The works of Edward Said, like his life, are often critiqued for crossing the borders between politics and the academy. Officially, Edward Said spent most of his life as a professor of Western Literature at Columbia University. Unofficially, he was known for his vocal support for a series of hot-button political causes, especially Palestinian independence (Borger). A Palestinian by birth, Edward Said became an active proponent of Palestinian sovereignty with the publication of his book *The Question of Palestine* in 1979. From that point on, Said’s work has been characterized by a trademark mixture of academics, political commentary, and observations on the world at large. His essays jump dizzyingly from topic to topic, perhaps beginning with a critique of a particular composer, moving to an analysis of classical Arabic grammatical theology, and settling, finally, on a message about methods of interpreting texts in their full historical contexts as a way of deconstructing harmful social systems. Even his most seemingly pedantic literary or musical criticism essays include some kernel of a broader issue, such as “Reflections on Exile,” which turns an analysis of Joseph Conrad’s short story “Amy Foster” into a statement on the developing world of exiles and refugees. As Asha Varadharajan writes, Said’s writing was never without a certain “mobility, playfulness, and skepticism—and . . . a willingness to enter and understand other worlds” (54).

This intermingling of social causes with heavily academic literary criticism was seen as groundbreaking by some critics, and pointlessly
reductive by others. Said was alternately celebrated for his “creative openness to discovery and knowledge” and attacked for spewing what some considered hateful propaganda and hypocrisy (Viswanathan 5). Controversy surrounded Said’s life, and he did little to dispel it, often responding to criticism with “sass, verve, and bite” (Varadharajan 55). Discussions of Edward Said tend to come to a standstill around the question of whether his activism was right or appropriate for someone in his position. Thus, the question is raised: why would a man with such a promising talent for literary criticism and the finer points of academia embroil himself in some of the thorniest political issues of his time?

It certainly would have been easier for Said to focus entirely on literature and scholarship, rather than insert himself into political discourse. His forays into politics cost him a chance at a quiet academic life. He made enemies of a range of well-known organizations and publications, including the Jewish Defense League, the Jerusalem Post, and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith International (Wright). Even the most controversial academics rarely receive death threats as regularly as Said did, whose office was set on fire in 1985 (Wright). Said’s perseverance through these tribulations exhibited his deep attachment to the causes he espoused, but simply saying he was devoted to politics is not enough to understand the intersection of activism and the academy in his work. If Said’s convictions were strong enough to weather countless attempts to discredit him or get him fired (Muravchik), then why did he not devote all of his energy to activism, instead of spending time writing reviews of classical music and teaching Foucault to university students?

In order to answer the persistent questions about Said’s life, it is necessary to carefully examine the only truly definitive source on Edward Said: his own writing. Said wrote heavily about the role of the intellectual in the public sphere, as well as the importance of understanding texts in broader social and historical contexts. The stances he took on these issues suggest an underlying belief Said held about the importance of knowledge as power in our society, a belief which could plausibly explain why Said acted the way he did. By looking back to Said’s own opinions on texts, knowledge, and the intellectual, it is
possible to understand the motivations and justifications behind his controversial career as an essayist, scholar, and activist.

A major point of discussion throughout Edward Said’s body of work is the significance of interpreting a text in both historical and contemporary settings. Said’s work posits that there is more to a text than simply paper. Texts, and the words that compose them, are active and mutable. This belief is evident in the choices Said made in his own writing. In his essay, “Cairo Recalled: Growing Up in the Cultural Crosscurrents of 1940s Egypt,” Said describes Cairene Arabic as “virtuosically darting in and out of solemnity, colonial discipline, and the combination of various religious and political authorities” (273). The language darts, moves, physically interacts with the structures of everyday life, and more significantly, of oppression. Said consistently identifies specific words as having power beyond their use on the page. The power and activity of these individual words then coalesces into a larger portrait of an active and engaged text, a text “enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society” (“The Text, the World, and the Critic” 3). Examining a text outside of the setting in which it is “enmeshed” would be looking at only half the picture, and understanding only part of what the text means. As Gauri Viswanathan writes, Said “retained an unflinching conviction that… to read literature outside its political contexts and origins in the name of aesthetic appreciation produces only false or incomplete readings” (4). To Said, no text existed in a vacuum; therefore, accurate literary criticism encompassed not only literature, but also history and politics.

At the time of Said’s entrance into the field of literary criticism, this was a fairly revolutionary idea. For about twenty years preceding the publication of Said’s first book in 1966, the field of literary studies had been dominated by the method of New Criticism (Klage). This particular method espoused the idea of studying the text “in isolation without regard for anything external to the text, like history, psychology, or biography” (Klage); in other words, almost the direct opposite of Said’s exploration of “the profoundly complex and interesting connection among words, texts, reality, and political/social history” (“History, Literature, and Geography” 465). In his essay “History, Literature, and Geography,” Said describes how, upon his arrival to
Columbia in 1963, he found himself “dogged by the notion, every-
where, current, that history and literature were in fact two quite sep-
arate fields of study, and ultimately of experience” (454). His book
Orientalism was panned by some critics for muddying the field of lit-
erary criticism with discussions of history and politics that were irrel-
evant to what should be, according to New Criticism, a purely impar-
tial science (Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered” 204). But Said was
determined to promote his new approach to literary criticism,
because, in his eyes, there was more at stake than simply “the possi-
bility of objectivity” (Klage). Said knew the value of examining con-
texts because, in Palestine, he had experienced firsthand a culture
whose products had been denied any sort of broader context. This was
the subject of Orientalism, the book that eventually took him from a
little-known critic to an established figure in academia.

Orientalism, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the
representation of the Orient (esp. the Middle East) in Western aca-
demic writing, art, or literature,” took the Arab world and “confined
[it] to the fixed status of an object frozen once and for all time by the
gaze of western percipients” (“orientalism”; Said, “Orientalism
Reconsidered” 201). For Orientalists, there was no Arab culture, no
discourse or influences that would suggest an Arab intellectual life
equal to that of the West. The passing of time had no effect on Arab
writing or culture; there were no distinct schools of thought or ideas
that might influence Middle Eastern writing. In short, Arab art and
literature were denied any kind of context. This distorted view of the
Middle East eventually gave birth to an even more harmful institu-
tion. Western universities established Orientalist departments
encompassing subjects from Egyptology to Buddhist Studies. By
establishing these fields of study, it was as if all life east of the Black
Sea was a single, well-defined discipline that, like algebra or chem-
istry, could be conquered by any devoted Western student who, hav-
ing mastered the Orient in theory, was then highly qualified to go
east, and master it in fact. By promoting an image of the Orient as an
“object” to be studied by the West, Orientalism justified Western
colonial ambitions in the Middle East.

Said, born in British-controlled Palestine and raised in British-
influenced Cairo, particularly understood the impact of colonialism.
He recognized that Orientalism, with its roots in the interpretation of texts and culture, was no less a tool of the colonial system than the British army. Orientalism needs to be torn down; however, unlike a wall or a statue, Orientalism is not physical. In order to undo its negative influences, someone first needed to reveal to the public the points where Orientalism pervades: art, literature, and society at large. This individual would have to be someone with a deep understanding of literature, art, and the intersections of culture and society—in short, they would need to be a critic, a role Said clearly assumed upon the publication of *Orientalism*. Of course, while Said’s first foray into politics through scholarship was born out of his personal connection to the Middle East, his motivations for speaking out were never inherently selfish. He did not involve himself in divisive discussions simply to make life easier for himself. If that had been his goal, he might have been deterred by death threats, vicious attacks in the media, and the possibility of losing his position at Columbia. The fact that Said persisted in his political activism despite vocal opposition suggests a deeper ideological motivation, one perhaps connected to his idea of the intellectual’s ideal role in society.

Edward Said’s exemplary scholar labors both within and outside the classroom and the library. To Said, “the role of the intellectual is not to consolidate authority, but to understand, interpret, and question it” (“On Defiance and Taking Positions” 502). He saw the intellectual in a unique position in society, able to examine and explain historical trends and uncover new ways of interpreting old or unsatisfactory systems. There is a tension between this ideal academic, who examines and criticizes extant ideas about their field, and the world’s established social structures. Returning briefly to the example of Orientalism, Said expresses the connection between criticism of ideas and social trends by writing that “the challenge to Orientalism, and the colonial era of which it is so organically a part, was a challenge to the muteness imposed upon the Orient as object” (“Orientalism Reconsidered” 202). In other words, by challenging the ideas behind Orientalism, Said and others act as a sort of conscience for the rest of the world, interpreting ideas through the lens of historical and political trends in order to explain their broader impact. Inconsistencies or
injustices discovered through this criticism must then be taken to the public, to spur activism and social engagement.

This simple idea of the intellectual’s responsibility to the rest of society goes a long way towards explaining the vibrant, seemingly contradictory life of Edward Said. He was a man who fit his own definition of the “radically secular, investigative, and relentlessly mobile” intellectual (“The Future of Criticism” 169) by acting against institutions which, through his work as a scholar, he had identified as harmful. Like words, like texts, he was active and engaged, forever changing and being changed by political, social, and intellectual environments. And this process of change may not have run completely smooth: Said’s myriad entanglements in conflicts and controversies are a testament to that. But the ultimate image that springs, active, from the work of Edward Said is not of a man embattled, picking sides in a conflict between critics and celebrants. What emerges instead is a vision of a unique sort of social contract between the intellectual and the public: one in which the intellectual’s ability to make critical observations about the world becomes a responsibility to make them, and to play a relentlessly active role in society.

WORKS CITED


