Nakbah (1998) and Aziz Shihab’s Does the Land Remember Me? A Memoir of Palestine (2007). Those writers belong to a generation that suffered the Nakbah in their childhood and early youth (Shihab was born in 1927, Toubbeh in 1930, Said in 1935, and Turki in 1940), and their narratives recount their traumatic memories of 1948 and how it affected their families and themselves. Those memoirs, and others by Palestinian exiles living in other countries and writing in numerous languages, play a role similar to that of slave narratives, prison memoirs, and testimonies of genocide and war crimes survivors, in that they concretize a historical trauma that may seem abstract to those unfamiliar with it, anchoring collective tragedy in individual experiences, and adding the human dimension often missing from historical accounts and ideological claims and counter-claims. In taking direct aim at the Zionist negation their rights, the memoirs of 1948 Palestinian exiles challenge the authority of the dominant discourse in the U.S. They also revolve around the problems of identity, home, and belonging—persistent themes in ethnic American autobiography in general, but with significant variations that sometimes run counter to the usual patterns in which immigrants, including non-Palestinian Arabs, have staked their claim to American identity. In what follows, I will briefly describe the treatment of those themes in the memoirs mentioned above, before concentrating in the rest of this article on Said’s Out of Place.

Identity, Home, and Belonging

The concept of home in Palestinian American autobiography is tied to the loss of the homeland. With few exceptions, and contrary to the norms of other immigrant and Arab American autobiography, the titles of many Palestinian American memoirs evoke exile, loss, and memory quite explicitly, thereby stressing a profound attachment to Palestine and the centrality of the concept of al-‘Awda (return or repatriation to Palestine, the end of exile). The word “exile” is in each of Turki’s book titles; Said is “out of place”; Shihab evokes the anthropomorphic attribution of memory to the land in Palestinian folklore when he wonders whether his land still remember him after decades of exile; and Toubbeh stresses his status as “refugee,” a condition narrated in its historical and human dimensions by all of those memoirists. Consequently, their coming-to-America stories revolve around loss and deracination, rather than fulfillment of destiny, attainment of goal, or reaching a final destination, as suggested by many memoir titles of Lebanese and Egyptian immigrants who left their countries of origin voluntarily: Abraham Rihbany's A Far Journey, George Haddad's Mt. Lebanon to Vermont, Salom Rizk's Syrian Yankee, Ihab Hassan's Out of Egypt, Leila Ahmed's A Border Passage: From Cairo to America, and so on.

Consequently, Palestinian American autobiography rarely displays the sentimental effusions about coming to America that are replete in Rihbany, Haddad, Rizk, Ihab Hassan, and immigrant autobiographers of other ethnicities. On the contrary, coming to America is often a mixed blessing, fraught as it is with the pain of dispossession and complicated by frustration and anger over the U.S. support for Israel. On the one hand, for example, Shihab declares that “coming to the United States was the greatest gift from God,” that he “feels sad for the people who were not equally blessed” (Shihab xxi), and that he is “lucky ... compared to them [relatives in Jordan, the West Bank, and Arab countries]. I was a refugee also, but in a country where I had more freedom and more opportunities. ... Palestinians who took refuge in other Arab countries were, and are still, treated like dirt” (23). On the other hand, his

dilemma was to live quietly and obediently in a country that helped make me a refugee and that I chose to make my home, pretending it is the greatest home for justice in the world. Or I could go back to Palestine and live miserably under Israeli occupation and possibly die fighting injustice. I chose the lesser of two evils. But I was boiling inside to find out that convincing even one American of the truth of what had happened to my

people and my homeland was quickly and continuously negated by press coverage portraying my victimized brothers as terrorists. At the same time, the U.S. press described the killers of my brothers and sisters as heroic people fighting for “security” with American weapons paid for by tax dollars to which I contributed. (2)

At the end of the narrative, he confides, “when the U.S. Immigration official said, ‘Welcome home,’ I did not feel that the United States was my home” (148). Such contradictions bespeak the conflicted feelings of those forced out of their homeland, as opposed to those who left it voluntarily and for whom the adopted country represents a far less problematic place.

Thus the concept of home in Palestinian American autobiography is provisional, fraught with anger and guilt, bitterness and nostalgia, hope and frustration, never stable or taken for granted. Not surprisingly, the journey “home” is often contradictorily twofold, containing some variation on the Palestinian concept of al-‘Awadh, and at the same time the idea of the United States as the new home. The return to Palestine and the return to the United States coexist, on the one hand, as an aspiration and a political project to be realized in the future, and on the other hand, as a pragmatic, existential necessity. The journey back to Palestine sometimes furnishes the framework for the memoir, as in the case of Shihab’s book and Turki’s Exile’s Return, while Toubbeh’s and Said’s memoirs tell of their authors’ trips to their birthplace from the U.S. In fact, one of the most recurring scenes in Palestinian writing after 1967 is that of the dispossessed coming back to knock on the doors of their houses, now inhabited by Jewish immigrants.² “No more,” a man from Brooklyn says to Shihab, “God gave it to us. It is ours now,” before slamming the door in his face (54). Turki, whose beard and long hair cause Palestinians and Israelis alike to mistake him for an Israeli, is made to feel like an intruder in the old house by its Eastern European inhabitant who initially agreed to let him look around, not knowing that he was Palestinian (Turki 1994, 4). As for Said, he decides against knocking on the door once he finds himself in front of the house (Said 1999, xii).³ Those journeys do not represent the end of the Palestinian diaspora, since the returnees are often not allowed to stay, but become instead occasions to contemplate the loss of home.

² The celebrated Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani, who wrote in Arabic, based his novella, “Returning to Haifa,” on this phenomenon.

³ See also the 1998 BBC documentary, In Search of Palestine, which follows Said’s journey to Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Shihab's narrative centers on the problem of home, which is embedded in the question of whether or not to sell his plot of land in the West Bank village of Sinjil, near Ramallah. Originally from Jerusalem, his family became refugees in 1948 and settled in that village. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1950 and became a journalist in Texas, working for the Dallas Morning News—a career that allowed him to see firsthand how Zionism manipulates public opinion through the media (Shihab 24-25, 148-49). The occasion of Shihab's trip to Palestine in the mid-1990s was his mother's imminent death at the age of a hundred and six. The mother's longevity, and especially her exhortations for him to return to build a house on his land, come to symbolize the endurance of Palestinian identity and the measure of his own attachments to his roots:

[M]y mother was begging for me to return to Sinjil village ... and begin construction of a red stone house so she could be proud of me before she died. ... Palestinians had wearied of seeing Jews build prefab settlement houses on their occupied land seemingly overnight. Arabs felt an urgency to build their own houses before Israelis claimed whatever land they had left. My mother once said that I could become a president of the United States and would still be nothing in the eyes of the villagers until I built a house For several years I had been entertaining the idea of selling my small piece of property in Palestine. (Shihab 3)

For his mother, his relatives, and the villagers, selling his land would literally be selling them out: "Don't sell your holy piece of land, my son, it is your link to your past and to your people who have been stepped upon with the heavy boots of the people you live among these days, the Amrikanis" (5). Another villager is more blunt: "First, let me warn you ... that you should never even think of selling to foreigners"—meaning Israelis. "Second, I advise you not to sell it to anyone from outside this village. And third, you would be a fool to sell it. You should return to your homeland, build yourself a stone house on the land, and live right here among your own people" (95). Eventually, Shihab makes up his mind to do that "someday" (99). With the plot of land bearing such a heavy burden of symbolism—an entire society's fight for survival—it becomes far more than a piece of private property; the predicament of the individual is insoluble in isolation from that of the collective. And since the fate of the Palestinian people remains in limbo, the resolution to individual dilemma of home and belonging is likewise indefinitely postponed.

As we can see from Shihab's predicament, the question of identity for people who have suffered a collective calamity is rarely conceived in individualistic terms, but rather in a dialectical tension between individual and community. Private property, private feelings, and private life are inextricably woven into the fabric of collective history. Needless to say, such indissoluble ties exist in all human contexts, but in an extreme situation like that of Palestinians living in exile or under occupation, it is impossible to obscure such ties. The implication of this for Palestinian American autobiography in relation to other kinds of coming-to-America narratives can be understood in the contrast between, on the one hand, Ihab Hassan's claim that he "is in the American grain, a tradition of men and women who crossed an ocean to reinvent themselves" (Ihab Hassan 1986, 251), implying free and unfettered reshaping of the self in a new context; and on the other hand, the sense of historical determination in Fawaz Turki's insistence that "people in struggle don't operate in a vacuum when they go about creating their self-definitions" (Turki 1988, 102).

Flowing Currents

Most Palestinian autobiographies illustrate that point. Toubbeh's slim volume contains no more than a bare outline of his own life, while the rest is devoted to the Nakbah and the growing Zionist influence in the U.S., where he has resided since 1951. Turki's memoirs also devote far more space to Palestinian history than to the author's personal life. Said's memoir is the exception that proves the rule. Out of Place is devoted almost entirely to his private life, even though the resonance of history is always there in the background. Throughout his enormous œuvre, Said's personal experience is closely intertwined with his intellectual work as a literary and cultural theorist and with his political activism. The importance of Orientalism cannot be overstated here, for it revolutionized the study not only of the Middle East, but also of colonialism and imperialism worldwide. While belaboring the importance of what is arguably the single most influential academic volume of the last quarter of the twentieth century is hardly necessary here, it is worth noting not only the crucial role that Palestinian dispossession played in the conception of the book, but also the way he anchors his project in his lived experience in the Arab world and the U.S.:

My own experiences ... are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists here an

almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. (Said 1978, 27)

So if Out of Place appears to be unique among Palestinian autobiographies in how much collective history it leaves out, that is because Said's work as a whole was inspired by that history, in which the personal and the political are ever present and inseparable.⁴ Precisely because Said's prolific and intensely committed scholarly and political writing carries so much of the weight of collective representation, the genre of the memoir returns, in his case, to being a record of personal experiences, the story of individual self-becoming, which is nonetheless embedded in collective, political history.

In fact, so completely did Said himself come to embody the Palestinian struggle that his memoir came under attack even before it was published.⁵ Said was the most prominent Palestinian American, so the mixed reception of his memoir reveals the ideological investments in narratives of identity. Out of Place is a lyrical and poignant account of the early life of a prominent intellectual and a searing narrative of the tragedy of Palestinian dispossession. Here, the autobiographical project not only constructs the subjectivity of the individual author (a success story of individual self-emergence), but also the collective experience of a people, and in so doing it undermines the truth claims of a dominant ideology (Zionism), which insists that Palestinian collective subjectivity does not exist. In Said's case, we can observe two simultaneous discursive operations: his entry into what Jerome Brunner calls a "conversation of

⁴ Orientalism (1978) was closely followed by The Question of Palestine (1979), which applied his critique of the epistemology of Oriental studies to Zionist ideology and the political discourse on Palestine in the U.S. Said subsequently authored and collaborated on several books on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: After the Last Sky (1986), Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question (1988), The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969-1994 (1994), Peace and Its Discontents (1996), The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After (2000). He also commented on Palestine in most of his other books on literary and cultural criticism.

⁵ Before Said's memoir appeared in bookstores, the right-wing Zionist New York magazine Commentary, which had viciously attacked Said before, ran a story (in its September 1999 issue) by Israeli researcher Justus Wiener who accused Said of lying about his birth in Jerusalem, the ownership of a family house there in which he spent part of his childhood, and other details about Said's life in Palestine. The libelous article was quickly excerpted in London's Daily Telegraph and New York's The Wall Street Journal, both known for pro-Israeli leanings. Many newspapers subsequently published articles defending Said, but the affair as a whole illustrates, among other things, the embattled status of Palestinian American writing.

elves” (Brunner 47) in the U.S. context conforms to a prevalent notion of subjectivity, while at the same time anchoring the individual in the collective Palestinian experience. The two operations in a sense justify Said’s lifework as a committed scholar and political activist, work that begins with his entry into professional and public life in the mid 1960s—the point at which the memoir ends—so that the memoir provides a personal context and prehistory to his lifework. In fact, it is possible to read his Reflections on Exile (2000), a collection of essays written between 1967 and 1998, as an intellectual autobiography, written on the margins of his major books, which picks up a life story from the point at which Out of Place (1999) leaves off, the titles of both books clearly modulating the theme of individual and collective displacement.

Said conceived of the idea of writing an autobiography in response to his diagnosis with leukemia and his realization “that I had at least entered, if not the final phase of my life, then the period—like Adam and Eve leaving the garden—from which there would be no return to my old life” (Said 1999, 216). He adds, “As one of the main responses to my illness I found in this book a new kind of challenge ... a project about as far from my professional and political life as it was possible for me to go” (217). Furthermore, the rhythm and pace of writing the memoir were fundamentally different: “whereas with other sorts of work that I did—essays, lectures, teaching, journalism—I was going across the illness, punctuating it almost forcibly with deadlines and cycles of beginning-middle-and-end, with this memoir I was borne along by the episodes of treatment, hospital stays, physical pain and mental anguish, letting those dictate how and when I could write, for how long and where” (216). Said’s response to the intensely private and immensely isolating confrontation with his mortality is two-fold: soldiering ahead with public responsibilities that impose their own temporal constraints on his faltering health, and seeking relief from both illness and public life in the private world of childhood memories that he reconstructs as a way, to use his favorite Gramscian metaphor, to “compile ... an inventory” of his life (Said 1978, 25). The contrasting rhythms of the two responses reveal a conflict, exacerbated by the existential weight of his predicament, between the demands of public and private life, whereas before his illness he was able to devote so much of his energy to public life that he “unconsciously turned [his] back” on “holidays and relaxation, all that passes for middle- and upper-class ‘leisure,’” and even sleep (1999, 217).

Out of Place is a story of individual self-emergence that is deeply marked by this tension between the public and private: “The underlying motifs for me have been the emergence of a

second self buried for a long time beneath a surface of often expertly acquired and wielded social characteristics belonging to the self my parents tried to construct, the ‘Edward’ I speak of intermittently, and how an extraordinarily increasing number of departures have unsettled my life from its earliest beginnings” (217). The first of those motifs involves the individualistic urge to escape from the persona and role defined for him by his parents: the ideal “Edward” they envisioned vs. the “delinquent son” (18) he appeared to be; hence “the extreme and rigid regime of discipline and extracurricular education that my father [created] and in which I became imprisoned from the age of nine,” and which threatened to stifle the real or hidden self struggling to free itself. This is a classic story of Oedipal conflict and individualistic struggle against pre-established social order. The second motif concerns the “departures” or “displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all those years” (217), and which give the memoir its title. Those displacements occur for all sorts of reasons—class (Anglophile Palestinian upper bourgeoisie), family history (the Jerusalemite family’s primary residence was in Cairo), language (he spoke Egyptian, not Palestinian, Arabic but his formal education was in English), education (in British and American schools in Cairo and Jerusalem, then in the U.S.), religion (an Anglican minority within Orthodox and Coptic Christian minorities in predominantly Muslim countries), citizenship (born a U.S. citizen in Jerusalem, raised mainly in Cairo and spending summers in Lebanon), history (dispossession in 1948, with his father losing his business in Palestine and the extended family dispersing all over the world), and finally personal (what he considered to be his banishment from Cairo to Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts at age fifteen).

Those private and collective forms of displacement are impossible to disentangle. As a result, even though the dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948 affected Said the least among all of the exiled autobiographers under consideration here—his family’s flourishing business in Cairo allowed his parents to shelter the children (“cocoon” them, as he puts it [294]) from the catastrophe that struck an entire society—the heroic example of his aunt Nabiha, who devoted her life to helping Palestinian refugees in Cairo (119-22), and his sense of historical responsibility (perhaps also the guilt of privilege) prompted him to devote his life to the struggle for the rights of Palestinians less fortunate than himself. By the same token, the loss of Palestine had the unique psychic effect on him of producing “a secret but ineradicable fear of not returning,” a fear that compelled him to pack too much luggage when traveling and also

paradoxically to “fabricate occasions for departure, thus giving rise to the fear voluntarily. The two seem absolutely necessary to my rhythm of life” (217).

Because the Nakbah seems to have been only one in a series of dislocations in his childhood, it was 1967, eighteen years into his American life, that for him embodied the dislocation that subsumed all other losses, the disappeared worlds of my youth and upbringing, the unpolitical years of my education, the assumption of disengaged teaching and scholarship at Columbia, and so on. I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it had all started, the struggle over Palestine. I subsequently entered the newly transformed Middle East landscape as a part of the Palestinian movement that emerged in Amman and then in Beirut in the late sixties through the seventies. This was an experience that drew on the agitated, largely hidden side of my prior life—the antiauthoritarianism, the need to break through an imposed and enforced silence, above all the need to draw back to a sort of original state of what was irreconcilable, thereby shattering and dispelling an unjust Establishment order. (293)

1967 was, of course, a turning point for the Palestinian national movement as a whole because Palestinians realized that they could no longer rely on the Arab states to defend them, that they had to take matters into their own hands. Thus Said’s response to the war was part and parcel of a broad mobilization of Palestinian energies, even as his antiauthoritarianism had roots in his private struggle to free himself from the strict discipline imposed on him by his father. The struggle for Palestinian national self-determination became the political correlative of the struggle of the inner self against the “Edward” defined by parents.

Thus political values like antiauthoritarianism, speaking the truth to power, and the insistence on “irreconcilability” or nonconformity to the “established order” all originate in private life and childhood experience. They shape his sense of home as something dialectically defined by rupture, and his notion of freedom as a state of being irremediably “out of place”:

My search for freedom, for the self beneath or obscured by “Edward,” could only have begun because of that rupture [coming to U.S. at age 15 to attend high school], so I have come to think of it as fortunate, despite the loneliness and unhappiness I experienced for so long. Now it does not seem important or even desirable to be “right” and in place (right at home, for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not

ever to feel too much at home anywhere, especially in a city like New York, where I shall be until I die. (294)

His coming to America was enabling, but not for the usual reasons found in immigrant autobiography. What is privileged is the experience of leaving home, rather than coming to the U.S. Said here expresses differently a favorite passage by Hugo of St. Victor that Erich Auerbach cites in Mimesis, and which states that “the person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land” (quoted in Culture and Imperialism 335). For Said, as for Auerbach, being nowhere at home, the condition of the exile, is not just a wrenching experience, but a necessary one for “transcend[ing] the restraints of imperial or national or provincial limits ... to the negative freedom of real knowledge” (335-36). Yet paradoxically, Said identifies New York as the locus of both home (“where I shall be until I die”) and homelessness itself (“not ever to feel too much at home anywhere, especially in a city like New York”)—the ultimate state of homelessness is to be at-home-in-homelessness, the site of “the negative freedom of real knowledge.” It is a negative freedom because it is predicated on the destruction of unitary identities that inevitably generate ethnocentric hierarchies:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white or Black, or Western, or Oriental. (1993, 336) Only, mainly, exclusively one thing or the other—such reductionism is the stuff of stereotype, self-stereotyping as well as the stereotyping of others. Instead of those unitary and essentialist conceptions of identity, Said presents a more fluid notion of subjectivity in Out of Place:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents ... require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are “off” and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. That skepticism too is one of the themes I

particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place. (1999, 295)

As they flow each along its own course in non-synchronous, occasionally contradictory and unharmonious motion, those currents represent a chaotic mixture of influences and inclinations—historical, societal, familial, personal—none of which can be considered the defining characteristic of identity. It is a form of freedom that is limited by contradiction, confusion, and skepticism—that habit of mind which can be at once liberating and paralyzing. Appreciating the rewards and the frustrations of this condition takes the kind of intellectual courage born out of the pain of dislocation and the anxieties of permanent exile.

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