After the violence of September 11, 2001, Americans became painfully conscious of the presence of Islam as a powerful source of identity for peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere. That strong and transnational religious identification, coupled with the deep anti-Americanism engendered by decades of the arrogant imposition of US world power, signaled the obsolescence of Cold War dichotomies between communism and capitalism, and even liberal dichotomies between first and third worlds, as ways of understanding geopolitical relations. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the war in Afghanistan that followed, make it all the more pressing that, as historians, we rethink our understanding of the US relationship to the Middle East in the period since 1945.

One essential tool in that reassessment is Edward Said’s 1978 study, *Orientalism*, a paradigmatical work for examining the role of culture in colonial and postcolonial relationships between the “West” and the “East.” This is a particularly appropriate moment to consider the enormous value of Said’s work as well as its limits. The concept of Orientalism makes certain kinds of power relationships visible, but it can also constrain our ability to comprehend fully the political and cultural encounters between the United States and the Middle East in the past half-century.

*Orientalism* argues that since the eighteenth century, European, and later, American, scholars and artists helped to produce a very particular understanding of the “Orient” (what is now known as the Middle East was generally understood as part of the Orient in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). In Said’s formulation, “Orientalism” was a certain type of lens, a way of understanding the history and culture of the Middle East that consistently marked it as mysterious, decadent, irrational, and backward. “Orientalist” had once been the term that scholars of ancient Middle Eastern languages and cultures had used to define themselves; in Said’s hands, the label provided an elegant shorthand for his contention that both the cognitive mapping of spaces (East v. West) and the stereotyping of peoples were intimately connected with economics, politics, and state power.

*Orientalism* was primarily a study of French and British intellectual and cultural life, but it would eventually have a deep and abiding influence on the study of US history, largely because of the role it played in arguing for the political significance of culture. In Said’s classic formulation, Orientalism is a large and multifaceted discourse, an “imaginative geography,” that became central to European self-representation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to US world under-
standings in the twentieth century. Orientalism operates on a binary logic: Orient v. Occident, Europeans v. Others, Us v. Them. These binaries parallel and draw heavily upon the logic of gender construction: the Orient is “feminized,” thus posed as mysterious, infinitely sexual and tied to the body, irrational, and inclined toward despotism; by contrast, the European is “masculinized” and represented as civilized, restrained, rational, and capable of democratic self-rule.

Said’s analysis of Orientalism is, at one level, the analysis of a certain set of stereotypes; the fact that Orientalist representations distorted the experiences and the capabilities of real human beings is part of what makes them so morally repugnant. But Said’s argument goes well beyond looking at the limits of such stereotypes to define the productive nature of Orientalist representations for Europeans. Orientalism mattered because it had an extraordinary identity-forging power for both its authors and their audiences. Orientalism provided one primary grid through which Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made sense of their imperial project. The moral logic of imperialism involved what Etienne Balibar described as an “imperialist superiority complex,” through which the project of imperialist expansion was able to transform itself, in the minds of its practitioners, “from a mere enterprise of conquest into an enterprise of universal domination, the founding of a ‘civilization’” (Balibar, 1991, p. 62). For Said, Orientalist scholarship, art, and travel narratives were an integral part of the structures of European imperial power: they did not simply legitimate a political relationship after the fact; instead, by offering Europeans the certainty that they already knew what there was to know of the East, representations became practices: they laid the foundation for imperial rule.

In the quarter-century since its publication, Said’s study has served as the inspiration for a broad variety of academic and political analyses of colonial and postcolonial power. Orientalism was immediately and profoundly influential in both Middle East studies and East Asian studies, where it provided the groundwork for an extensive self-examination within each field. In British and European literary studies, and in European cultural history, Said’s focus on the power of culture inspired detailed analyses of the imperial imagination, as it played a role in the work of writers ranging from E. M. Forster to Gustave Flaubert (Lowe, 1991; Suleri, 1993; Behdad, 1994); in art, including studies of American landscape painters’ images of the Holy Land and photographs of Middle Eastern women (Davis, 1996; Graham-Brown, 1988); and in popular culture, from boys’ adventure stories to popular occultism (Green, 1979; Brantlinger, 1988). And not only the Orient was at issue: the colonial imagination, it was argued, reached as far as colonialism itself, and during the 1980s and 1990s, scholars produced extraordinary work on primitivism, “Africanist” discourse, and the cultural meanings of India and Latin America, among others (Miller, 1985; Torgovnick, 1990; Pratt, 1992; McClintock, 1995).

Building on Said’s intervention, scholars in recent years have also challenged and revised important aspects of his argument. Two major critiques were to prove particularly important for Americanists. The first challenge was that Said had not adequately accounted for the complexities and even open-endedness of Orientalist discourse and that it was never as unified and internally coherent as he had posited. Thus scholars would need to analyze Orientalism in terms of its many occasions and multiple uses. This critique recognized that there were many writers and intellectuals who had an investment in representing the “Orient,” and they often did so
in ways that drew on the tropes that Said had outlined: they were exoticizing, and inclined to represent “Orientals” as irrational and decadent. But like all cultural texts, these representations were also chaotic and open to a variety of potential meanings. As Lisa Lowe has argued, Orientalism consisted of “an uneven matrix of orientalist situations across different cultures and historical sites” (Lowe, 1991, p. 12). Both the Orient and the Occident, as produced by Orientalism, were marked by instability, changing meanings, internal contradictions, and slippages. To suggest, as Said does, that the practices of Orientalism were so totalizing as to frame almost every utterance by Europeans is also, at least implicitly, to elide the possibility of transformations, challenges, or alternatives (Behdad, 1994). It thus becomes very difficult to account for change over time.

This is precisely the criticism that has often been leveled against the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, to whom Said is indebted. Discourses are not simply self-authorizing, and they are never unaffected by the behaviors and practices that contest them. The postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has suggested that colonial discourse is always “ambivalent,” that European imperialists were generally torn by a dual tendency: toward distancing and denigration of the colonized, on the one hand, and toward exoticization and sexual desire, on the other (Bhabha, 1994). When audiences went to a World’s Fair exhibit that promised a faithful reproduction of the buildings and inhabitants of a Cairo street, they were invited to see the colorful poverty and fascinating—but-disgusting habits of the “other” (Mitchell, 1988). What they did see in the multiple and chaotic displays was almost certainly less uniform and less coherent than the official narrative: they might feel superior, but tourists might also and simultaneously feel a longing that veered into a critique of their own culture. Because of this tension—a tension that exists in the fact that all representations carry the possibility of multiple interpretations, and indeed often invite that diversity—imperialist or colonialist representations can never have the totalizing effect they seem to seek.

A second and related critique observes that Orientalism changes depending on who is mobilizing it. Said posits Orientalism as a masculinist enterprise, one that tends to imagine the Orient as feminine (and thus linked to irrationality, sexuality, and lack of capacity for democracy). And in many respects, this argument parallels the work done by political theorists and women’s historians in analyzing the ways in which industrializing nations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to separate out certain spaces designated as “private”—those signified by home and hearth—and to gender those spaces as “female.” Women’s association with the private world was supposed to provide a space of tranquility for men, an escape from their stresses in the industrializing, competitive, market-driven “public.” But this private world also functioned to assure women’s unequal access to citizenship, voting, and public life (Cott, 1977; Fraser, 1989). Similarly, Said and others have suggested that the representations of “Orientals” as feminized (sensual, domestic, nonrational) and the West as masculinized (rational, intellectual, and public) served to legitimize the exclusion of colonized peoples from democratic rights. In this model, citizenship and nationality were necessarily represented as white and male.

Yet many women in Europe and the United States have been active participants in Orientalism, and in ways that complicated its assumptions. Lowe’s reading of European women writers, for example, describes the ways in which, at some periods,
European women’s rights discourse simultaneously drew upon and subverted Orientalist logic. Anne McClintock offers a similar analysis, in a rather different context, of the resourceful, unexpected, and sometimes dangerous ways that European women mobilized (and were framed by) the imperial discourse on Africa, particularly its obsessive conflation of “whiteness” and “cleanliness.”

But perhaps the most important issue for Americanists has simply been that Orientalism did not adequately account for the particular modes of US power, especially post-World War II. Only the final section of Orientalism deals with US engagements with the Middle East, and it is the least nuanced and interesting of the book. Focused primarily on policymakers’ statements or the work of area studies scholars, this criticism is essentially an ideological critique of US foreign policy, but it fails to account for the complexities of that policy. After World War II, the official rhetoric of US policymakers, along with journalistic accounts of international relations and loosely connected popular culture images, worked to establish the United States as different from the old colonial powers. They did so in part by fracturing the East–West binary on which traditional Orientalism had depended, separating the United States from the rest of the “West”; the United States would take up its superpower status in explicit opposition to older models of colonialism. In addition, certain subcultural groups, such as black Muslims or Christian fundamentalists, began to make their own claims on the Middle East, and their writings often contested some of the presumptions of official US policies. This diversity of voices does not mean that American culture or US policy developed a fully accurate and nuanced view of the region, but rather that the style of representation changed noticeably, from a general East–West binary to a model of “benevolent” American hegemony supplanting colonial rule. But if US appropriations and representations of the Middle East did not follow a simple Orientalist paradigm, that was because the project of separating the United States from European imperialism, or distinguishing the Middle East from the rest of the Orient, functioned strategically: in the post-Orientalist logic of the last fifty years, one alternative to European power/knowledge over the Orient was American power in the modern Middle East.

If Said’s discussion of the United States fails to live up to the rich analysis of intersecting grids of culture, intellectual life, and state policy that distinguishes the first part of the book, US scholarship in recent years has taken up the challenge of more clearly delineating the specific character of Americans’ understandings of their postwar global role. It was Said’s model for thinking about culture and power, and the fruitful challenges and additions to that model, that established Orientalism’s influence on the work of American historians. Since the 1980s, US historians have built on Said’s work to explore the superpower role of the United States not only in terms of diplomatic or Cold War history, but also in relationship to American culture.

The scholarly conversation that Orientalism launched was undoubtedly part of the impetus behind the 1993 groundbreaking anthology edited by literary scholars Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, The Cultures of United States Imperialism. In her introduction, Kaplan defined three major absences in the scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s: “the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism” (Kaplan, 1993, p. 11). The collection’s
aim was to place the history of US global power at the heart of the study of US cultures, and to give culture a central place in an analysis of the production and reproduction of US power. Looking at US engagements with the Philippines, Latin America, and elsewhere, scholars paid particular attention to the remarkable impact of mass culture in the United States, with essays on Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West” show, science fiction writing, a museum exhibit, and popular newspaper accounts of Pancho Villa, among others (Slotkin, Brown, Haraway, Wilson, all 1993). Like many of the heirs to Orientalism, these studies attended to the contexts in which cultural texts were received: representations were assumed to be made meaningful only in specific contexts of reception.

But scholarship on the United States, in this collection and in the years to follow, would need to diverge from even the most nuanced study of European colonial power, because the specific contexts of US history demanded new analytical frameworks. First, since the United States had most often eschewed formal colonies, turning instead to economic and political influence, its “imperial” project itself was different. In fact, US power was often defined, both by policymakers and by popular audiences, in opposition to old-style European power: what underlay US engagement with the world was not so much imperialism as what one scholar adroitly called “anti-imperial Americanism” (Michaels, 1993). The political will to hegemony was still very much present, but the style and meaning of that hegemony were new, especially after World War II, when the United States consciously inherited and revised the role of world superpower.

Second, racial difference within the United States would necessarily be a factor in the ways in which diverse cultural texts imagined the rest of the world. In Orientalism, Said argued that Europe represented itself to itself as homogeneous, a single “us” against a “them” somewhere outside the borders. But Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, as well as a mind-boggling variety of white ethnics, have populated the United States, and concerns about “internal” racial difference have never been far from discussions of the US role in the world. In the decades after World War II, the successes of the civil rights movement and later other liberation movements increasingly meant that even the most bland popular culture would need to account for American racial and cultural diversity. Popular movies might insist that “we” were facing a world of evil Russians and Arab terrorists, but the “we” of America would have to be understood as heterogeneous: thus the multicultural “ethnic” platoons that arose in World War II movies and made their way, with an increasingly diverse cast, in the post-Gulf War era.

Race was also an issue for people who identified part of their heritage with a region of the world where the United States was investing, be it Asia or Latin America, Africa or the Middle East. For example, African American poets and activists may have sometimes been as exoticizing as white authors when they wrote about Africa or the Middle East, but they also frequently (and often in the same work) suggested alternatives to the terms of American hegemony. When Richard Wright wrote The Color Curtain, his remarkable report on the 1955 Asian–African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, he engaged in no small bit of exoticizing of the “mystical” and “irrational” peoples of the third world who were forming the nonaligned movement (Wright, 1994, pp. 218–19). But he also knew that in writing favorably about their struggle for liberation, he was arguing for the rights and liberties of African
Americans: his racial consciousness did not prohibit an “Orientalizing” gaze, but it did transform its meaning.

As scholars of US history have taken up the call to analyze culture and American power together, they have often moved well beyond the terrain defined by Orientalism. This is a very useful counter to the overuse of the idea of Orientalism in the 1980s and 1990s: too often, activists and writers have used the term Orientalism to characterize any representation of any part of the “East,” from Madame Butterfly to television news accounts of the Viet Cong to movies about Middle Eastern terrorism. Yet not all stereotypes, even those of Asians or Arabs, are Orientalist; they might be racist, or even exoticizing, without engaging in the particular logic of Orientalism: binary, feminizing, and self-authorizing. (For example, in recent decades Arabs in film have often been represented as hypermasculine, not feminine and sensual.) When Orientalism becomes the term used to describe every Western image of every part of the eastern half of the world, the definition has become too flexible for its own good.

Yet the debt to Said’s pioneering analysis remains, first and foremost in the fact that it has moved so decisively beyond simple stereotype studies to instead analyze the cultural work done by representations. We do not only point out that certain images were negative, or inaccurate, or denigrating; we go on to ask why they appeared when they did, and what kind of changes in perception or self-understanding they helped to bring about. And despite the theoretical and historical limitations to the Orientalism framework, it remains a useful and evocative characterization of a certain European and American “way of seeing” (Berger, 1977).

In the globalizing era’s confusion of transnational cultures and global flows of people, we have also seen the rise of significant new imaginative geographies, such as Benjamin Barber’s “Jihad v. McWorld,” or Samuel Huntington’s seductively simple “clash of civilizations.” People are indeed different from each other, but our desires, needs, and hopes are not organized along clear lines of geography or even by commitments to “modernity” or anti-modernity. Instead, human beings all over the world exist in modernity together, affected in diverse ways by technology, globalization, unequal distribution of resources, and the increased flow of information. Our relations with each other are as layered as the interactions of global capital and as slippery as the worldwide passages of migration. In the face of this enormously complex reality, we ignore at our peril the force of Said’s fundamental argument: the tendency to divide the world into two “unequal halves,” in which one part of the world is understood to be irrational, anti-democratic, and profoundly unlike “us,” is the failed logic of imperial thinking.

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