# IS THERE AN ARAB (YET) IN THIS FIELD? POSTCOLONIALISM, COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, AND THE MIDDLE EASTERN HORIZON OF SAID'S DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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A common complaint about Edward Said's *Orientalism*, by most accounts the foundational text of Postcolonial Studies, has been that its relentless focus on the western gaze resulted in an inadvertent hyper-objectification of the Arab, who remains at the end of the study an object constructed, controlled, and fully circumscribed by the discourse of Europe and America. In this essay, I will narrate an account of the dynamics of how this text, with its broadly influential strategy of colonial discourse analysis, has, surprisingly, become influential among some of the most innovative, perceptive, and engaged scholars of *Arab* cultural production. This story is far from simple, since it involves scholarship contending with a contradiction between the Arab as an object of discourse in Said's classic text, and the Arab as a creator of discourse in cultural studies-oriented Arab scholarship. The complex and often halting engagement with this contradiction in newer scholarship focused on the Arab Middle East and North Africa and allegorizes, to a large extent, an acute challenge in all branches

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of postcolonial scholarship. This is the problem of how to resist the gravitational pull of Eurocentrism.[1]

Over a decade ago, Bart Moore-Gilbert summarized the aforementioned criticism of Edward Said's now classic text and its lack of usefulness to certain types of scholars. "*Orientalism*," he wrote, "generally promotes an idea of the colonized subject as passive, silent and incapable of resistance. [It] seem[s] to accept at face value the power relations inscribed in the colonialist trope of 'surveying as if from a peculiarly suited vantage point the passive, sensual, feminine, even silent and supine East'" (51).[2] Indeed this style of reading *Orientalism* is reinforced by the book's context within Said's promotion of the work of Michel Foucault among American literary scholars in the 1970s. Moore-Gilbert's comment seems to call for an acknowledgement of the ability of those on whom Orientalism was visited to act as agents, but Foucault has always been read in the United States as deeply skeptical of this type of resistance narrative. Paul Bové, for example, has described Foucault's notion of discourse as a force extremely powerful in its ability to absorb and reappropriate all resistance:

> In disciplinary societies, self-determination is nearly impossible, and political opposition must take the form of resistance to the systems of knowledge and their institutions that regulate the population into "individualities" who, as such, make themselves available for more discipline, to be actors acted upon. In this understanding of governability, truth produced by these knowledge systems blocks the possibility of sapping power; it speaks for—or, as we say in Western republics, it "represents"—others. But for poststructuralism, it is not self-evident, for example, that notions of oppositional leadership, such as Gramsci's conception of the "organic intellectual," will be significant alternatives to the regulating ideal of "speaking for." Having emerged out of the events of 1968, post-structuralism remains politically suspicious of all rhetorics of leadership and all representational institutions. (62)

Not everyone has read the possibility of resistance in Foucault's conception of discourse as pessimistically with respect to other voices—and voices of others. Lois McNay, for example, in *Gender and Agency*, views Foucauldian discursive power as a substratum against which individual agency contends. Said himself, after repudiating in the essay "Traveling Theory" his own earlier embrace of Foucault, introduces *Culture and Imperialism* by proclaiming that the colonized does possess agency and that there are multiple narratives that must

be taken into account to gain a comprehensive understanding of colonialism, its discourses, and its narratives. Still, the momentum of that earlier formulation that seemed to strip the orientalized, the colonized, and the subaltern of all agency and of any voice has been enduring. As a result, the migration of Said's influence into studies of the culture of the modern Arab world has been not only innovative, brilliant, and subtle, but also haunted by the specter of Eurocentrist discourse.

## Said and the Arabs

One is struck by the contrast in Said's position on the question of agency when comparing his two most influential and famous works of literary criticism. In the opening pages of *Orientalism*, he sets his focus on Western voices without qualification and without apology:

> There were—and are—cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West. About that fact this study of Orientalism has very little to contribute, except to acknowledge it tacitly. But the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orient. (5)

Fifteen years later in 1993, and surely in part as a result of the criticisms referenced by Moore-Gilbert, Said introduces *Culture and Imperialism* in a way that suggests a completely different focus, even a different theoretical stance on the question of postcolonial agency:

> What I left out of *Orientalism* was that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great movement of decolonization all across the Third World. . . . Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out. (xii)

Through this veritable mea culpa in his introduction and through his third chapter, "Resistance and Opposition," Said clarifies his position on the question of the voice cum agency of the colonized and the

recently decolonized. One might argue, however, that even this second book is most memorable and influential in its other three chapters, which devote themselves fairly exclusively to what has come to be called colonial discourse analysis, focusing on Verdi, Camus, and Austen. Even chapter 3 uses Western canonical figures like Yeats as examples of resistance and cites writers and thinkers from the Arab world, for the most part, only in passing. Certainly, no Arabic novel receives the careful, detailed attention accorded to Austen's *Mansfield Park* in either this or any other of Said's writings. These textual realities, combined with the enduring legacy of *Orientalism* as a ground-breaking and influential critical reference, have undercut the relevance of the shift in Said's approach. As a result, most readings of Said's later criticism leave substantially intact the questions surrounding the voice and agency of the orientalized Arab subject that were first raised by *Orientalism* in spite of his self-proclaimed departure from that aspect of the earlier text.

This problem of subaltern agency might be extended by comparing the way literary texts or theoretical works written by Arabs are dealt with in Said's oeuvre. They are virtually absent from his major works of critical theory, including, besides *Orientalism*, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* and *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Yet one must immediately add that Said's work stands alone in the bibliography of works by major American literary critics of the time in its willingness to make some reference to texts written in Arabic. The best example of a more extended attention to such texts by Said may be the essay "Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction after 1948," originally written in the early 1970s as the introduction to an English translation of the novel *'Awdat al-Ta'ir ila al Bahr* (*Days of Dust*) by Lebanese writer Halim Barakat. The English translation of the novel was published by a modest midwestern American press, so the sweeping but schematic essay had an unusually low profile for an essay authored by Said, even at that early point in his career. It was republished near the end of Said's life under its current title in his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. The essay sets the ambitious goal for itself of describing what makes modern Arabic fiction distinct from the fiction of Europe. Said pursues this goal through passing reference to reverberations of the classical tradition in modern Arabic literature, but he focuses primarily on the effects on Arabic writing of crushing historical defeats suffered by Arabs in 1948 and 1967, pointedly suggesting a direct relationship between historical events and the very form that contemporary Arab fiction had taken.

Bold but schematic, the essay's contextual oddities are striking. That so grand an argument would be made in the introduction to a novel, a novel that the piece barely mentions, twists the very notion

of rhetorical situation. Furthermore, the tension between ambition and cursoriness in the piece suggests Said had just started to consider a literary problem worthy of further attention, but the piece appeared only a few years before the publication of *Orientalism* and the emergence of Said as one of the major voices in literary criticism, and he never really returned to this material.

In 1988, in an essay entitled "After Mahfouz," written for the *London Review of Books* at about the time the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz became the first Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature, Said retraced his steps, making a very similar argument about the direction of contemporary Arabic prose, using some of the same examples as in the previous essay, but this time ending with another Lebanese text, Elias Khoury's *al Jebel al Saghir* (*The Little Mountain*). The biggest difference between the two is that the second essay is only half as long. It shows little intellectual extension of the highly suggestive arguments of the earlier essay. Said's deep engagement with Arab politics and society throughout the post-*Orientalism* period stands as a clear marker of his increasing engagement with discourses and agencies of Arabs. But his career-long focus on the culture of the West and its Orientalizing gaze toward the Arabs combines with the paucity of material focusing in direct and complicated ways on Arab literature and ideas to make the possibility of applying Saidean thought to the literature and philosophy of the region challenging, to say the least.[3]

Although the field of comparative literature has always had difficulty defining itself and its boundaries clearly, one could argue that Said has emerged as one central figure whose work helps define the field. Emily Apter's recent collection of essays, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, simultaneously exposes and enacts the problem of agency and the non-European subject in the specific contexts of the contemporary discipline of comparative literature and the current status of Said's influence in literary studies. In a telling passage dealing with the concept of "World literature," Apter lists a series of definitions and naming processes undertaken by prominent American literary critics working at elite US universities (40–42). An impressive list of emergent terminology (global lit, cosmopolitanism, world lit, literary transnationalism, and comparative postcolonial and diaspora studies) suggests an extensive and nuanced engagement on the part of American academia with literature's global nature. At the same time, what emerges from Apter's discussion of these competing concepts of literary globalization is the pronounced tendency of critical discourses to collapse back into the Eurocentric, especially through their investment in a tradition of high theory that centers Europe. Apter's text itself embodies the anxieties created by this tendency.

From its first pages, the specific question of Arabic and America's new construction of it as the linguistic "other" to be set up against "American" underpins Apter's readings. In spite of Apter's identification and critique of this problem, even she is able to devote an entire chapter to Algerian language politics without citing a single text written originally in Arabic. Rather, the bibliography of the chapter comes entirely from French and English language source material, leaving out anything translated into these languages from Arabic.

Said figures prominently in her revisionist narrative of the discipline of comparative literature. His work on Eric Auerbach as an originator of the discipline's discourse and his attention to Auerbach's connection to Istanbul suggest both the philological and humanist roots of the discipline and its potential future as a platform for global—not merely European—studies. Apter reinforces and develops Said's reading of Auerbach through her own reading of Leo Spitzer as a cofounder of the discipline along with Auerbach who replicates the move to Turkey and underscores thereby the potential of humanism that reaches beyond the conflation of universalism with Europe. Yet as I have suggested, Said's own work leaves this possibility underdeveloped. If Said is suggestive of a more global and politically committed direction for the discipline of comparative literature, this potential must directly face the problem of the Eurocentric tendency within Said's own legacy as a literary critic.

Among those working more specifically on modern Arab writing and thought, Said's legacy has evolved in a way that reflects interestingly the theoretical problems I have been tracing. Initially, scholars of the Middle East often concluded that his work was largely irrelevant to the project of criticizing and interpreting Arab literary and cultural voices. The Arab writer seemed to these scholars to occupy the place in Said's system that the Gramscian "organic intellectual" occupies in Bové's quotation cited above, a figure perhaps deserving of "suspicion," but in any case not worthy of attention. This perception continued to be widespread even as Said became the most prominent advocate for serious engagement with Arabic culture in the United States, and, in the form of his advocacy for the Palestinian cause, produced a body of polemical writing that showed a distinct confidence in a more Gramscian, less Poststructural/Foucauldian belief in the possibilities of resistance. This tension between the substantial popularity of Said as a face of Arab culture and the sense among Arab literary studies scholars that he said far too little about the actual culture produced in the region parallels an older and more conceptual tension between colonial discourse analysis as a pure critique of the West's gaze, and the need for a critical approach to the arts and ideas of the region that makes substantive statements about Arab actors.

In a palpable sense, recent scholarship by US-based academics about modern Arabic culture manifests itself as an attempt to work out this conceptual tension, as the Saidean paradigm of colonial discourse analysis is belatedly embraced and adapted, albeit with the anxiety of a field that would prefer not to do away with its main historical focus by embracing a model that presumes what is really important is what Western culture has to say about Arabs.[4]

Comparative literature in the United States is a relatively small field, and if Arabs have any presence in it, this can be attributed primarily to Said's substantial influence. But the method of colonial discourse analysis as articulated by Said, his contemporaries, and his students, has not helped historically in calling attention to Arab letters. Surprisingly, this situation is changing, as I hope to suggest in the following two sections of this essay, which will deal with contemporary scholarship engaged with Arab culture. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the paradox of the classic postcolonial method's afterlife in scholarship produced in the United States and dealing with modern Arabic literature and culture. The paradox stems from the method's historical focus on the western gaze and away from Arabic cultural production, now being creatively, if haltingly, engaged by a new generation of scholars in the United States. Let there be no mistake, then, that the scholarship cited in the sections that follow is groundbreaking work that I admire and find fascinating. If my discussion of it places an unfortunate but necessary critical emphasis on ways that, to a greater or lesser extent, these works participate in the particular problem I have been tracing, I would also note that this critical work makes bold new moves to address this very problem.

## The Arabs through American Eyes

The first thing to acknowledge is that Said's work in *Orientalism* has evolved among American scholars of the Middle East from being the target of outright hostility in the eighties, to being dismissed as just about the West and therefore not useful in the nineties, to being the main influence on scholarship in the field today. Douglas Little's exposition of *American Orientalism*, for example, could fairly easily have been written as a straightforward diplomatic history of relations with the Middle East on the part of successive American governments since Franklin Roosevelt—if not for Said's influence, which compels the author to consider the interplay between cultural conceptualizations of Arabs in the United States and the attitudes of diplomats and presidents in dealing with the region. Thus, Little

claims that "if one wishes to understand America's encounter with the Middle East after 1945, one must appreciate the cultural baggage and racial stereotypes that most Americans carried with them" (3). Throughout the first forty pages of the book, Little moves back and forth between his overview of diplomatic history and a survey of representations of the Arab in popular culture through references to films including *Black Sunday*, *The Siege*, and *True Lies*. In this attention to racialized depictions of Arabs in American popular culture, Little reinforces critiques found in the work of several other scholars working in the United States today, including Jack Shaheen, Tim Jon Semmerling, and Holly Edwards.[5]

If such scholarship does not always show a keen awareness of the distinction between discourses of the stereotype and discourses of representation, Melanie McAlister's widely cited *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* provides an antidote in its careful tracing of the connection between power and representation in the way Cold War America imagined the Middle East. McAlister makes the distinctions between her approach and Said's plain, but her study, like that of Little and others, furthers Said's project in an important way. Where postcolonial scholars have shown some hesitancy to take up Said's repeated call for a postcolonialism that deals with the question of American imperial culture, preferring instead to stay focused on the historical British and French examples, American Studies scholarship has now taken up the question, building on later chapters in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, not to mention studies like *Covering Islam* and *The Question of Palestine*.[6] McAlister's study has become a key text in this body of work. It surveys the packaging of the region in American popular culture via a series of chapters dealing with everything from Hollywood's tradition of Biblical epics to Black Nationalism's relationship with Islam to media coverage of the Iran "hostage crisis" to the political subtext of the merchandising of the King Tut exhibit in the United States. Like the other Americanist scholarship I have cited, McAlister recognizes "that [US] foreign policy has a significant cultural component," but she goes on to aver "that understanding the political import of culture requires that we position cultural texts *in* history, as active producers of meaning, rather than assuming that they merely 'reflect' or 'reproduce' some preexisting social reality" (5). McAlister's introduction devotes several pages to a critical analysis of Said's argument in *Orientalism*, taking into account later critiques of his theories and making a point of adapting his work to the American context. She is particularly influenced by those critics of Said who find his conception of Orientalizing culture overly stable and unified. Indeed, she goes out of her way to show that cultural

representations of the Middle East in America have been fluid and varied, and at different times they have done different cultural work. What McAlister does not seem interested in, however, is the problem of an Arab voice that has been the focus of the earlier sections of this essay. Indeed, her manner of reading the US/Middle East relationship is thoroughly one-sided and makes no effort to avoid reinforcing an idea of the colonized subject as "passive, sensual, feminine, even silent and supine" and incapable of resistance.

On this point, Brian T. Edwards's more recent study, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, From Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, presents a more complicated methodological strategy. Again the emphasis is on *America's* Maghreb, that is, what American discourse has to say about the figure and culture of the North African Arab. But Edwards more than justifies revisiting this formula by taking up a new regional focus, showing the crucial place of the Maghreb countries in the American engagement with the region. Edwards looks at the explosion of interest in the region on the part of Americans just at the moment when the US military was invading the region, putting the final touches on World War II in Europe, and enabling the American emergence as the major superpower of the post-World War II period. He insightfully reads the journalism authored by Americans in the Maghreb at the time alongside films like *Road to Morocco*, *Casablanca*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in a manner that suggests a correlation between America's increasing imperial power and its representations of the peoples that its imperialism would be visited on, but like McAlister, he is careful not to suggest too easy of a causal relationship between imperialism and culture, since, "Simply put, some representations have more impact on political history than others (those by diplomats and policy planners over those by novelists and cineastes). The question of how to put the two spheres together haunts Americanist work, which has tended lately to avoid the ghost by collapsing representations of the foreign and foreign policy under the guise of 'discourse,' defined rather broadly and left uninterrogated" (B. Edwards 10). Furthermore, Edwards makes a point, unlike the other scholars I have mentioned so far, of identifying specific distinctions between the evolution of the American mode of imperialism and its British and French predecessors, as when he notes that, "If European Orientalism revolved around an exhaustive sense of the history, religion, languages, and cultures of the Maghreb, American representations more frequently detach themselves from the sense that such precision is needed to 'understand' and represent the world" (2). What emerges from Edwards's readings is a sense of the imaginative collapsing of the world into an American domestic sphere when considering the American

imperialist gaze as exemplified in the case of Paul Bowles's use in *The Sheltering Sky* of the sexual union between Kit and Belqassim as a way to undercut the American Jim Crow regime (B. Edwards 95), or in his reading of "racial time" in the film *Casablanca*, where the piano player Sam comes to embody the commodification of the local population as subservient and usable (71).

Significantly, sensitivity to the problem of adapting colonial discourse analysis from Said's *Orientalism* and redeploying it as purely hermetic rhetorics *about the other* distinguishes this study from the previous ones I have mentioned. Not only does Edwards compare and contrast American orientalizing discourse to earlier British and French orientalisms, he also disrupts the American narrative through a consideration of cultural representations actually produced by Arabs. So, for example, Edwards surveys the critical assessment of Paul Bowles's work by Moroccan authors (84–87), even if this survey seems to go out of its way to privilege those local thinkers who wished to revive Bowles's Moroccan reputation by presenting him as a transformative figure through his critical stance toward American culture and his sensitivity toward Morocco and Moroccans, that is, through his transcendent status as what Edwards calls a Tangerian writer. In other passages that show an interest in Moroccans as intellectual agents, Edwards uses the memoir of Moroccan anthropologist Fatima Mernissi as a counterpoint to accounts of the American occupation of Morocco in the early 1940s (58–59), analyzes the appropriation of *Casablanca* in Moroccan cinema (74–77), and considers the oral narratives of Mohammed Mrabet as both a collaboration with and an extension of the work of Americans—or in Edwards's formulation "Tangerians"—Paul and Jane Bowles (80). By moving away from a position of overinvestment in the rhetorics of the colonizer, Edwards produces a study that a more specialized scholar of modern Arabic literature may find herself able to engage with, albeit in only a limited way. More important is the way in which these gestures by Edwards disrupt the tendency to etiolate Said's critique by appropriating it as a subversion of the stereotype and by ignoring the complicated questions around agency and voice that both he and his critics attempted to grapple with in the course of his famous study's afterlife.

## The Arabs in Post-Saidean Criticism

Joseph A. Massad's *Desiring Arabs* proves to be even more helpful on the particular point of engagement with the discourses of actually existing Arabs. The author describes his study as "an intellectual history of the representation of the sexual desires of

Arabs in and about the Arab world and how it came to be linked to civilizational worth" (49). This "history of representation" approach owes a clear debt to the colonial discourse analysis of Said that has been my focus, especially in passages in which the author reads the prominent role played by desire in Orientalizing histories by westerners. Massad looks at the colonizer's desire in both historical terms and in the contemporary era:

> If Orientalists and anthropologists depicted the sexual practices of Arabs with a keen interest in the sexual desires of Arab men, many Western writers and tourists . . . would travel to Arab countries to fulfill their desires for Arabs. . . . [G]ay tourism to Morocco and Egypt, as well as the large number of gay men in the diplomatic corps of Western embassies, in the local offices of Western newspapers, and on the staffs of Western NGOs stationed in the Arab world has continued that tradition. (39)

In a complicated and ingenuous argument, Massad claims that the contemporary conception of homosexuality has been imposed by the West on Arab culture, first in the form of colonial desire during the period of colonization, and later in the form of calls by Western human rights activists, what Massad calls "the Gay International", that "gay Arabs" not be subjected to repression, but rather be given the freedom to practice their lifestyle in the open in Arab society (160). But Massad argues that both discursive histories distort the sexual culture of the region. He claims that the Arab world is a context "in which lesbianism and gayness, let alone homosexuality as configured in the normalized West, are not the other against whom the self is constituted" (40). Still Massad demonstrates meticulously that such conceptions of sexual practice have been absorbed into more than one Arab discursive practice, in the cases, for example, of Arab liberals, who have adopted wholesale the human rights discourse built on such notions, and equally of Arab Islamists, whose condemnations of homosexual desire in the Arab context are neologistic, and equally accepting of western discursive representations of desire.

My summary of Massad's argument is necessarily schematic and too general, and it ignores the controversy that the book has provoked among sexuality studies critics.[7] The most important point for the purposes of this essay is that he creates a method that manages to build on Said's analysis of colonial discourse at the same time as it incorporates the intellectual discourse of modern Arabs. Indeed, the latter is the main focus of the study. Massad seeks to demonstrate how a progressivist conception—one that believes civilizations evolve in stages—infused Arab intellectual history, including thinking about

human sexuality. He focuses on intellectuals from the period that Albert Hourani described as "the liberal age,"[8] and on those more recent intellectuals like Jurj Tarabishi that see themselves as the heirs of this tradition. He goes on to argue that more recent Islamist discourse has reacted against this liberal discursive history even as it has left intact many of its presumptions. Throughout his analysis, Massad takes the modern and contemporary intellectual history of the Arab world deeply seriously, examining it with engagement and depth. So distinctive is this aspect of his study in comparison to the previous scholarship I have cited, that it may seem to some querulous to point out that he presents the modern thought of the Arabs as substantially derivative of Europe. Yet this point must be noted in our context, since it bears directly on the argument that all resistance to the dominant discourse of the post-Enlightenment West eventually becomes subsumed within it. In this case, modern Arab thought is already appropriated before it can resist.

For some literary critics, the manner in which Massad incorporates the Arab novel into his history of representation will feel even more problematic, since he has no compunction about calling down authors for their insufficiently complex presentations of human sexuality. An issue of reading practice presents itself in those passages in which he adopts a particularly judgmental tone toward authors of novels for the characters and fictions they create, since most current definitions of the literary text allow for a level of Derridean or Bakhtinian play that throws a great deal more responsibility back on the critic to create meaning out of discourse in the novel. Massad rigidly ascribes ideological positions to Mahfouz (282), Hanan al-Shaykh (340–341), Sa'dallah Wannus (376), Sonallah Ibrahim (386), or 'Ala' Al-Aswani (395) and then condemns those positions. In doing so, he arguably ignores the very textuality of the texts in question. As one critic has said, "The frustrating aspect of *Desiring Arabs* is the potential it forecloses by stopping short of enabling the majority of the texts it analyzes to say anything more" (Jacob 3). But this dimension of Massad's reading practice is not central to his very worthwhile goals for these chapters, namely to incorporate novelistic discourse into the larger discursive history of Arab desire he wishes to trace.

In Elliott Colla's *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, colonial discourse analysis is deployed once again, but with a methodological sophistication highly comparable to that found in Massad's study. Colla goes further than all of his predecessors with the exception of Massad in his interest in using Egyptian intellectual history to bring the voice and agency of the Arab into the conversation. My claim is that such moves may circumvent the tendency to ignore rhetorics that come from outside of Europe and

that thus leave intact the sense that the colonized subject is "passive, silent . . . and supine." The author himself states his goals as "exploring [the] links between museum collecting, Egyptology, and colonial rule" (Colla 10). A certain conception of ancient Egyptian civilization as global patrimony had to be created in England in the early nineteenth century as part of a complex enterprise that correlated to both the colonial project and linked institutional enterprises with pedagogical and consumerist dimensions. The physical manifestations of ancient Egypt had to be transformed from materials to "artifacts." Colla develops the theoretical term "artifaction" (16), a discursive process that significantly affected ancient Egyptian material. Artifaction transformed objects like the famous Memnon Head, brought to England in 1819, from an enormous oddity to a foundational point of departure in the history of "Western Civilization." As Colla demonstrates, it was necessary to elevate the conception of ancient Egyptian materials just enough to be considered "art," but not so much that it would completely throw off its valence of primitivism. It had to be seen as the precursor to Classical Greece, but not its equal. This positionality reinforced both the conception of England as the culmination of this ancient tradition and the justification that England should become its modern caretaker. It also allowed Egyptian objects in the British National Museum to become marketable commodities in the early-nineteenth-century British field of culture.

In complex ways, Colla's analysis exhibits subtle anxieties around his redeploying of the colonial discourse analysis paradigm. An example of such anxiety appears in his treatment of art objects as cultural data. He describes this methodological problem as follows:

> But it is time to move beyond the now routine observation that cultural objects are constructed by human subjects to argue that antiquities were not merely passive objects in history. As nonhuman objects, they were entangled in the social life of human actors and played an active role in the formation of power relations. . . . This is a call not to return to traditional materialism, but rather to notice that humans, Egyptian antiquities, and the representations of artifacts formed part of a sprawling network of agents and *actants*. (19)

Here Colla's argument for the status of artifacts as agents recalls McAlister's position on the role of popular cultural texts in shaping historical realities. Both positions are heavily indebted to Raymond Williams's work on culture,[9] and to the more complicated approach to questions of agency deployed by Said in his later work, which owed the same debt to Williams in a way that his study of Orientalism did not.

But Colla's reworking of the colonial discourse analysis method does not stop here. Rather, in a move highly parallel to Massad's method, he shifts the focus of his study from the gaze of the colonizers to the adaptation and appropriation of discourses of civilization in Egyptian literature, culture, and thought. From the beginning, he makes clear his awareness of the ideological dimension of this shift. Thus, in his introduction, he states,

> The most obvious fault in both the revisionist accounts (including Afro-centric accounts) and the colonial enlightenment narrative is that modern Egyptians simply do not figure in the story. For instance, scholars of European Egyptomania, even those attuned to its postcolonial critique, have been largely unaware of the fact that a comparable cultural phenomenon occurred in Egypt during the 1920s and 1930s as Egyptian intellectuals and artists studied ancient Egypt and considered it the source of modern Egyptian identity. (13)

Colla's own consideration of the Egyptian context of Pharaonism begins by quickly surveying some of the references to ancient Egyptian monuments and civilization within classical Arabic writing. This brief history allows the author to show how local rhetoric surrounding Pharaonic culture was transformed from scattered and heterogeneous before the colonial period to something more like a discourse with cohesion after British and French colonialism came to the region and elevated, for its own purposes, the status of ancient Egypt. At the risk of oversimplifying, the basic outlines of this story are similar to the rise-of-the-babus narrative in India, whereby the mutiny of 1857 inspired the British to create an educated middle class to perform the function of local water carriers, only to have this class eventually lead the nationalist movement that overthrew the colonial regime itself. Egyptian nationalists begin to appropriate the British colonial elevation of ancient Egyptian civilization around the time of the 1919 revolt. The literary and cultural Pharaonism traced by *Conflicted Antiquities* proves a justification initially for nationalists to ask why they should have to suffer dependence on a foreign power, but as the anticolonial movement evolves and the structure of British colonialism in Egypt becomes increasingly complex, so too do the uses of Pharaonism evolve, diversify, and transform. So where the initial phase of literary and cultural Pharaonism often gestured toward something called territoriality—a kind of local nationalism—by the late 1930s and early 1940s when Nobel laureate Mahfouz was writing his historical novels set among the Pharaohs, the meanings of Pharaonic civilization had become multiple, including the allegory of

the corrupt and weak monarch reflecting back on Egypt's Farouk. For Colla, Mahfouz's novels mark a transitional moment in the nationalist struggle, as they exhaust the possibilities of cultural Pharaonism and move to the next phase of expression through the language of pan-Arabism, during which it was necessary for the deployment of ancient Egypt as what Lois Zamora in a different context calls a "usable past" to atrophy.

In the end, both Massad and Colla engage with the intellectual history of the twentieth century in Egypt and the Arab world with a thoroughness and subtlety rarely, if ever, seen in scholarship on the Middle East region published in the United States. But like Massad, Colla finds it difficult to break free from the presumption that modern Arabic thought is essentially derivative. This problem results less from any inadequacies in the thorough scholarship engaged in by the two authors, and more from discursive paradigms that are systemic and institutional. In some scholarship this might be seen as the difficulty of escaping the legacy of Albert Hourani, who described Arab thought during the *Nahda* period as the beneficiary of European influences, but in these very sophisticated and very contemporary—indeed cutting edge—studies, our attention is called to a deeper philosophical problem. If one fixates too extensively on Moore-Gilbert's problem of the agency of the colonized, does this not inevitably lead to an essentializing approach to modernity and culture that does not sufficiently take into account the extent to which all contemporary cultures are products of European colonialism and global capitalism? Gayatri Spivak has both framed the problem and suggested a way out of the prison house of Eurocentrism. Her early groundbreaking essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," still constitutes the most compelling expression of the cautionary approach to presuming that the critic might facilely manage to find a source of resistance to colonial discourse. On a more general plane, Bové asserts that "in disciplinary societies, self-determination is nearly impossible" as we have seen. Spivak's essay makes this assertion, however problematic in its absolute form, relevant to the study of colonial discourses, which cannot simply wither away by means of our invoking native informants or indigenous cultures—because the subaltern cannot speak. In an Arabic context one might expand on this by saying that modernity incorporates the region into so-called Western culture over the course of the nineteenth century and that the major trajectory (if not the only trajectory) of arts, letters, and ideas in the region thereinafter is part and parcel of the crisis of modernity in the post-Enlightenment West, and should be studied as such. Any attempt to do otherwise is doomed to essentialize and end up reinscribing Orientalist conceptions of the static nature of Arab culture.

## Arab Poetics as the Disruption of a Discourse

Although there is a great deal to be said for the hermeneutical caution that inheres in this position, it perhaps insufficiently acknowledges the extent to which modernities are multiple, as are the factors that influence what we call culture. Thinkers read local newspapers, consume local popular culture (not to mention high culture), and absorb other local influences that may be religious, economic, physical, geographical, or architectural. In short, cultures in regions that have been colonized, subjected to Eurocentrism, and economically unequally developed are influenced by both the global and the local. Beyond these varied influences, we should also keep in mind the variety of the intellectual histories produced in the region. Instead, there has always been a tendency among westerners writing about Arab intellectuals to either ignore completely or dramatically marginalize various dissident and minority trends in local thinking.

Arab intellectual movements have been substantially influenced by Western thought since at least the late sixth century, but they have never been completely subsumed underneath what has come to be called the Western tradition, even though the overlap between the two traditions has always been the easiest material for scholars writing in the US to emphasize. A "wilderness" exists in the intellectual tradition of the Arabs that could be compared to the feminist wilderness described by Elaine Showalter in her now-classic article, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." As was the case with Showalter's feminist wilderness, the wild portion of Arab thought—made up of those trends that are markedly distinct from the obsessions of American and European thinkers and that are virtually inaccessible to the latter group—is a relatively small sliver of the whole, but with an importance far beyond its proportion. For example, a unique contemporary movement in the ideas and letters of the Arab region is emerging around a critical neo-Sufism that has no Western equivalent. For a still small but growing group of Arab intellectuals, Sufism moves beyond the committed secularism that dominated politics and intellectual life in the last century, as well as the more reactionary Islamic thought that became assertive around the end of it. The trend can be seen in the literary criticism of Syrian poet-intellectual Adonis, in the historiography of Lebanese academic and diplomat Khaled Ziadeh, and in the poetry of the late Palestinian icon Mahmoud Darwish.[10]

The Palestinian, pan-Arab, and international poetry of Darwish is particularly worth pausing over in conclusion. In general contemporary Arabic poetry presents a challenge for postcolonial studies, which is far more comfortable with novels, especially ones written in English.

Non-European poetics raises issues of difference that are not easily understood through the frame of colonialism. In Darwish's specific case, his legacy as a political poet, his association with the Palestinian cause, the evolution of his aesthetic sensibility, and his close association with Edward Said as a literary figure in opposition to Israeli settler colonialism all combine to make him an example that illustrates and dramatically complicates the issues I have raised here.

For a little over a decade, Darwish has received increasing attention internationally. This very gradual trend has accelerated with a flurry of new and interesting translations of his work that have appeared in recent months since his death in August 2008. In a poetic career that spanned more than forty years, the aesthetics and philosophy of his poetry traveled a great distance in ways that critics have barely begun to try to understand. In the 1960s, Darwish became a celebrity by authoring poems that captured the nationalist indignation surrounding the Palestinian tragedy. While these verses were (and are) beloved by citizens across the Arab world, the simplicity of their aesthetic structure and vision eventually made them a source of scorn from elite Arab poetry critics, who preferred his later more complicated work, and the poet himself eventually refused to collaborate with critics and translators interested in this early phase. The early period also stigmatized Darwish for years after his poetic sensibility completely transformed among supporters of the Israeli rejectionist agenda and denouncers of politically committed poetry within elite Western poetry circles.

By around the time of Israel's siege of Beirut in 1982, Darwish had embarked on a profoundly new poetic agenda. As he turned increasingly to the long form, his later poetry was characterized by an interest in metaphysics and myth, and along these lines, Quranic and pre-Islamic allusions made their way into his poetry with greater recurrence. During this time, he regularly returned to the question of Palestine and the complicated relationship with Israel, but he did so through a lens that is increasingly ethical and broadly critical. This broad criticism includes a more specific critique of the corrupted nationalist discourse of post-Madrid Arafat. The uniqueness of Darwish's poetic language is often commented on by critics writing about his work during the later periods, as he distinguished himself from other free verse Arabic poets through an interest in incorporating some classical forms into the new Arabic poetic sensibility.[11]

Even this very general summary of the issues raised by Darwish's long and complicated career suggests some of the challenges he presents to the Eurocentric trend in postcolonial criticism. Although it is easiest for those reading his work in translation in the West to see him as a political poet of Palestine, this view blocks the critic from

understanding the richness of his output over the last thirty years (in which his most complex and interesting poetry was produced). There are traces in Darwish's poetics, indeed with nearly every important contemporary Arab poet, of cultural issues that predate the arrival of European colonialism in the Arab region. Since postcolonialism too often presumes that non-European history begins with European colonization, the postcolonial lens is ill-equipped to engage with these aspects of Arabic poetry.

Said's engagement with Darwish's poetry is highly comparable to his writing about the Arabic novel. The two were friends, fellow travelers, and beloved competitors. Each appears, albeit somewhat allusively, in the work of the other. Said compares Darwish's early work to that of Yeats in his famous essay that characterizes the latter as a poet of decolonization. Darwish is mentioned near the end of both essays about Arabic fiction that I discussed in section two. His poem الأرض تضيق بنا (The Earth is Closing in on Us) provides Said with the title for his critical memoir *After the Last Sky*. Said's only standalone discussion of the poet is a four page introduction of his life and career written in 1994 for *Grand Street* occasioned by its publication of a new translation of one of his latest poems, كوكباً على آخر المشهد الأندلسي أحد عشر (Eleven Planets on the End of the Andalusian Scene). While the repeated allusions to Darwish in Said's work acknowledge the poet's centrality, the absence of a sustained treatment of Darwish's aesthetic project suggests that the automatic citation of Said in nearly every recent introduction to Darwish's work has to do with a nonpoetic connection between the two Palestinian writers.

Finally, Darwish—as a public figure, a Foucauldian author function, a poet, and a body—demands a postcolonial method that moves far beyond colonial discourse analysis. A method worthy of his works would need to incorporate an even richer sense of postcolonial agency and voice, and offer even more than what recent developments in postcolonial, Arab cultural studies, and post-Saidean criticism have accomplished. In his poem الرجل الأبيض ــــما قبل الأخيرة ــــر خطبة الهندي الأحم أمام (The Speech of the Red Indian—the next to Last One—before the White Man), for example, many of the issues I have hinted at above come into view. The poem is a long dramatic monologue delivered by an indigenous American in seven parts. It is rich in its deploying of myth, metaphysics, and allegory. The narrator traces the history of the white man's ascendancy back to Columbus, but the poem's history has a spiritual and mythical component not always associated with anticolonial historiography. The white man embodies an ideology that is crassly materialist and knows nothing of the red

man's sense of the natural and supernatural. The most prominent images are perhaps cosmic, environmental ones, but the word أشباح ("spirits " or "ghosts") recurs throughout the seven sections as a kind of reminder of the connection between environmentalism, spirituality, and ancestor worship in New World metaphysics. The most immediate rubric for a US-based critic to engage with one of the poem's two excellent translations into English,[12] is its allegorical connection between the indigenous speaker and the Palestinian suffering under their own contemporary colonial burden. More elusive might be the way it uses the spiritualism of the "red man" to critique the turn toward a technocratic language by the Arafat oligarchs that left behind the historical, humanistic grievances of the Palestinian populace. Simultaneously, the poem invokes a more spiritual Arabic metaphysical tradition and in doing so suggests a warning against the institutionalized spirituality-as-religiosity rising up around Palestinian political movements. Importantly, the poem also self-consciously reverses the Orientalist gaze by offering an unapologetically politicized representation of the white man, emanating from the voice of the colonized-indigenous.

In her more recent writing, Spivak has supplemented her early cautionary work with a call for a new postcolonial studies that takes into account something more than colonial discourse. In *The Death of a Discipline*, she writes, "I thought Comparative Literature should be world embracing at the beginning of my career. And I continue to believe that the politics of the production of knowledge in area studies (and also anthropology and the other 'human sciences') can be touched by a new Comparative Literature, whose hallmark remains a care for language and idiom" (4–5). Here it is important to remember that the postcolonial studies whose methods have come to influence the study of modern Arab culture in the ways I have been trying to describe, began as, among other things, a critique of area studies. But Spivak's own language in *The Death of a Discipline* suggests to me that the present moment in which postcolonial theory has become "traveling theory," decontextualized and made consumable, is a moment that calls for more methodological adventurousness, the previous cautions of Foucault, Bové, and the earliest postcolonial criticism notwithstanding. Surely, a logical component of such new methods would include some attention to cultures of local knowledge, dissident Arab intellectuals, and traces of the precolonial in the postcolonial. For now, however, Spivak's world-embracing comparative literature looms like an as yet unattainable last sky of postcolonial studies.

## Notes

1. Although Eurocentrism is historically constructed, I use the metaphor of gravity to clarify that I see its pervasive influence as so systemic that it creeps into the scholarship of writers that consciously set out to undermine it, including some of the authors discussed in this essay. Furthermore, so systemic of a problem cannot easily be swept aside. So my essay concludes not with a deus ex machina resolution, but rather by suggesting explorations of some of what Eurocentric delimitations direct us away from as scholars. For example, the later work of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose complex poetics challenge the Anglophone prejudice of the field of postcolonial studies and whose later work goes so far as to try to reverse the Orientalist gaze, the study of which by Edward Said initiated the very field in question.

2. The phrase "surveying as if from a peculiarly suited vantage point the passive, sensual, feminine, even silent and supine East" is a direct quotation from page 138 of *Orientalism*. Moore-Gilbert has attempted to reverse Said's critique and shine it back on the scholarly parameters of Said's own text.

3. I do not mean to suggest that Said's prolific writing in the area of Palestinian and Arab self-determination has nothing to do with Arab agency. Obviously, it does. My point of departure is that the problem of Eurocentrism is very deeply imbedded and that the reading of Foucault as a thinker who excludes the possibility of agency exemplifies it. If resistance to Eurocentric discourse is possible, it can only happen through a comprehensive strategy in multiple discursive contexts. Particularly underdeveloped in American academic discourse are serious considerations of Arabic literary culture: its fiction, poetry, and especially philosophy.

4. A few examples seem to suggest less focus on the work of Said and his influence among critics of Arabic literature and culture in Europe. See Richard Jacquemond, Elisabeth Kendall, and Ken Seigneurie.

5. See Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America 1870–1930*; Tim Jon Semmerling, *"Evil" Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear*; and Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. This bibliography suggests that the discourse analysis method has been increasingly influential in certain types of studies of American popular culture.

6. The most authoritative discussion of the postcolonial problem with the discourse of American imperialism is found in Donald Pease's "US Imperialism: Global Dominance without Colonies."

7. As an example of these types of critiques, see Wilson C. Jacob, "Review of Joseph Andoni Massad, *Desiring Arabs*."

8. Hourani's foundational text traces the intellectual history of the *Nahda*, or Arabic literary "Renaissance," from its origins in the mid-nineteenth century through the interwar period, with significant em-

phasis on the seminal European role in the beginning of this movement. It engages in an extensive discussion of European presence in the region during the nineteenth century and influential study missions to Europe undertaken by key figures in the movement. In his preface to the second edition, Hourani himself admits that this emphasis came to the neglect of other local influences on Arab thought during the period.

9. See, for example, Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, and *Keywords, Vocabulary of Culture and Society*.

10. See Adonis's *Sufism and Surrealism*, and Ziadeh's في تاريج الجبارتي العلماء و الفرنسيس (Scholars and the French in Jabarti's History).

11. Munir Akash, for example, calls one of Darwish's later poems "unique in its unfolding of poetic genius" (39).

12. There is a technical precision to Sargon Boulos's older translation, which might convey to the Anglophone reader much of the foreignness of Darwish's matrix of allusions. Fady Joudah's more recent version is characteristically mellifluous, reminding us of Darwish's forceful commitment to the music of poetry without ever compromising on those aspects of his poetics that most challenge his readers. See Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens* 127–45, and Darwish, *If I Were Another* 69–77.

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