

## **Reflections on Edward Said's Legacy: Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Enlightenment**

Henry Yu

Volume 17, numéro 2, 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016588ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016588ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Yu, H. (2006). Reflections on Edward Said's Legacy: Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Enlightenment. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 17(2), 16–31.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/016588ar>

Résumé de l'article

Comment faut-il comprendre la critique qu'Edward Said formule sur l'imbrication du savoir et de l'influence coloniale quand on sait qu'il fut lui-même issu de milieux universitaires élitistes comme ceux de Princeton et de Harvard ? Le fait que Said a reçu son instruction au Moyen-Orient dans le réseau scolaire colonial réservé à l'élite et qu'il a fréquenté aux États-Unis de prestigieux établissements d'enseignement permet-il d'expliquer les origines de sa pensée sur l'orientalisme ? Dans sa poursuite d'un idéal cosmopolite du savoir, Said exprime une tension qu'exploite Henry Yu pour faire ressortir les contradictions contenues dans l'héritage du Siècle des lumières et du colonialisme européen.

# Reflections on Edward Said's Legacy: Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Enlightenment<sup>1</sup>

HENRY YU

## *Abstract*

*How are we to understand Edward Said's critique of the imbrication of knowledge and colonial power in light of his own education at elite universities such as Princeton and Harvard? Is Said's own path through elite colonial schooling in the Middle East and the exclusive schools of the United States a context for understanding the origins of his arguments in Orientalism? Yu uses the tension in Said's own commitment to a cosmopolitan ideal of knowledge to explore the contradictions within the legacies of the Enlightenment and European colonialism.*

## *Résumé*

*Comment faut-il comprendre la critique qu'Edward Said formule sur l'imbrication du savoir et de l'influence coloniale quand on sait qu'il fut lui-même issu de milieux universitaires élitistes comme ceux de Princeton et de Harvard ? Le fait que Said a reçu son instruction au Moyen-Orient dans le réseau scolaire colonial réservé à l'élite et qu'il a fréquenté aux États-Unis de prestigieux établissements d'enseignement permet-il d'expliquer les origines de sa pensée sur l'orientalisme ? Dans sa poursuite d'un idéal cosmopolite du savoir, Said exprime une tension qu'exploite Henry Yu pour faire ressortir les contradictions contenues dans l'héritage du Siècle des lumières et du colonialisme européen.*

**M**y purpose in this essay is to reflect on some of the legacies of Edward Said's conception of Orientalism, in particular his examination of the interplay between cosmopolitan ideals and exotic identity, between the taxonomy of the world as an organized array of categories in the mind of the enlightened scholar and the surveillance of being that is the epistemological and

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to *Amerasia Journal* for the permission to use as a small portion of this essay as a memorial tribute to Edward Said in 2005. Also to the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Brown University for an invitation to be a speaker in their 2004 series on "Other Orientalisms."

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ontological existence of someone whose life is determined by one of those categories.<sup>2</sup> The genius of Said's work lay in his exposure of Orientalism as a form of enlightened knowledge acquisition, and how it was inextricably connected to the practices of European colonialism. But Said's insights are particularly understandable when you place the generation of his ideas in the framework of his own education at elite colonial institutions, both in the Middle East and in the United States. Without understanding the genealogy of his education, from his British teachers at an elite school in Cairo, Egypt, through his university education at Princeton and Harvard in the United States, we might miss the personal poignancy of Said's ideas. But first, I will start with a personal anecdote.

For years, I have assigned the first 110 pages of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in my classes, hoping that my students will experience the same epiphany I felt two decades ago when I first read the book in an undergraduate class on Chinese history. I cannot say that mine was a religious awakening, but it was a revelation: what I had known before was false, and the truth I now knew so re-ordered the way I understood my world that I would never again be the same. Indeed, *Orientalism* was that most valuable of explanations, an answer to a question unasked, a solution that defined as a problem what heretofore had seemed unproblematic. Such realizations are rare, and although not all of my students seemed to have suffered the same, I have nevertheless seen enough in seminar discussion over the years to convince me that I am not alone.

I have been trying to understand the nature of that revelation ever since it afflicted me so many years ago. The elegance of Said's argument belied its complexity. He mixed simple formulations about the continuing recurrence of binary oppositions between East and West, Orient and Occident, with intricate arguments about the relationship of knowledge to power, of scholarship to colonialism, of ideas to violence. Orientalism was not just a set of ideas that made an exotic object called the "Orient," it was a set of relations of power, a form of knowledge that inscribed upon people all kinds of meanings about ignorance, inferiority, sexuality; and most importantly, it embodied the desire for one set of people to dominate and control another. The pen was not only mightier than the sword in Said's book, it wrote the justifications for the wielding of the sword, and at its most powerful even made the sword dispensable. Clerks and scholars, scribbling, and the taxonomies and tales they produced were not just the ephemera of colonial power, they were the very machinery of empire. Writing as a weapon, knowledge as a form of power and control — Said did not invent such analyses, but in *Orientalism* he produced perhaps the clearest and most resonant argument about how indispensable the pen was to the success of

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2 Edward Said works cited include: *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine the Way We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 1997); *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 2000); *Power, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

colonial and racial domination. My engagement with Said carried me through my PhD dissertation, and eventually a book, *Thinking Orientals*, with the very title an acknowledgment of the debt to his work.<sup>3</sup>

I am not alone in assigning only the first 110 pages of *Orientalism*. Not just a concession to the page limit of undergraduate reading, this selection also reflects a strange paradox in Said's argument — the first 110 pages make the most general claims, and the following sections are the most detailed in explanation, and yet the clarity and persuasiveness of Said's argument lessened with the increase in detail. As a historian by training, I could not escape the discomfort that this was rhetorically the opposite of a well-made argument. But the resonance to many of *Orientalism* as an argument did not lay in its details, it was to be found in its appeal to those who had felt the sting of being the object of someone else's curiosity, to those who had known what it was like to be the exotic object of someone else's desire to know. As a Palestinian intellectual in exile, Said also served as an admirable model of how an "Oriental" could think and write in the face of such Orientalist knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

*Orientalism* as an argument about knowledge and power changed a great deal when it was applied to "Orientals" at the centre of knowledge production, rather than those categorized and controlled in the colonies. For instance, those classified as "Orientals" situated in the United States and the United Kingdom clamoured their way into universities and other centres of learning, embedding themselves in the institutions where intellectual combat over representations of the exotic Orient took place. Increasingly, they found themselves in complicated situations where they were both the studiers and the studied. Who an "Oriental" was, varied in different places and at different times, of course, but as Said observed, the category itself remained remarkably consistent as a grab bag of all those who represented the exotic Other to an Occidental or European West. Said's *Orientalism*, however, never discussed this paradoxical place where "Orientals" moved beyond the category of the "studied" and became the "studiers." A whole field of post-colonial scholars, in Said's wake, would agonize over the difficulties of this epistemological paradox of being both the studier and the studied, but Said himself never directly addressed what it was like to be the "Oriental" in *Orientalism*. And yet his book could be read as a continual mediation on that very question.

Each time I read *Orientalism*, I feel anew how angry it is, despite the calm tone of its explication. Said was a quintessential "thinking Oriental," and his argument was what an "Oriental" thinks of a thousand years of Orientalist knowledge. How could it not be angry? Said was that rarest of public intellec-

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3 Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford, 2001).

4 For one of his explicit essays on the genesis of his thinking, see Edward Said, "Orientalism, an Afterward," *Raritan* 14, no. 3 (Winter 1995).

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tuals, one whose polemical cause could be expressed effectively as an enlightened, academic argument. Perhaps that was why the reactions to his arguments were so dichotomous — some worshipped him and others thought him dangerous to the point of evil.

I remember the first time I saw Edward Said in person, delivering a paper to the Shelby Cullom Davis Center Colloquium at Princeton University. The room was packed on a Friday morning, and friends and enemies both old and new abounded, interspersed amongst the curious looking for a spectacle. He had presented some of the material that would form a chapter in the book *Culture and Imperialism*, which would appear several years later. During the heated question and answer period, an old enemy stood behind Said and delivered a challenge, anachronistically waving his cane as he pledged to defend the honour of one of the Brontë sisters, or perhaps it was *Jane Eyre* — the scene entered my memory suffused with such a sense of the surreal that I cannot quite believe my recall of the details, and it is not beyond the realm of the real that someone would duel over the honour of a fictional character. Throughout this impassioned offensive, Said sat impassively with his back to the waving cane, never once turning to acknowledge the man behind him. Finally, when the invective had ended, Said in a calm and even voice dismissed the challenge, observing curtly that he was already well acquainted with the man's "addle-pated" musings — next question. A number of fairly intelligent graduate students later scrambled to decipher his succinct and deadly insult, a dagger so gilded with gentility and erudition that it seemed to have been unsheathed in an Oxford chamber filled with pipe-smoke and glasses of port.

I remembered the exchange because it seemed to me to reflect many of the contradictions of Said as an intellectual, of *Orientalism* as an interpretation, and of the life of "thinking Orientals" at the centres rather than the margins of empire. Said was cultured and civilized, in every sense of how those words convey the highest attainments of learning and cultivation. He embodied the ideals of European Enlightenment and the humanist tradition — understood from an education at the best schools in the world the joys of knowledge, of scholarship, of the life of learning. He was a music critic, adept at speaking about classical music or American jazz, trained to appreciate the subtleties contained in the finest compositions (Said was *The Nation's* classical music critic for years). And yet he also embodied what it was like to be the object of European knowledge, a category of the taxonomist rather than the taxonomist, the exotic Oriental in the midst of the Enlightened institutions that had buttressed so much of "Western" imperialism.<sup>5</sup>

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5 For an example of another book that treated "Orientalism" differently than Said, and yet from which he drew much inspiration, see the earlier study by Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), translated by Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking, and first published in French in 1950.

In his early schooling, Said was given the best education that a colonized intellectual could receive. In a 1998 essay in the *London Review of Books*, drawn from his memoir, Said described what he learned in Egypt at an elite school staffed by British teachers:

All my early education had ... been in élite colonial schools, English public schools designed by the British to bring up a generation of Arabs with natural ties to Britain. The last one I went to before I left the Middle East to go to the United States was Victoria College in Cairo, a school in effect created to educate those ruling-class Arabs and Levantines who were going to take over after the British left .... My whole education was Anglocentric, so much so that I knew a great deal more about British and even Indian history and geography (required subjects) than I did about the history and geography of the Arab world. But although taught to believe and think like an English schoolboy, I was also trained to understand that I was an alien, a Non-European Other, educated by my betters to know my station and not to aspire to being British. The line separating Us from Them was linguistic, cultural, racial and ethnic.<sup>6</sup>

If Edward Said understood that his education replicated that of an English school boy, he also knew that he was not an English school boy, and thus began that formative tension between acquiring the knowledge of the colonizer tempered against the alienation of knowing oneself as the colonized Other. After moving to the United States, he continued through his days at Princeton and Harvard to acquire the very best “Western” education available, despite his continuing personal links to the Middle East:

Although I went back to the Middle East in the holidays (my family continued to live there, moving from Egypt to Lebanon in 1963), I found myself becoming an entirely Western person; both at college and in graduate school I studied literature, music and philosophy, but none of it had anything to do with my own tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Said embodied the condition of the post-colonial intellectual — acquiring at the finest schools the knowledge of the colonizers, displacing whatever knowledge the colonized might have learned, absent colonialism. At the heart of so many of the contradictions of such an intellectual life were the core ideals of the European Enlightenment, and how those who had been classified as the exotic Oriental (indeed anyone who resided in the category of objectified Other that the taxonomies of Enlightened knowledge produced) dealt with their simultaneous embrace of — and alienation from — the legacies of the Enlightenment.

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6 Edward Said, “Between Worlds: A Memoir,” *London Review of Books* 20, no. 9 (7 May 1998): single page electronic version at [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n09/print/said01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n09/print/said01_.html).

7 Ibid.

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After leaving graduate school at Harvard to take up an academic position at Columbia, Said began to explore how his education had bifurcated him:

Having allowed myself gradually to assume the professional voice of an American academic as a way of submerging my difficult and unassimilable past, I began to think and write contrapuntally, using the disparate halves of my experience, as an Arab and as an American, to work with and also against each other.<sup>8</sup>

*Orientalism* was the masterful result, even if in the end he almost never spoke about himself in the book. Indeed, in focusing his critique upon the “Orientalist” intellectuals of Europe and the United States whose knowledge undergirded colonial power, Said’s book was often read too literally for its argument about the “Orientalists” (with endless attacks on the accuracy of his scholarship), rather than for how his insights were so obviously the product of his own colonial education and all of its contradictions.

There are interesting questions to be asked about how to understand the inextricable legacies of the Enlightenment — cosmopolitanism and colonialism, the freedom of knowledge and the enslavement of ignorance. Beyond understanding the contradictions that Edward Said himself embodied, however, is a historical analysis of some of the shifts that have occurred in the last century in the functions of knowledge, power, and cosmopolitan taste in higher education.

My aim in this essay is to sketch rather schematically an interpretation of how, in North America, Orientalist knowledge and a taste for the exotic spread from an elite fascination limited to a handful of scholars and worldly travellers, to become a widely disseminated mode of appreciating people, goods, and knowledge as exotic and different. Another way to describe this process is the spread in the twentieth century of a systematic array of meanings for the consuming of objects based upon cosmopolitan ideals of taste and appreciation, and how these ideals relied on Orientalist knowledge as a set of definitions about what was exotic. Ultimately, one of the core elements of consumer desire that fuelled mass consumption in mid-twentieth century North America centered upon a taste for the exotic, and although this consumer legacy of elite Orientalism is beyond the scope of this essay, it is ultimately my rationale for examining the story I trace.

The key for understanding the distribution of scholarly notions of Orientalism centres, of course, on those institutions where scholars most often gather — colleges and universities — and a series of changes that occurred to universities in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We can forget some-

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8 Ibid.

times how recent an invention the modern university really is, and how much a product it is of Enlightenment ideals about the acquisition of knowledge. Before the eighteenth century, colleges and universities did not aspire to a voracious appetite for knowledge about all things. An encyclopedic need to know and classify, to understand in a taxonomic way the variety of the world, idealized by Enlightenment *philosophes*, came to be a central mission of universities and colleges in Scotland and eventually in England, other parts of Europe, and the newly formed United States.<sup>9</sup> Closely tied in Scotland to new notions of moral philosophy and political economy, a far reaching appreciation arose for the global varieties of knowledge, for worlds beyond the local, yet contained within a unified system for understanding these varieties.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, the Enlightenment argument about the value of learning the taxonomies of knowledge had allied with the evangelical mission of colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, providing the rationale for higher education's expansive role in social engineering and the transformation of elite colleges from theological seminaries to modern universities. Places of enlightened learning were re-designed to produce the leaders of tomorrow who would lead not as pastoral shepherds of their flocks, but as enlightened men who should lead because of superior training and knowledge. In the United States this achieved its clearest form as colleges shifted in the nineteenth century from theological bases for education involving biblical languages such as Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, towards moral philosophy, law, and other forms of knowledge more appropriate for civil society. By the early twentieth century, the Ivy League and other private liberal arts colleges remained an exclusive club in which membership indicated increased possibilities for social advancement for the young men who entered, but the justifications for their leadership role rested not on the rationale

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9 For the classic interpretation of the Enlightenment, see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, Volume One: The Rise of Modern Paganism*, and *Volume Two: The Science of Freedom*, originally published by Alfred Knopf in 1966 and 1969 respectively. Gay's portrayal painted the *philosophes* as cosmopolitan citizens of the world — a civil society comprised not from the realm of the local and thus confined by considerations of geographic confinement and expressions of loyalty, but a membership in a club that was spatially expansive and based upon the acceptance of a set of Enlightened ideas and ideals. The *philosophes* were more like each other, across space and time, than they were akin to the ignorant masses that surrounded them, and Gay argued persuasively that Thomas Jefferson, Denis Diderot, Adam Smith all thought of themselves as akin through a shared belief in the power of knowledge and Enlightenment, despite the geographical distances between the United States, France, and Scotland.

10 The distribution of these kinds of Enlightenment ideas from one locale to another were indeed quite concrete practices involving the migration of human bodies, of books, of journals, of drawings, of specimen collections. For example, see Ned Landsman, ed., *Nation and Province in the First British Empire: Scotland and the Americas, 1600-1800* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 2001).



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of their membership in an aristocratic class of “natural” or financial elites, but in the idea that what they had learned made them superior.

The university system was neither the heart nor the brain of the social system — it was becoming more like the liver or kidneys. Those passing through were cleansed and improved, and the undesirable were blocked and removed. The exclusions were manifold, but two distinct forms of entry — wealth and talent — created a porous membrane that allowed the ever more articulate circulation of those with an abundance of either between higher education and the greater society at large. Talent, defined in various forms by intellectual and artistic accomplishment, was idealized, but money could buy entrance in its absence. To move from the organic metaphor of the body politic to that of drug trafficking, the university became the money laundering system where wealth was cleansed and transformed, so that mediocre scions of the rich attained the same degrees as the best and most talented.

Enlightenment and knowledge were the coin of this money laundering scheme, with the possession of superior knowledge the justification both for the rewarding of degrees and the rewards that would follow after graduation. These rewards were often explicitly financial, but most effective were the myriad of other forms of opportunity and social access that membership in the networks of the chosen and enlightened brought. Marriage alliances, professional careers, government positions became tied to the possession of the right college degree in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States. Indeed, the rise of the professions (all of the major professional organizations in the United States — the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association, even the American Historical Association — came to organize professional life at that time), is unimaginable without the explicit partnerships that eventually developed with this ever articulated advancement system of higher education as an engine of social reproduction.

So far, the story I have sketched is well known. It is both the triumphant self-congratulatory story that universities tell of their own modern history, as well as the crass system of social advancement that those who navigate it aspire to game. It was in the context of this transformation of the modern university that Edward Said's focus on the men who made the Orient a “career” made such sense. As he navigated the paths of elite higher education in the late twentieth century United States, from Massachusetts prep school to Princeton undergraduate to Harvard PhD, how could he not notice how the possession of knowledge was a form of power, derived from the prestige of elite universities and their role in the reproduction of social hierarchy?

Education was the key to advancement in the late twentieth century United States. Ambitious aspirants found in the professions an opportunity for upward mobility, and those who were already wealthy and well positioned found in higher education the post hoc justification and legitimation for their inheritance

of a leading place in society. Being himself a product and beneficiary of such a system, and yet alienated from it enough to understand it as an outsider, is it a surprise that he would model his interpretation of Orientalism upon its operation?

Reading back how power and knowledge operated at Harvard and Princeton to justify the reproduction and advancement of elites in the United States, Said combined this awareness of the connections between knowledge and power and the insights he had gained while a schoolboy in Egypt. Looking back, Said marvelled at how his British colonial school in Cairo had been filled with young princes and those who would go on to rule the Arab world after the end of colonialism (as well as the boy who would grow up to be the actor Omar Sharif!). Knowledge and networks, education and advancement — these were the visceral lessons of Said's schooling. His own mobility through education, both geographically and socially, could not have been lost upon him as he began to imagine what it must have been like for the "Orientalists" who were educated to manage and control the exotic locales of the imperial realm.

Mobility was an incessant metaphor in imperial expansion. Aspiring nobodies, by migrating to another place, arrived in a new space where they were at the top rather than near the bottom of stratified societies. The lesson of social mobility in an expanding empire is that the metaphor of mobility upwards, in terms of social advancement up the ranks of a stratified society, so closely mapped onto the geographic mobility of migration between different places within imperial realms.

And once there, how the aspirants celebrated! Servants, households, elaborate parties, became the symbolic means to display the grandeur of newfound social positions. David Cannadine described this "Ornamentalism" within the British Empire, this empty façade of power, as a corrective to Said's idea that these civil servants of empire really had much coercive control. How much of the Empire was pomp and circumstance, with some delusional civil servants fantasizing that they were in control when really the locals, the military, and the merchant princes still ran the place? What was the role of knowledge, of Orientalist knowledge, in the true workings of empire? Was it like the uniforms and the parades, a pretty object displayed in a thin veneer of asserted power or was it the very manifestation of relations of power? Was it sign or was it signifier?<sup>11</sup>

The rise of middling mobile hordes, the clerks of colonialism filling the expansive opportunities provided by growing imperial bureaucracies, was not however the target of Said's critique. Said aimed at the intellectuals, the creators of knowledge. And in his question about how colonial elites created and used knowledge about the "exotic Orient" (even if the knowledge gained had

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11 David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

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little connection to the realities of life in the colonies) was an attack on the wrong uses of knowledge, coming from an intellectual who believed wholeheartedly in the right uses of knowledge.

Enlightenment as a form of knowledge legitimating and actualizing control and oppression, this was the central story of Said's *Orientalism*, and we can easily imagine as we move along the paths through Princeton and Harvard that Said himself travelled as an undergraduate and graduate student, we can glimpse some of his inspiration for telling a story about knowledge acquisition and its relationships to power and hierarchy. The technocracy that colonialism had created, a ruling elite of knowledgeable men, defined the "thinking Orientals" that surrounded him in American universities:

In the Fifties and early Sixties students from the Arab world were almost invariably scientists, doctors and engineers, or specialists in the Middle East, getting degrees at places like Princeton and Harvard and then, for the most part, returning to their countries to become teachers in universities there. I had very little to do with them, for one reason or another, and this naturally increased my isolation from my own language and background.<sup>12</sup>

Said's sense of isolation from these men is revealing, since he did not equate their knowledge of science, engineering, and medicine with their identity as "Arabs" from the Middle East. Indeed, he equated this acquisition of "Western" knowledge with their role as educators and the learned elite upon their return home. The possession of knowledge was equal to leadership, a lesson of both colonial education and the United States university system. The question of the relationship of whatever knowledge they acquired to their identity as "Arabs," however, remained a question. Whatever these men he barely met at Princeton and Harvard knew, they were Arab in a way that he was not. And Said's sense of not being Arab was somehow tied to the very different kinds of knowledge he had acquired during his education.

A major source of critique of Said's definition of Orientalism in the years since its publication concerns the claim that lies at its heart, that knowledge was equivalent to power. Is there Orientalism without empire? And is there Orientalism without an empire aligned with a professional system of advancement tied to university education? Linda Colley, for instance, has argued that before the nineteenth century, British empire was full of non-elites who were relatively powerless and as much victims of colonialism as the locals who regularly kidnapped, mutilated, and killed them.<sup>13</sup> The relationship of knowledge and power were nowhere to be found among the working classes of imperial migra-

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12 Said, "Between Worlds: A Memoir".

13 Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (New York: Random House, 2004)

tion. According to Colley, on the lowest levels, the soldiers and policemen of empire were not the beneficiaries of Orientalism as a knowledge system.

The argument remains, however, that once the university system of advancement was created, then enlightenment knowledge did have a major place in defining superiority and inferiority, and more importantly in creating a legitimacy for the piles of knowledge — endless maps and reports and paperwork — created by the vast armies of bureaucrats and functionaries who were the clerks of empire. Knowledge, and the aura of superiority associated with those who passed through the university system, extended even to those petty clerks who had never set foot on a college campus, those who had escaped the lower orders or middling lives in the home nation to become the local elites of colonial spaces. Their proximity to enlightened knowledge and its central place in the legitimation of authority and superiority most closely aligned them with the graduates of elite universities and colleges who had been christened the leaders and managers of society.

Much of this Said did not argue in *Orientalism*, and yet it is not far fetched to say that he could have easily done so; but the cosmopolitan ideals of enlightenment knowledge have another history in North America in which Said himself was embedded, and which complicates his own critique of the elitism of Orientalism. The single most expansive moment in the growth of higher education the world has ever seen took place in the United States immediately after World War II. Fertilized by the Federal funding of the Townsend GI Bill, university education for the first time in world history came within the reach of a majority of a society's citizens.<sup>14</sup> I want to focus on one particular legacy of this explosive expansion: the role of the growing university system in distributing new forms of knowledge about race, culture, and exotic difference.

The relatively new field of anthropology, itself a beneficiary of imperial expansion and the colonial control of new territories both in the United States and in Great Britain, played a crucial role. Early academic anthropologists such as Columbia University's Franz Boas, through his own writings and those of his students, such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, articulated a new iteration of the Enlightenment concern with classifying the world into taxonomic categories. Cultural theory, a universal language for decoding the babel of local societies and distinct groups, contained a constant tension between a fascination

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14 In the United States, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw not only the redesign of the Ivy Leagues to become engines of social engineering, but the rise of the great public universities. The Morrill Land Grants Act of 1865, which used the profits of railroad expansion to create public universities and colleges in the midwest and west, is perhaps the best example of how the imperial expansion of the United States across the continent fuelled a new growth of higher education. This growth was modeled on the practical needs of agriculture and horticulture, the technical sciences of a better control of nature, but the founding of the land grant colleges laid the seed for the rise of the great public universities a century later.

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for local systems and practices that had their own logic, and a scholarly demand for the particular to make sense within the universal. An interest in the array of what were defined as distinct local cultures around the world allowed the anthropologist to understand how a particular group of people could seem so exotic and different, and yet ultimately understandable to an outsider. The tension between the local and the global, the insider and the outsider, the particular and the universal — all of these dichotomies were fused into a new idea of cultures as both discrete entities and particular manifestations of a universal human order. A new intellectual outlook arose within anthropology that was fascinated by this constant interplay between the local and the universal, an ethnographic imagination that would map the world not based upon the physical parameters of biology or even geography, but a set of analytical categories labelled culture.

One of the lessons of the new cultural anthropology was anti-racism, defined quite explicitly as an intellectual shift from theories concerning biological race to cultural theories of difference. Best exemplified by Ashley Montagu's best seller, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942), cultural anthropology offered a new way of organizing the world, a seemingly non-hierarchical division into discrete cultural groups that could not justify hierarchies based upon biological superiority or inferiority. One of the attendant lessons (although not a necessity theoretically), was an appreciation for cultures that were different than one's own.

Where did this appreciation for exotic difference originate? The enlightenment fascination with taxonomy had encouraged a desire for collecting the exotic, but that collecting did not require much more of an understanding of any particular object beyond finding its proper place in the taxonomic order. An appreciation for an exotic culture, to the point of understanding its internal logic from the point of view of an insider — this went well beyond mere collecting and into another realm, that of connoisseurship. To understand that history, we need to return to the university system again and the exclusivity of the elite colleges that fostered cultural anthropology.

To be a collector of objects and to be a connoisseur of those objects can be two very different things. To be the one can be limited to assessing and understanding nothing beyond the market value of an art object, for instance, but for the other, to be a true connoisseur, one must have a knowledge and appreciation of the object for itself. This kind of distinction is of course a historically specific definition, and it was prevalent in 1920s New York, a place where thriving financial markets and a global trade in every kind of commodity, including art, had made it North America's cultural capital. It was a "cultural" capital both in the sense of Matthew Arnold's "high culture" — the attainments in the arts and literature of advanced civilizations — as well as in the anthropologists' new sense of the distinct social practices of societies, since Manhattan had become an urban intersection of mass migrations from all over

the globe and the contact between these various migrants had created ideal examples for intellectuals of what constituted cultural difference.<sup>15</sup>

It was within this setting that a cosmopolitan ideal arose out of the intersections between elite universities, emergent anthropology, and the appreciation of connoisseurs for exotic art and culture. A self-consciously urbane set of intellectuals were creating what they believed to be a new American civilization, one that was international and cosmopolitan in its outlook, and Columbia and New York University were at its centre. A significant migrant wave of highly educated European Jewish emigres had helped create, in less than a generation, a New York intelligentsia that was just as cultured, just as well read, and just as steeped in the “Classic” music of Europe, as those they left behind in places such as Vienna. Many of these intellectuals also could appreciate the exotic “low” culture of black musical forms such as jazz. During those years, a subway ride uptown from Greenwich Village and New York University to Harlem, right next to Columbia University, brought you to the heart of the thriving Harlem Renaissance, where jazz clubs and poetry readings and art showings heralded a new interest in African and African American “culture.” Franz Boas, for instance, began at this time working with Zora Neale Thurston, who was collecting African American folk stories. Thurston was being funded by a wealthy New York patron whose interest in the stories coincided with a desire to collect African and other forms of exotic “art” and “cultural” objects. Primitivism in painting and sculpture, associated with the aesthetic forms of objects from Africa and the Pacific, also drove the art markets for authentic objects with exotic origins, and a connoisseur’s knowledge of the provenance and cultural meaning of such objects increased their value. Oriental art was also a major fad of the urban elite, and collecting *chinoiseries* and *japonoiseries* was a “rage.”

The 1920s marked the point at which a cosmopolitan interest in the exotic unknown became part of the training for becoming a social scientist in the United States. The creation of a cosmopolitan ideal was not limited to social science, but it found its most rigorous theorization there in the perspectives of the sociologist or anthropologist as an outsider or stranger, and the social scientific ideal of objectivity.<sup>16</sup> In elite intellectual life overall, an awareness of the

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15 For a different explanation for the growth of anthropology as an anti-racist set of theories, see George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

16 On American sociology and race, see Fred H. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal: McGill University, 1977); Stow Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago, 1905-45* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1987), 68-72; Fred Wacker, *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and Race: Race Relations Theory in America Before Myrdal* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983); John Madge, *The Origins of Scientific Sociology* (Glencoe, IL, Illinois: The Free Press, 1962); Stanford Lyman, *Militarism, Imperialism, and Racial Accommodation: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Early Writings of Robert. E. Park* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas, 1992).

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plural nature of American society was widespread, with the cosmopolitan interest in such diversity only one of many possible responses (another, for instance, being the retreat to Anglo-Saxon superiority).<sup>17</sup> A connoisseur's collecting and appreciation of the strange was still, however, the province of a select few who self-consciously saw themselves as progressive or even radical. Discovery and cosmopolitan enlightenment was still a rare pleasure and desire.<sup>18</sup>

The creation in 1920s New York of a certain brand of elite cosmopolitanism, with an attendant fascination with exotic art objects and a connoisseur's appreciation of other cultures, expanded to other elite private universities in the northeastern United States. It traveled along with the growth of the anthropological discipline, both in the minds and books of its disciples; but it was also carried along the routes of fashion and tasteful consumption. It remained, however, an elite phenomenon in the 1920s, associated with the limited readership of small circulation magazines such as *The New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly* published in Boston.

The expansion of these ideals of tasteful cosmopolitan appreciation for the exotic would not occur until after World War II. The vast expansion of higher education was the major engine, since whole sets of young men were now entering universities and colleges and learning what small sets of the enlightened had learned only a generation before. The money laundering system of higher education was now cleansing students who had no money, having entered because they were veterans whose tuitions were subsidized by the Federal government. These new students tended overwhelmingly to be male, and their passage through the higher education system also accomplished another amazing feat, the vast expansion of a generic sense of whiteness to European migrants only one generation removed from working class laborers who were the targets of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism.<sup>19</sup> In 1924, the Reed-Johnson Act had cut the United States off from further immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe precisely because of the fear that too many Slavs,

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17 As one among many examples of how a migrant intellectual theorized the mixing of New York, see Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924).

18 For an interpretation of how a desire for the exotic arose in the United States, see T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Thought, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

19 For an example of how a formerly despised "race" became at first "white ethnic" and then generically white, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), and Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). For an example of how suburbanization aided in the formation of a generic category of "white" identity, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Italian Catholics, and Jews had entered the nation. Three decades later, these families had been incorporated (if somewhat unevenly and at the cost of the erasure of any overt signs of immigrant origins) into the contours of generic whiteness with the expansion of the privileges of white supremacy (African Americans, for example, were largely excluded from the privileges of the post-war Federal subsidies).

The immediate privileges and long term rewards of cheap university educations and professional careers (along with Federal housing subsidies that paid for suburban growth), created a form of rapid mobility in the post-war United States that echoed the social and geographic mobility of colonial administrators of the British Empire in its heyday, except more explicitly tied to the possession of a university degree. College education became synonymous with upward class mobility, and the acquisition of the proper cosmopolitan taste and appreciation requisite for the educated elite became one of the lessons learned during the passage through higher education. Learning to appreciate the exotic other, even to embrace their difference, served ironically to cement the distinction between the normative knower at the centre of knowledge production and acquisition, versus all those who were the objects of knowledge. That those considered non-white, along with women, were largely outside the university system, reinforced their objectification as fundamentally different than those who sat at the centre of knowledge.

This was the world of which Edward Said was himself an educated product. To trace this genealogy of the university system is not of course to reduce his ideas to some mechanical output of the process, but to frame his observations on the Orientalism of British and French intellectuals within the particular cosmopolitan ideals that had so recently been installed in American higher education, and which were so entrenched in places such as Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia. The cosmopolitan ideals that shaped the entrance of so many new students into academia in the twentieth century were embraced in complicated ways, depending upon the aspirations and backgrounds of the students. To be a working class, formerly despised white ethnic passing through higher education, such cosmopolitan ideals allowed a class mobility and a transformation into an enlightened white supremacy that ironically was also anti-racist. To be a Palestinian-Lebanese exile from a well-off merchant family, such cosmopolitan ideals were a complicated mix. On the one hand, the embrace of the tasteful appreciation of culture, both in its high art forms of literature, art, and music and in its newer taste for exotic black musical forms, protected non-white students from the vulnerabilities of an outsider status and allowed the same class aspirations through education that so many of the new students shared. On the other hand, being the Oriental had also given Said constant insight into what it was like to be the outsider, the object of cosmopolitan tastes and desires. Oddly enough, this sensibility was not at the forefront of his analysis in *Orientalism*.



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Yet, as he wrote his memoir at the end of his life, it was this sense of the objectified, of what it was like to be the vase, or the rug, or even the plate of chow mein, that explained for him the possibility that he could understand how knowledge and power operated in colonial education.

Said insisted many times that he shared the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment, and he was no nihilist tearing at the structures of learning and taste. But Said saw as clearly the difficulties of being the object of the knower as he saw the benefits of being the knower. It should come as no surprise then that there were contradictions contained in Said's simultaneous embrace and critique of the enlightenment ideals of the university system. How could there not have been?

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**HENRY YU** received his BA in Honours History from UBC and an MA and PhD in History from Princeton University. After ten years at UCLA, Yu returned to UBC in 2003 to help build programs focused on trans-Pacific migrations. Prof. Yu's book, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2001) received the Norris and Carol Hundley Prize as the Most Distinguished Book of 2001, and he is currently working on a book entitled *How Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes*.

**HENRY YU** a obtenu un baccalauréat spécialisé en histoire à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique ainsi qu'une maîtrise et un doctorat en histoire de l'Université de Princeton. Après dix années de carrière à l'Université de la Californie, à Los Angeles (UCLA), Henry Yu revient à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique en 2003 pour élaborer des programmes sur les migrations transpacifiques. Pour son livre *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2001), il a reçu le prix Norris and Carol Hundley à titre de publication la plus remarquable de 2001; il travaille présentement à un ouvrage intitulé *How Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes*.