

Entangled Territories: *A Note from Ankara and Beirut*

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In a segment of his *This Is Not Beirut/Kan Ya Ma Kan*, Jayce Salloum lists a number of characterizations of Beirut and Lebanon from the 1940s to the present. Salloum's list includes: "Pearl of the Orient," "Paris of the Middle East," "Crossroads between East and West," "Bastard French," and "Window on the West." In this segment, Salloum could have just as easily been alluding to other liminal cities, such as Istanbul, Alexandria, and Algiers. These characterizations leave little doubt about the central terms framing the definitions of Beirut, Algiers, Alexandria, and Istanbul, and they make apparent the intimacy and distance of the terms East and West, Orient and Occident. But what precisely do these terms mean? What and whom do they reference?

The concepts of East and West have figured prominently in discourses of colonialism, postcolonialism, modernism, and postmodernism, among others. These concepts are made to stand for enormous categories, categories that simultaneously refer to vastly divergent geographies, histories, religions, and economies. In one sense, this diversity renders terms like East and West nearly meaningless. Despite the complexity of the material subsumed within these categories, notions of East and West are presumed to be a matter of common sense. We agree as long as it is understood that common sense refers to naturalized, long-standing tropes and stereotypes. Certainly we continue to see the repetition of these tropes and stereotypes in popular culture and political discourse, most notably in the popular media discussions of the Gulf War, the World Trade Center bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing, immigration policy, Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and most recently the Iranian elections. The problem for many of us attempting to challenge the assumptions of colonial thinking is to do justice to the heterogeneous nature of culture (in both the East and the West) while maintaining the broad conceptual tools capable of explaining power relations and histories of domination. For this reason, we are unwilling to jettison terms like East and West too hastily, although we recognize the necessity of calling into question the assumptions that underlie these notions.

In the past two decades, from the art world to journalism to academia, many people have sought to reassess long-standing assumptions about East and West. Critics have concentrated on issues of culture and history and on the meanings of the terms in question. Often conceived in response to continued and deeply problematic attitudes and policies of particular Western and non-Western individuals, governments, and

institutions, and inspired by Edward Said's groundbreaking study, *Orientalism*, these analyses have focused on unpacking the fraught assumptions about the Orient formulated in Western travel narratives, colonial documents, journalistic reports, art productions, and literary works of fiction, among other kinds of texts. Many of these analyses have challenged the disinterested claims of certain authoritative texts and highlighted the links among geopolitics, economics, notions of race, gender, sexuality, time and place and the production and distribution of knowledge about the Orient. Such work has provided a much-needed corrective to many received ideas.

Yet a weakness remains. In many of these analyses, the signifiers East, Orient, Occident, and West continue to be used, often without being adequately problematized, and continue to refer to very different geographical regions, cultural entities, and people.

East and Orient have at times been used to refer to Arabs, Muslims, the Arab world, or the Middle East in general. At other times, these terms have referred to Muslims in general, including non-Arab Muslims. And at still other times, they have included Arabs, Muslims, Turks, Iranians, and anyone and any territory to the east and south of Greece. For the North American, the Orient generally evokes East Asia, an area usually not included in most critiques of Orientalism. The terms West and Occident are just as encompassing. Historically, these terms have been used to refer to the regions and peoples of Greece and Rome, England, France, the United States, and occasionally Germany. At other times, they referred to Western Europe and North America in general.

In effect, terms such as East and West have been used to refer to vastly different objects, places and peoples, and have meant very different things at different times. For the critic of colonial notions of culture, this means that we must bear in mind this peculiar plasticity and the fact that these terms do not imply fixed geographical, political, economic, or psychic locations. At the same time, these terms continue to invoke particular and long-standing assumptions, images and statements. In considering the meaning of these terms we must keep alive this tension between the plasticity of the terms and the rigid assumptions they invoke.

Although the West has sought to contain Eastern influence for several centuries, it should be obvious that Westerners' relations to the Orient have never been homogeneous, consistent, nor settled. Like the East, the West was never a single, coherent entity, even during periods of active colonization. Profound tensions have always existed within Western societies, and different Westerners and Western institutions have experienced and represented the Orient differently at different times. It is presumptuous to speak of a common, Western "experience of the Orient" that accounts for the complexity and specificity of the US. Marines' service in Lebanon 1983, a British administrator's role in Palestine in the 1930s, a German engineer's travels in the Ottoman Empire in the 1890s, or an Italian tourist's journey to see the pyramids.

It would also be uncritically idealist for cultural critics to search for the pan-logical category, the single term or concept that encompasses and transcends the different

experiences and representations of East and West. It can be tempting to see abstract categories—in this case, East, West, Orient, Occident—in a way that gives them independent existence and utilizes them to explain historical situations. Particular histories and events cannot be read as the effluvia or objectification of the logical categories that exist in an abstract universe. The world changes; reality is complex. The categories we employ to help us understand complex processes in time and space are no more than schematic outlines designed to aid us in mapping configurations of culture and history. As such they are tools, and ought not be given a status beyond this. At the same time, East, West, Orient, Occident are important terms that do stand for something real. As such they may at times override all or some other forms of difference. But such claims must be demonstrated and not simply stated.

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A collection such as this owes a great debt to the work of Edward Said, whose 1978 work *Orientalism* has generated an extremely rich debate on these issues. *Orientalism* (along with Said's work on related topics, including *Covering Islam*, *Blaming the Victims*, *The Culture of Imperialism*, and *The Politics of Dispossession*) features as a central contribution to the study of Western representations of the Middle East and the Arab-Islamic worlds. Except for the rare specialist study in intellectual history, *Orientalism* was the first book-length text to demonstrate the interrelations of scholarly, aesthetic and military agendas during the colonial period. Said writes:

A field like Orientalism has a cumulative and corporate identity, one that is particularly strong given its associations with traditional learning. . . . The result for Orientalism has been a sort of consensus: certain things, certain types of statements, certain types of work have seemed for the Orientalist correct. . . . Orientalism can thus be regarded as a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient. The Orient is taught, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways.¹

While one may contest the internal coherence and regularity implied in this definition, this passage continues to demand serious consideration. Said here asserts that a number of structures and conventions—"imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases"—have come to dominate the manner in which knowledge about the Orient, the Oriental, the Arab, the Turk and the Muslim is produced. These have, according to a central argument in *Orientalism*, produced a sort of consensus about how the Orient is represented in the West, and have further facilitated the process by which a range of demeaning representations continue to be produced "without challenge, or demurrals." Said

suggests that it is these representations, in conjunction with other forces, that made it possible for the East to be delivered to Western empire. In this, Said ascribes an intentionality to discourse that would seem to rely on two debatable presuppositions: first, that Orientalism maintains an internal coherence across time and space, and, second, that representation functions in a uniform and predictable relation to power.

Responses in the last twenty years to Said's arguments have been varied, ranging from early outrage at *Orientalism's* challenge to Western claims to truth, to more recent critics like Lisa Lowe, James Clifford, Aijaz Ahmad, and Robert Young. The most powerful critiques of *Orientalism* focus on Said's emphasis on the production of knowledge in the West, and his apparent foreclosure on an essential determinant of the semiotic, political, and social values and effects of these representations—namely, their reception and challenge by the colonized. The extent to which the theoretical strategies articulated in *Orientalism* actually silence a potential response by the colonized remains open to debate, but critical writing that engages with this text has generated a large, extremely rich body of both theoretical and empirical studies that focus on colonial and post-colonial responses to the proliferations of the Western project. As a result of such interventions, attempts are being made to answer the question we raised above: how do we recognize the discursive and representational practices organized along problematic categories like “East” and “West,” while at the same time acknowledging the inadequacies and colonial histories of these categories, and again at the same time generating challenges to their hegemonic function?

The essays in this issue present moments in which discursive means of representation did overlap and were mutually implicated in one another to produce a kind of regularity, but not the intentionality that Said speaks of in *Orientalism*. One of our objectives in bringing together a collection such as this is to juxtapose work from a range of sites, including the visual arts. Rather than imposing fixed categories on what is essentially diverse, fluid cultural material, the cultural and visual analyses included in *Entangled Territories* have the potential to call into question the static, closed entities promulgated within contemporary configurations of Orientalist discourse. A cautious reading of Said's book, despite its critical limitations, still provides a rich account of the relations between representations of the Arab-Turkish-Islamic worlds and colonial domination. A number of questions raised by *Orientalism* or inspired by the book relate directly to the essays here: How does one culture represent, interpret, and dominate another? How is authority demarcated by the inscription of identity and difference? Answers to these questions are varied, and encompass diverse theoretical and political positionings.

Note

- 1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1978), 202.