About Politics, Palestine, and Friendship: A Letter to Edward from Egypt

Lila Abu-Lughod

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Dear Edward,

Sitting on the thatched terrace of a house made of mud brick, watching children chase birds out of the ripening wheat fields while their mothers harvest clover for sheep and water buffalo, listening to a distant clang announcing the seller of bottled gas, and enjoying the winter sunshine through the eucalyptus, I can hardly conjure the world you inhabited. Even though you spent your boyhood in Egypt, it was north, in a different part of this country. There, your school was so exclusive that being an Oriental in it carried a stigma. There, your apartment was furnished with antiques and dusted by servants. Here, children march off to school in crumpled beige uniforms and recite from dog-eared government textbooks.

When I ask people here if they have heard of you—people who know a lot about growing wheat, Indian irrigation pumps, medical problems, and the sorry state of the Egyptian economy—they struggle with the name. Edward Said? Nothing comes up, though they know every television actor who will appear in the serial being filmed now in the nearby pharaonic ruin and every political personage who pontificates on the news. And they know Palestine. Some know it directly, like the ninety-some-year-old I met the other day who was taken to Gaza to cook for the British during the Second World War. Most know it indirectly, like all the women who report to me each day how many people were killed by the Israelis in Palestine. They shake their heads, "God protect them. God give them strength."

Our friends here also know my father. Some remember his visit seven years ago. Others remember that when I was last here on a research trip, I

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was anxious about him. I traveled to Ramallah to see him when he came out of the hospital. I still see in various homes the posters of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem that I brought as gifts, pinned up beside posters of Mecca, favorite Egyptian soccer teams, Arab pop stars, and cartoon bears. There is a gentle hesitation whenever I mention my father. A respect for the loss. It is this connection to my father and to Palestine that allows me to think about you here.

Your son brought some laughter to the numb group gathered at your funeral at Riverside Church in New York City when he told us how amazed he was that you managed to write so much when it seemed that you spent all your time talking on the telephone. My memories of life with my father also carry the familiar sounds of him talking on the phone—affectionate, angry, urgent, cajoling, mixing Arabic and English, talking politics. And you were the person my father talked to most.

I know your friendship began in Princeton, through music. I was just two when my father began graduate school there in the mid-1950s, still unpolished, with a thick accent and Arab nationalist sympathies. He had chosen Oriental studies at Princeton to work with Philip Hitti, the only modern Arab historian teaching in the United States. My father had come far in the barely six years since his expulsion from Jaffa, the city he was forced to flee when it fell to the Jewish forces, ten days before the destruction of Palestine and the declaration of the State of Israel. He had arrived in the United States by boat on borrowed money. His English was poor, though he had been among the smart students at Al-'Amiriyya High School (now called the Weitzman School). He savored the irony that he was a refugee with no future when he heard the news that he had passed his high school matriculation exams. The list was announced by Radio Israel; the Arab Department of Education no longer existed.

Like many an immigrant to the United States, my father had worked a variety of jobs in his first years, from mopping floors in a laundry to testing temperatures in a steel mill. He had also won a scholarship after his first year at a mediocre state university. In Chicago he had married my mother. She was beginning to develop in him an appreciation of, among other

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things, classical music. The day you met, she had sent him to pick up free concert tickets made available to impoverished graduate students. You, a budding classical musician and a privileged Princeton undergraduate, were distributing the tickets. You moved in a different world from his, groomed by a New England prep school and, before that, Victoria College, where Egypt's wealthy, including Levantines, sent their sons and daughters. But when he asked you where you were from, and delicately confirmed that you were an Arab Palestinian, you began to talk.

You were to keep talking until May 23, 2001. This was the day my father died. But the reason the date is so fixed in my memory is that we had anxiously held it out to him, day after day, as the day you were to arrive. My father, suffering from what finally had been diagnosed, quite late, as lung cancer, was then living in Ramallah, the West Bank town to which he had moved in the early 1990s. His American passport entitled him, under Israeli authority, to stay for three-month stints as a tourist in his homeland. After forty years in the United States, he had "returned" to Palestine—not to his beloved Jaffa, too firmly within the borders of Israel, but to a part of Palestine that was just emerging (temporarily, as it has turned out) from direct Israeli military control. He was energized by the hope of contributing to a society beginning to breathe again. It had been a while since you'd last seen each other, but you talked on the telephone regularly. If the calls in early May focused more on medical reports than on the decisions of the Palestinian Authority or the latest Israeli outrage, you still talked about the world.

In the moments when my father was well enough to sit up, he planned busily for your visit. Everyone would want to see Edward, he said. He had to figure out how to arrange for you to see different circles of people without anyone feeling slighted and without burdening you. He knew you'd be tired from travel. My father extracted from me the reassurance that I knew how to make "Mom's Moroccan chicken." We abetted his excitement, though we knew his oxygen tank would alarm you and his weakness would hardly allow for the kind of dinner party he imagined—joking and holding forth, with the conversation lively, ranging back and forth from good-natured teasing to backbiting gossip to serious political argument. Out loud we counted the days until your arrival, hoping it would keep him going. Secretly we prayed that you would come sooner.

At the commemoration ceremony held for my father in Ramallah the day after his funeral in Jaffa, Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet, described my father's eagerness to see you as "the longing of a twin for his soul mate."[1] But you were in no way twins. What was this extraordinary

1. Mahmoud Darwish, "Ibrahim Abu-Lughod: The Path of Return Is the Path of Knowledge" (in Arabic), *Akhbar Yafa,* 31 May 2001, p. 4.

friendship? What did you give each other? What did you see in each other? To understand this friendship is to see a side of you that perhaps was not visible to colleagues in America who knew you only as a brilliant and intimidating literary critic, or to those around the world who saw you as being an outspoken public intellectual who kept the truth of Palestine alive.

It is hard for anyone to know, really, what goes on between friends. What I saw was mutual respect. And loyalty. I saw the trusting camaraderie born of a shared passion to use the mind to grasp the political predicament in which you, as Arabs and Palestinians, found yourselves. You both spoke out with consistency and integrity, though my father was sometimes more accommodating because of his involvement in realpolitik. I saw in both of you an incredible confidence, perhaps born of desperation, that your actions could affect the world. You wanted to change history by writing, though later in life you would try to make a difference by bringing Palestinian and Israeli musicians together; my father was always more effective through the people he talked to, one by one, and through his ability to mobilize them through the institutions he brought into being.

My father respected talent and had a gift for putting Arabs and Palestinians to work for the cause. You were in another league, really, although when my father began to draw you into the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (an association he had helped found after the 1967 war), you were still an awkward public speaker. You would never have my father's fiery oratory, his easy warmth, or his humor. But you had formidable intellectual power, and you worked like a madman. My father would proudly take credit for bringing you into Palestinian politics, especially the struggle in the United States against anti-Arab sentiment, misinformation, and hostile policy. The key moment was when he asked you to contribute an essay to a special issue of a journal after the 1967 war. You wrote for my father what he always recalled as an incredible essay—about the image of the Arab in the West. This was the germ of what became your most transformative book, *Orientalism*.

In your memoir, you told us that your father steered clear of politics and your refined mother pushed you to opera.[2] Your own brilliance and nervous energy gave you a stellar academic career. But my father helped secure a place for you, a sometimes prickly thoroughbred, in the Arab political community. He drew you deep into conversation with politically committed Palestinians living in Beirut, Syria, Tunis, Qatar, Jordan, and London. You thanked him, in your eulogy in Ramallah, for introducing you to so many

2. See Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York, 1999).

interlocutors and dear friends. Was it through my father that you got involved in the Palestinian National Council and developed your ambivalent relationship to Yasir Arafat, the leader you would later condemn unsparingly for his use of the Oslo accords to cling to personal power, bending to Israel's will and forfeiting the rights of his people?

Arafat had been important to my father. Someone had introduced them in Cairo in August 1970, just as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was emerging. My father remembers looking straight at him and asking: "Mr. Arafat, what role do you see for people like me who are living outside? We are intellectuals, working with ideas at institutions. What role do you see for us in the revolution?" Arafat's answer, in that heady language of the era, stuck with my father. "Doctor, when we began our revolution, we were Palestinians sitting in Kuwait or Qatar thinking, 'What can we do for Palestine?' We decided to make a revolution . . . . We organized ourselves and here we are." He continued, "Now, for you and your friends, think about what you can do. If you need help from us to do what you want to do, let us know. But it is for you to decide how you can contribute to this revolution, which is yours. How do you contribute to the liberation of Palestine?"[3]

Arafat invited him to attend the upcoming meeting of the Palestinian National Council. From then on, my father felt himself more a Palestinian. He taught political science, he had wide interests in nationalism and liberation movements, he continued to listen to Vivaldi, and he tried to keep wayward children on track. But he spoke widely, wrote, and also flew to New York to sit in the PLO suite at the United Nations' sessions where men drafted resolutions and strategized about how to get the world to recognize the Palestinian plight. Bottles of Johnnie Walker Black on the table, lots of smoke, and intense masculine argument. Were you there? I don't remember. But you were there as a fellow member of the Palestinian National Council in meetings in Amman, Cairo, and Algiers. When they drafted the declaration of statehood in Algiers in 1988, I expect you backed my father, the father of three daughters and one son, when he supported women's equal right to pass on Palestinian nationality to their children.

Sitting next to my father, you were a featured speaker, year after year, at the annual meetings of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates where academic papers were presented and politics analyzed. The two of you helped found the *Arab Studies Quarterly,* an academic journal intended as an alternative to Zionist and Orientalist scholarship on the

3. Quoted in Hisham Ahmed-Fararjeh, *Ibrahim Abu-Lughod: Resistance, Exile, and Return* (Birzeit, 2003), p. 115.

Arab world. And you wrote and wrote, encouraged and applauded by my father: books like *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam;* prescient essays like "Permission to Narrate," written on the occasion of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. You showed in that article how talk of terrorism conveniently—deliberately—blocked any narration of the histories that could lay bare the roots and reason of violence.

I was touched when your elegy to my father in the *London Review of Books* was titled "My Guru."[4] You were the star. You were the giant. My father was very smart, and he certainly understood politics; he was also a charismatic teacher and an energetic participant in what he called "village politics"—university life. But his devotion to the Arab community in the United States led him to accumulate Man of the Year plaques from dozens of Arab American and Palestinian organizations, not honorary degrees from prestigious universities. His energies went into trying to make things happen, especially in the Arab world, whether the Palestinian Open University that UNESCO had asked him to plan (and that an Israeli cluster bomb on his Beirut balcony, and all that came with the invasion in 1982, prevented him from establishing) or, much later, the edited volume of proceedings from the "Landscapes of Palestine" conference that he organized at Birzeit University, in Palestine. You gave the keynote address at that conference and brought your inspiring friend W. J. T. Mitchell, editor of *Critical Inquiry,* something my father was still excited about years later. I was humbled to find you describing my father as "an authority for all important things I did as an intellectual."[5]

If you cherished my father's friendship, my father was fiercely loyal to you. He appreciated your work and delighted in your achievements. I saw an interviewer on the Al-Jazeera television program *Guest and Issue* in 2000 ask my father's opinion of a statement made by one Palestinian professor that there are two models for dealing with the Palestinian political situation. The first model was said to be Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, who had decided to return and to wage a new form of daily struggle on the land of Palestine. Then there was the other model, Dr. Edward Said, abroad, whose "extremist" response was to talk only about his disgust with the current Palestinian political line. "Do you think," the interviewer asked, "that there really are two models for dealing with the political situation?"

My father said flatly, "I don't think that at all." He refused the invidious comparison. He defended you fairly, recognizing and respecting your dif-

4. See Said, "My Guru," *London Review of Books,* 13 Dec. 2001, pp. 19–20.

5. Said, "If I Had Had a Brother, He Would Not Have Been More True, Gentle, and Loving than Ibrahim" (in Arabic), *Akhbar Yafa,* 31 May 2001, p. 4.

ferences. He explained that his Arab roots and Arab commitment had remained constant through the work he did. He noted that though his career (as a professor of political science at various universities) was in the United States, he had also worked in Egypt and Beirut. You, he noted, had been educated in America, where your academic work kept you. Turning things around, my father used the occasion to hold you up as a model for Palestinians. He pointed out that you did come to Palestine, though your work was elsewhere. And to work elsewhere, he added, "is the right of every Palestinian, no matter where. That is the transnational character of the Palestinian people." My father then praised you as "a distinguished model for what the diaspora can do for Palestine." First, "what it can do in the confrontation with Israel" but also in its criticism of the Palestinian Authority. "As a Palestinian, he also has the right, the complete right," he said of you, "to express his opinion about what's going on politically in the lands of the Palestinian Authority. That is the sacred right of every Palestinian. He exercises it. But he exercises it outside, because he exercises all his rights outside. His is the worldly model . . . . But he is part of this country, just as I was part of it before I came back." He ended, "But anyway, we are not two models. There are many models for the Palestinian people."

You and my father were comrades in a search for justice for Palestinians. You were also friends. I don't think you talked to each other about family matters much, but you appreciated each others' insights, talents, and humanity. I saw on several occasions your great capacity for love, you who could not suffer fools, were pitiless toward those who crossed you, and could be impatient with your own family. In your extraordinary elegy you spoke in the same breath about my father and your other friend Eqbal Ahmad. What a troika. He passed away two years before my father, in Pakistan. This was the country to which he had, like my father, "returned" after a life spent in the United States. It hadn't escaped any of you that his location in Pakistan as a refugee from India was the result of one of those colonial partitions so popular in the late 1940s (India and Pakistan, apartheid in South Africa, Israel and Palestine) that was not so different from the one you and my father suffered. For me, growing up, Eqbal was adored, the only other friend of my father's besides you who could keep us riveted at the dining room table when the talk turned to politics.

At the memorial service for Eqbal at the Asia Society in New York, my father spoke gratefully of what Eqbal had done for the Palestinians through his acute political analyses and his warnings about the dangers of provincial nationalism. You ended on a more human note, saying, "So much has been said about Eqbal's qualities: his generosity, his brilliance, his honesty, his

commitment to justice and truth, his great human and pedagogic powers . . . Eqbal the activist and speaker . . . . I want to conclude this extraordinary occasion, if I might, by recalling one experience which moved me and my family greatly." You told us about how he had come every day for two months to sit with you after you returned from the hospital, sick and weak from a difficult experimental treatment. "Most of the time," you said, "I was not able to speak or even to stay awake. I was in pain, and I was suffering. But there, across the room, was Eqbal, sometimes nursing a drink, sometimes not. Sitting there quietly, available to me, to Mariam, and my children." He was a friend to you, and a guru as well. You described how you used to call him Mawlana (religious teacher) and he used to call you Sayf al-Islam (Sword of Islam)—"the most inappropriate titles that ever went between friends." Then you added, "But it was, I think, a sign of our very deep friendship and the love that we had for each other."

My father was to be the next friend you lost. May 23, 2001. You missed seeing him by hours. So instead of being feted at dinner parties, you had to walk with us, with hundreds of people from all over Palestine, through the streets of Jaffa to bring my father to the cemetery overlooking the sea that he had loved to swim in as a boy. We left him there. And you pressed on. You were not silent when, months later, Israeli tanks rolled into Ramallah, a savage bombardment devastated Jenin, assassinations alternated with invasions, and the lies continued. Yet you wrote that you felt diminished by the loss of my father.

I, like so many others, now feel diminished by the silencing of your voice. You three were remarkable men forged in the colonial crucible and fired unevenly by the enthusiasms of liberation movements. Driven by your burdens, you gave yourselves to the world. I like to imagine the three of you now sitting up there in heaven, drinking Johnnie Walker Black and talking politics. I sit here on the earthen terrace with the sunset warming the pharaonic temple across the field, wondering how to carry on your work. The first step, I know, is to keep talking about Palestine.

Love,

Lila

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