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From “Drops – of India” to “Floors / Descending”: Orient and Orientalisms in US-American Poetry and Poetics. Introduction

“[A]lmost every British or French poet,” Emily A. Haddad writes in her study *Orientalist Poetics: The Islamic Middle East in Nineteenth-Century English and French Poetry* (2002), “could be included in an anthology of nineteenth-century orientalist poetry.” Poets made reputations, she claims, and even a living from writing “poems on oriental topics” (2). If not for “almost every” nineteenth-century US-American poet, this may still hold true for many authors of lyric texts. In fact, in the course of their history American poetry and poetics have repeatedly called upon and taken refuge in the ‘Oriental’ and thus contributed to what evolved as our dominant notions of ‘the Orient,’ of an imaginary space which encompasses Asian cultures east of the Mediterranean as well as African cultures, especially those of Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt.

While our current debates on Orient and Orientalisms tend to capitalize on Western notions of cultural dominance over ‘the East,’ we should not forget, though, that ‘Oriental’ cultures became most prominent reference points in poetry at moments when the genre underwent fundamental transformations of its forms and cultural functions. What, according to Haddad, united European poets also aligns American poets amongst themselves and allies them with their European contemporaries: a sense that ‘the Orient’ constituted an arena of poetic experimentation and mapped out an “alternative aesthetic space” (2). As for British and French poetry in the nineteenth century, Orientalisms indeed became central to the evolution of US-American poetry and poetics from Romanticism across modernism to post-modernism, a process during which the cultural topography of the Orient in turn transformed.

If, however, topographies as well as visions of the Orient and Orientalisms have had a significant impact on the history of US-American poetry, this also means that, in turn, nationally specific processes of colonization, modernization, and decolonization must have been inscribed in that history. These intricate interrelations between poetry and – cultural as well as colonial – politics show even in the work of Emily Dickinson who saw “New Englandly” (Fr 256), as she famously claimed, who never laid eyes on either desert or exotic country, yet also evolved a poetics which, as Gudrun Grabher argued, shares moments of Zen Buddhism and is proximate to the Japanese haiku (172-234). For Dickinson, poetry itself was an outlandish potion. In her poem “It would never be Common – more – I said – / Difference – had begun –” (1862, Fr 388), for instance, the speaker references the pleasures of a particular poetic practice as “My – drop – of India”:

I put my pleasure all abroad –
 I dealt a word of Gold
 To every Creature – that I met –
 And Dowered – all the World –

When – suddenly – my Riches shrank –
 A Goblin – drank my Dew –
 My Palaces – dropped tenantless –
 Myself – was beggared – too –

I clutched at sounds –
 I groped at shapes –
 I touched the tops of Films –
 I felt the Wilderness roll back
 Along my Golden lines –

The Sackcloth – hangs upon the nail –
 The Frock I used to wear –
 But where my moment of Brocade –
 My – drop – of India?¹

There is no doubt that the ‘Orientalist’ trope on which this poem rests (“drop – of India”) strongly resonates with dear memories of “indulgence” (“Difference”) and “riches” (“Palaces,” “Gold,” “Golden lines,” “Brocade”). At the same time, these pleasures, eroticized by tropes of fluidity (“Dew,” “films,” “drop”) and by intertextual reference to Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1859), are highly precarious. After all, this – first and foremost poetological – text advertises a poetics that many other of Dickinson’s poems explicitly critique and call into question on grounds of epistemology and (gender) politics.²

“[D]eal[ing] a word of Gold / To every creature – that I met –,” Dickinson’s speaker recalls engaging in an Adamic practice of naming which puts into poetic practice the Transcendentalist belief that poetry can bridge the gap between self and other or nature. Sharing many tenets of Transcendentalist thinking, including the primacy of perception, Dickinson resisted this idealist position for

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² See, for instance, Dickinson’s poems “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” (Fr 764), “Nature – is what we see –” (Fr 721), and “Nature and God – I neither knew” (Fr 803), among many others.

various reasons. Not only does “Perception of an object cost / Precise the object’s loss –,” as the poet writes (Fr 1103). Otherness – be it the alterity, or “Wilderness,” of nature or that of another person or territory – cannot be domesticated, appropriated, and thus be negated. Otherness, for Dickinson, remains a mystery and “nature is a stranger yet”:

The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost. (Fr 1433)

One may thus perhaps call Dickinson’s poetry anti-imperialist and anti-colonial, of course, in its own indeterminate, polysemantic manner.

For us as contemporary readers, Dickinson’s reference to the “essence” of India and its “riches” highlights the very nature of the “pleasure” that India historically represented for the West: after all, ties between Occident and Orient have been forged by interests of trade first and foremost, even if the conditions of that trade, as Jürgen G. Nagel underlines in his recent study, were infused by a high dose of adventure. Ever since India could be reached not only by the strenuous and risky journey along the Silk Route, but by months of seaway travel – that is since around 1500 – the Far East moved closer to Europe and globalization accelerated. This, of course, is also the moment Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ an ‘India’ which Dickinson along with her fellow Americans called ‘home.’ The colonization of the Americas for which Columbus was so instrumental became a precondition for trade relations with the East. The silver the Spanish colonists “squeezed from America,” as Ulrich Baron puts it, was reinvested in mapping the routes of commerce with India. Calling on Columbus in her poems,³ Dickinson left no doubt that her mind travelled to other shores. She did not mind, though, squeezing a “drop – of India” into her lines for some extra spice and suggesting, for us as contemporary readers, their complicated politics. Nonetheless, both the gothic elements that infuse Dickinson’s conception of foreignness and the sense of disappointment and loss the speaker voices in the final lines of the poem reaffirm the ambivalent – and in a double sense foundational – cultural fascination with the Oriental that has been the driving force for much of American – Romantic as well as modernist – poetry.

This collection of essays seeks to explore the poetics and politics of American poetry’s multiple investments in Oriental cultures and their particular aesthetics. These expeditions take us from the distinct Romanticisms of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Bayard Taylor across Emma Lazarus’s work to the modernist poetics of Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and Wallace Stevens, the post-modernist, confessional, and political poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Gary Snyder, and Adrienne Rich, and finally to the

³ As she does in “Sic transit gloria mundi” (Fr 2) and “Trust in the unexpected” (Fr 561).

contemporary texts by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, John Yau, and Kimiko Hahn. By locating versions of the Orient and of Orientalism in these moments of US-American poetry, tracing new crossroads of cultures, and rediscovering places as foreign as Banyan ashrams – or even Bostonian living rooms – this excursion opens up novel perspectives on central moments of American literary and cultural history. At the same time it brings into the open new vistas on what, thirty years ago, Edward Said conceived of as Orientalism.

Orientalism Reconsidered: The Case of Poetry

Few critics deny the importance of Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (1978), even though its theoretical assumptions and controversial, sometimes polemical, assertions continue to be scrutinized and rejected by various scholarly camps and their different critical – and political – perspectives. This very fact has led Robert J. C. Young to claim that *Orientalism* “effectively founded postcolonial studies as an academic discipline” (383)⁴ which “has actually defined itself [...] through the range of objections, reworkings, and counter-arguments that have been marshalled in such great variety against Said's work” (384). As Timothy Brennan has pointed out, such an argument may fail to acknowledge that Said actually positioned himself *against* poststructuralist theory, thus implicitly objecting to fundamental tenets of postcolonial critique. At the same time, Said's loose appropriation of, or departure from, Foucault has nevertheless proved highly productive for critical inquiries into colonialism and imperialism.

Said's notion of Orientalist thought as a discursive regime of knowledge in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe is established in broad strokes at the very beginning of *Orientalism*. Narrowly denoting academic disciplines that deal with Oriental cultures and politics, Said understands Orientalism more broadly as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2), prevalent in all kinds of (political as well as fictional) writings. Crucially, Said establishes a strong connection, a “disciplined – perhaps even regulated – traffic” (3) between the two, in sentences that never fail to be cited in any exploration of Said's work:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short,

⁴ Not everyone, of course, would agree with this claim which tends to downplay, for instance, the significance of Frantz Fanon for the emergence of postcolonial studies.

Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. [...] My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. (3)

For the collection of essays that we present here, Said's parenthetical insistence that Orientalism still wields formidable discursive power is crucial. The same goes for his initial cautionary note that Americans, associating the term predominantly with the Far East, and with China and Japan in particular, "will not feel quite the same about the Orient" as Europeans who have tended to focus on the Middle East (1). However, Said also points out that the U.S. rise to super-power status after World War II and its expanded role in the Middle East has certainly had an effect on the formerly "considerably less dense" understanding of the Orient (2).

This collection's diverse explorations of how the Orient figures in US-American poetry show how important it is to note these poets' ambiguous positioning in the discursive field of Orientalism. While for any poet the Orient remains a "textual universe" (Said, *Orientalism* 52) which imposes "constraints upon and limitations of thought" (42), the following essays call into question the inescapable impact of Orientalism on US-American poets that Said makes out: "Even the most imaginative writers of an age [...]," he claims, "were constrained in what they could either experience of or say about the Orient" (43). Nor have US-American poets inevitably adhered to what Said has termed the "essence of Orientalism," the "ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (*Orientalism* 42), as Kathleen Flanagan has shown for the Modernist circle around Ezra Pound. With respect to his influence on twentieth-century American poets, Pound may in fact serve as supporting evidence for Said's belief "in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism" (23).

Said's account of Orientalism has thus somewhat tenuously been caught between his sense of a hegemonic discourse and his intention to challenge this discourse from *within*. Relying on methods of literary criticism that have powerfully upheld Western dominance over the East, Said made his critics wonder how effective his approach could be. In 1981 Paul A. Bové, for instance, could still score points for arguing that *Orientalism* cannot rank as a "seriously oppositional text" because its methodology makes use of the very devices that are

“ideological instruments of the hegemonic culture” (385). Bové challenges Said’s trust in the impact of an individual to gradually transform a discursive field and considers the figure of the conscientious oppositional critic an illusion and a “bizarre conceit” (386-87). However, the very significance of Said’s seminal study *Orientalism* for concurrent decentering, secular, and oppositional approaches across many academic fields mitigates such a charge. Moreover, Said himself felt to be in tune and sought alliances “on common grounds of assembly,” as he writes in his 1985 essay “Orientalism Reconsidered,” with methodologically diverse critical agendas, agendas that are at once “political and practical in as much as they intend – without necessarily succeeding – the end of dominating, coercive systems of knowledge” (214).

We may note that Said speaks in the plural about oppressive discursive formations and “systems of domination” (215) and accounts for shifts and changes over space and time. In his afterword to the 1995 edition of *Orientalism*, he imparts that he has always most strongly objected to the many allegations of his book’s supposed “anti-Westernism”:

I deplore so simple a characterization of a work that is – here I am not going to be falsely modest – quite nuanced and discriminating in what it says about different people, different periods, and different styles of Orientalism. Each of my analyses varies the picture, increases the difference and discriminations, separates authors and periods from each other, even though all pertain to Orientalism. (337)

Allowing for historically and nationally different “styles” of Orientalist discourse, Said nonetheless retains the usage of “Orientalism” in the singular, as if to suggest that French, British, and US-American cultures were maintaining the same kind of hegemony over the same version of the Orient. This is why we opt for the plural “Orientalisms” in the title of this book. By privileging the plural, we are in agreement with Malini Johar Schueller who legitimizes the title of her important study on *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890* (1998) with the “deformative power of both particular writers and specific contexts” and insists on “the specificity of the Oriental configuration” (x).

At the same time, though, it is important that we see both Said’s work and the perspectives of his critics in the context of their particular historical moment. Meanwhile, cultural criticism has come to acknowledge, for instance, that, as Heike Schaefer puts it, all (literary) representations of the Orient “simultaneously move outward and inward.” Referencing Holly Edwards’s study of the Orient in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visual arts, Schaefer underlines that literary depictions of the Orient both serve imperial desires and signal American writers’ eagerness to scrutinize their own culture and its trajectories (xi). And such claims may safely rely on the many illuminating insights, evolving from literary and cultural studies during the last three decades, into the

interdependence of constructions of identity and projections of alterity; in fact, they may even rely on Said. "A group of people living on a few acres of land," he wrote,

will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call "the land of the barbarians." [...] It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours.' To a certain extent modern and primitive societies seem thus to derive a sense of their identities negatively. (54)

And yet Said, of course, paid only incidental attention to poetry in *Orientalism*, and much less so to matters of poetics. He cites poems first and foremost to illustrate how Orientalist tropes encroached on and invigorated the poetry of writers as diverse as Dante (68-71), Victor Hugo (82-83; 167), Rudyard Kipling (226-28), and William Butler Yeats (230). While maintaining that the history of Orientalism promises "a marvelous instance of the interrelations between society, history, and textuality" (24), such assertion remains vague when it comes to poetry. In fact, Said deems novels, poetry, and Orientalist scholarship to have a comparable impact: "Similarly William Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo," he writes, "restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs. At most, the 'real' Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it" (22).

Said is interested in the "images" and "motifs" of literary texts, be they travel writings, novels, or poems. At no point, though, does he address issues of aesthetics and form or exemplify why he thinks "rhythm" contributes to the ways in which these works make the Orient "visible." For Said, literature both finds inspiration in a "boundless" Orient and serves to contain the 'threat' that this illimitable space poses to the Western imagination. This is why in Byron's *Giaour* (1813), in Goethe's *Westöstlicher Divan* (1819), in Hugo's *Orientales* (1850), the Orient is "a form of release, a place of original opportunity" to which poets have continued to return (167). And while Said's diagnosis is illuminating we get no sense of how these poetic texts actually orchestrate an interplay of boundlessness, constraint, and release.

Yet it may be precisely because Said concocted daring insights while neglecting matters of aesthetics that he managed to inspire many studies on verse and Orientalism. Most of this research has focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British poetry, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1797/1816), Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir* (1798), Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), Lord Byron's *The Giaour* (1813) and *Corsair* (1814), and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Alastor* (1816) and *Revolt of Islam* (1818). Subsuming these texts under the generic category "orientalist quest-romance," Francis Lo agrees with Said when he argues that "because of their imaginary Eastern setting, the ultimate goals of these quest-ro-

mances have to do with the political situation in Britain itself just as much as its newly acquired territories in Asia” (144). Yet while these quest-romances negotiated political anxieties in an era of conflicts and revolutions, they also served aesthetic functions that are of little concern for Said, as various scholars argue. C. C. Barfoot, for instance, draws attention to how mysterious Oriental landscapes and “phantasmagoric romances,” projected by Romantic writers, “offered deliverance and distraction [...] from the increasing realism of contemporary fiction” (86). It was Haddad, first and foremost, though, who has elucidated how the Orient served European poets as an “alternative aesthetic space” in which to renegotiate the forms and functions of poetry and poetics in the nineteenth century. In her view, “Orientalist poetics does not yield a single, unified approach; rather, it provides a medium for the cultivation and refinement of a broad range of poetic positions.” Orientalism was central for these poets, she claims, because it served “as a diffuse avant-garde, a matrix for the re-examination of both preexisting conventions and contemporary expectations in poetry and poetics” (2). And this goes as much for Shelley and Southey as for American modernist poets like Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell – two poets ‘featured’ in this collection – for who the Chinese language served as “a model for a purified poetic practice in English” (Kern ix).

What Gesa Mackenthun considers Said’s “most striking blind spot,” namely “his almost complete disregard of American literature” (15), has left a wide open field for scholars to engage US-American authors’ versions of and challenges to colonial discourses – colonial discourses complicated by North America’s own history as settler colony. The reason why there is still some ground to be trodden may, at least in part, be due to the fact that postcolonial studies are central to current British and Canadian studies, while remaining seemingly peripheral to the field of American studies. A notable exception to this is Schueller’s study *U.S. Orientalisms* which is situated at the crossroads of postcolonial and gender studies. In fact, Schueller’s great contribution is to strip eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature from its (global) insularity in literary criticism and to read texts as diverse as missionary writings, Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797), or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Fate” (1860) in the context of an “anxiety-ridden” “imperial self-definition” of ‘American’ nationhood based on “raced and gendered distinctions” (4). On the way, Schueller’s wide-ranging study also shows how the poetry of Walt Whitman, Bayard Taylor, and Herman Melville both contributed to and challenged this imperial project. Accordingly, in a recent review article entitled “Orientalizing American Studies,” Schueller underlines the “continuing importance of Orientalism as a paradigm not only for understanding U.S. encounters with the Middle East but also for conceptions of national and local identities” (488).

Yet so far the most studies on US-American poets’ Orientalisms have dealt with modernists and, most particularly, with Pound’s investments and borrow-

ings from Far Eastern poetic traditions. Kathleen Flanagan's essay "The Orient as Pretext for Aesthetic and Cultural Revolution in Modern American Poetry" (1994), Zhaoming Qian's study *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (1995) and Robert Kern's book *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (1996) have sparked an ongoing debate on the nature and motivations of Pound's cultural borrowings. T. S. Eliot's claim – prominently positioned in his introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928) – that Pound was the "inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" has been cited repeatedly, partly because it reverberates so well with the provocative claim of *Orientalism*: The Orient, Said famously announced in the book's very first paragraph, "was almost a European invention" (1).

Yet, as Kern shows, Eliot actually pondered the limits of any translation from the Chinese, praises as well as qualifies Pound's exactitude (3), and is very well aware that Pound's *Cathay* is more likely an event in Anglo-American literature than a reliable re-presentation of Chinese poetry. Kern thus follows Hugh Kenner's verdict that Pound's genuine achievement is his "effort to rethink the nature of an English poem" (*Pound Era* 199). For Flanagan, then, the Orient served for the modernists as "pretext" and as "a model for aesthetic dissent" (127) against the literary modes of Victorian poetry, on the one hand, and the trust in realism and science, on the other. The depiction of a pastoral Orient as an idealized realm of the imagination was "as much an extension of nineteenth-century English Romanticism as it was a revolution" (117). Verse forms influenced by Japanese *haikus* and *tankas* or Chinese Tang and Sung dynasty verse became "a revolutionary tool, an exotic means of dissenting from prevailing poetic techniques in English" (119). The fact that most modernist poets idealized rather than denigrated the Orient in their borrowings from ancient Far Eastern texts for Flanagan still constitutes a version of Orientalism, but "perhaps [... one] of a more 'progressive' type" (126), so her moderate qualification.

From this many critics conclude that the modernists were less interested in Chinese culture than in the search for an Adamic language and "preoccupations, projections, and appropriations internal to the West" (Yu 46). Qian's project, by contrast, has been to illuminate the actual impact of Chinese poetry without which, he claims, one could not duly appreciate the emergence of high Modernism: "It would be gross insensibility not to perceive the Oriental contribution to its growth" (5). Attesting Pound a genuine, if intuitive, understanding of Chinese poetry, Qian rejects what he feels Said's critical practice implies: the sense of an all but 'passive' Orient subjected to Occidental projections and approximations. Yet if Qian is right, and we think he is, arguing that the Far East had an impact of far greater significance on American modernists than the Middle East (1), does this still hold true for postmodernist and contemporary US-American poetry? In what ways do recent American poetry and poetics reflect back on

both modernist Orientalisms and on Said's *Orientalism*? Or in other words: what forms does Orientalism take today?

Reading American poets – from Emily Dickinson to Frank Bidart, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Kimiko Hahn – it becomes evident that not only has the Orient meant many different things at different historical moments. More often than not tropes of the Orient have functioned as a screen onto which to project matters that are by no means foreign but very close to home. As we follow American poets on their journeys East, we are bound to arrive in – albeit culturally distinct – territories of the West. For after all, the status of the Orient in US-American poetry and poetics may in part be due to the othering of America in nineteenth-century European discourses (Gersdorf 98-99). In part, though, it may also result from the fact that America, as Catrin Gersdorf reminds us, is indeed “a special case” in the sense that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have argued in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) (19). Distinguishing Occident and Orient in spatial and topographical terms, Deleuze and Guattari align Africa and America as “great Empires of the Orient” because both “run up against wide open smooth spaces” (385). In America “the return to the Old World occur[s] in the East” (19, qtd. in Gersdorf 35) while the “open deserts” – “the signature landscape of the Orient” – “and steppes of the West,” as Gersdorf points out, “conjure landscapes of the Oriental East” (35, 36, 35). Or as Deleuze and Guattari put it: “America reversed the directions: it put its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East” (19). This “playful inflection of America as inverted Orient” may indeed, as Gersdorf writes, “appear intellectually flamboyant” (35).⁵ And yet, as Hannes Bergthaller's contribution to this collection highlights, poetic journeys to the East do at times figure as a westward movement.

Topographies of Orientalisms: From Ralph Waldo Emerson to Kimiko Hahn

Our collection opens with Herwig Friedl's programmatic essay that takes Said to task for turning a blind eye on the impact of writers from the Orient on the West. Yet while Qian argues that the Far East was more important for the emergence of modernism, Friedl focuses on Emerson's admiration of the thirteenth-century Persian poet Sa'di. Friedl's contribution “Emerson, Persian Poetry, and Sheikh Mosleho'd-Din Sa'di-ye Shirazi: The Hermeneutics of Hospitality” seeks to redirect literary criticism towards an appreciation of “the productive, dialogic encounter between prominent individual representatives of world cultures” (34). According to Friedl, Said and other postcolonial scholars have skewed academic

⁵ For more detailed analyses of the desert as a figuration of the Orient in nineteenth-century constructions of America, see ch. 2 of Gersdorf's study.

inquiry towards a second-order “hermeneutics of resentment,” which subjects even generous and sensitive Western engagements with Oriental authors “to a comprehensive and totalizing, often even totalitarian, politically motivated reductionist re-interpretation” (33). Exemplifying a “hermeneutics of hospitality” instead, Friedl shows how in Emerson’s journals, essays, and poems, a ‘friendship’ between two outstanding thinkers emerges, a friendship that “creates the possibility of knowing oneself in the other in unprecedented ways” (41).

The Orient provided such opportunities of self-discovery and recovery set in an “egalitarian bonhomie of fellowship” (63) for nineteenth-century travel writer and poet Bayard Taylor, as Liam Corley argues in “‘The Veil I Would Not Tear Away’: Rapprochement and Retreat in Bayard Taylor’s *Poems of the Orient*.” For Taylor, ailing from what he perceived as the alienated drudgery of urban and industrial life in the United States, the sensual and delightful “freedom of the Oriental life” became a “physical necessity” (62) and a way to explore alternative sexualities. Both his poetry and his public appearances in the United States, dressed in Arab garb, oscillated between Occidental and Oriental identities and challenged Western racial superiority and genteel body politics. At the same time, Taylor’s performative advocacy of the Arab world served to bolster his own status as poet and religious visionary and concealed an affirmation of the American traveler’s economic and political power. Still, according to Corley, Taylor plays a “seminal role as a cultural interlocutor” and a valuable poetic exploration of a potentially intercultural self.

An Oriental journey much different in kind is at the center of Christa Buschendorf’s essay “Melville’s *Clarel* – Irreconcilable Contradictions, or: A Pilgrimage to Piranesi’s *Carceri*.” Melville’s epic poem stands out among the contemporaneously burgeoning ‘Holy Land literature’ because it regards the conflict between religion and science to be unsolvable. This is why a series of juxtaposed and unsynthesized oppositions structure *Clarel* and culminate in the metaphor of Piranesi’s labyrinthian *Carceri*, evoking “an unquenchable desire for infinity and the reality of earthly confinement” (99) as the predicament of the human condition. *Clarel*’s “quest for spirituality in an age of growing materialism” (82), Buschendorf argues, projects the Oriental landscape not so much as an exotic space than as a meeting-place for colliding cultures and creeds. At the same time, the arid wasteland and barren maze of Palestine becomes a “sublime wilderness” (85) that addresses the ethical and epistemological dimensions of the biblical “mystery of iniquity” (93).

Melville once disparagingly referred to millennialist pilgrimages to the Holy Land as “this preposterous Jew mania” (qtd. in Buschendorf 81). In the proto-Zionist writings of Emma Lazarus, by contrast, the justification for a return to Palestine is accompanied by an inverse concern for the status of Jews in Occidental culture, a position that was potentially threatened by an accelerating influx of Eastern European Jews into the United States. In “‘The Orient Sun

Gleams from the Eye': Emma Lazarus's Lyrics and the Tropes of Orientalism" Ranen Omer-Sherman thus draws our attention to "Jewish Orientalism" and challenges us "to think within and beyond Said's East/West divide, reading the relations between Semitic and Orientalist discourses as another grid through which modern European identity emerges" (104). Simultaneously claiming for the Jews an ancient heritage of a romanticized 'East' and envisioning a masculinized agrarian folklife set in the United States, Lazarus vacillated between America as the "new Zion" and a call for a redemptive rebirth of Jewish Palestine. Omer-Sherman shows that the poet's design of the future Jewish culture/nation was necessarily torn between a cosmopolitan, modernist conception of Judaism and time-bound traditions; between lofty visions of a model Jew of a reclaimed 'East' and the harsh reality of the *Ostjuden* masses' ghetto life.

While the essay on Lazarus works a transition between Romanticism and modernism, it is followed by two contributions which reconsider modernism's central figure, Ezra Pound. Zhaoming Qian challenges the view that Pound's writings on Confucian thought in the mid-to-late 1910s are apolitical and insignificant. Instead Qian proposes that Pound's engagement with the anti-Confucian claims of the Chinese reformer and family acquaintance F. T. Song led him to embrace tenets of Confucianism still important for his more comprehensive explorations in later years. "Against Anti-Confucianism: Ezra Pound's Encounter/Collision with a Chinese Modernist" investigates how for both men the other culture's set of beliefs advance as remedies for concerns in their own societies, be they poverty, conformism, human dignity, democracy, or social responsibility. Qian reiterates his contention from *Orientalism and Modernism* that Pound was "anything but a hegemonic Orientalist" (141), a claim that our collection's second essay on the poet, "Modernist Scandals: Ezra Pound's Translations of 'the' Chinese Poem," strongly repudiates. Drawing on Lawrence Venuti's post-structural theory of translation and a revisionist linguistic understanding of the Chinese writing system, R. John Williams credits Pound with reinvigorating American poetry by the introduction of a disconcerting foreignness. However, Pound's turn to Confucius comes at the price of a "rather violent domestication" of Chinese poetry as well as a "literary displacement" and a silencing of contemporary Chinese culture (149). As he elucidates this central dimension of modernist Orientalism from a new angle, Williams's essay also brings to our attention another "scandal" of cultural translation: how Pound's ill-founded preoccupation with the ideograph lives forth in the Derridean conjecture that Chinese writing represents a liberating alternative to Western phonocentrism.

In her essay "Poetics of an Enclosed Garden: The Orient in Amy Lowell's *Pictures of the Floating World*" Simone Knewitz takes on Kathleen Flanagan's claim that Amy Lowell associated free verse with Chinese and Japanese poetry, often juxtaposing and separating West and East in both content and form, as in her 1919 poetry collection *Pictures of the Floating World* (178). Knewitz, by

contrast, demonstrates how the two parts of *Pictures* – “Lacquer Prints” and “Chinoiseries” which depict Oriental scenes and “Planes of Personality” which interrogates lesbian desire – are intricately linked, sharing, if in diverging ways, performances of authenticity, exoticism, and threatening sexualities. Devin Zuber discerns yet another previously neglected affiliation of Western and Eastern cultures in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and explores the impact of Chan (Zen) Buddhist paintings on Stevens’s explorations of Western abstract modernism. “‘Poking Around in the Dust of Asia’: Wallace Stevens, Modernism, and the Aesthetics of the East” deals with the *frisson* and the interrelations of verbal and visual representation of different cultures. Zuber claims that Stevens’s interest in the East went far beyond the contemporary vogue of *chinoiserie* and *japonaiserie* items like silk kimonos and paper parasols and detects moments of Buddhist philosophy of consciousness in Stevens’s long poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937). Challenging the notion that Stevens’s abstractions are tied exclusively to Western modernist painters such as Picasso, he proposes a new sense of a “transnational circuit of meaning” (193). Somewhat ironically, said kimonos and parasols move center stage in Frank Kearful’s essay on “Robert Lowell and New England Orientalism: China Trade Rubble, an Open Porthole, and Irregular Japanese Touches.” Lowell, much like Dickinson, still saw “New Englandly” and could not look past the Oriental paraphernalia in his family’s and fellow Boston Brahmins’ living rooms, telling of his region’s heritage of extensive trade. With a keen eye for the subtleties of Lowell’s poetry and New England’s social environment, Kearful reveals how Oriental artifacts contribute to Lowell’s story of personal, spiritual, and mercantile decline. The Lowell and Winslow families are emblematic of this decay in *Life Studies* (1959), and Amy Lowell’s *Pictures of the Floating World* seem to match this with artistic failure, as “91 Revere Street” suggests: “But was *poetry* what one would call Amy’s loud, bossy, unladylike *chinoiserie* – her free verse!” (232).

In Anna Hartnell’s essay “Re-Drawing the East/West Boundary: Orientalizing Jewish Identity in Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Kaddish’” we encounter yet another poet who invests the Orient with the potential of a renewed Jewish culture. At the same time, this contribution makes all too evident that waves of anti-Semitism and pogroms and the mass destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust have dramatically changed the geopolitical and mental landscapes which once embedded Emma Lazarus’s proto-Zionist writings. More significantly, Hartnell illuminates the strikingly shifting terrains in the Beat poet’s imagination and shows how Ginsberg embraces the American jeremiad as a form, appropriates Buddhist notions of presence and self, uneasily appropriates traditions of secular and religious Judaism, and detects in Naomi Ginsberg’s insanity a foreignness that goes far beyond her status as a Russian refugee in Cold War America. What Ginsberg ultimately proposes in “Kaddish” (1961) is nothing less than the unraveling of the phony coupling of Judeo-Christianity in Cold War America,

Hartnell provocatively contends, in favor of a Jewish identity that reclaims its Semitic, Oriental roots and looks even further East. Interestingly enough, this particularist potential Ginsberg envisioned in the East marks a stark contrast to the universalist, planetary visions Gary Snyder drew from the same counter-cultural thrust, a penchant for Zen Buddhism, and, last but not least, a strong admiration for Whitman. In his contribution “Orientalism and Millenarian Dialectics in Walt Whitman’s ‘Passage from India’ and Gary Snyder’s *Earth House Hold*,” Hannes Bergthaller describes the Californian poet’s journey to the Far East as a westward movement, at the end of which the local trope of the wilderness finds a global, spiritual expansion in ecological thought. In spite of Snyder’s respect and sensitivity for other cultures, this quest is Hegelian as well as uniquely American, projecting the poet as a savior figure that sublates cultural oppositions and discovers the *telos* of history in a recovery of origins. In a nuanced argument Bergthaller shows how Snyder, against the backdrop of intense political turmoil, remains indebted to Whitman’s tradition of lyric nationalism (*and* Orientalism), while also illuminating some of its blind spots.

Of course, paradigms of difference championed in the turmoil of the 1960s civil rights and feminist movements have dramatically altered the scope of US-American poetry, increasing the diversity of both subject matter and aesthetics and (re-)introducing marginalized voices of ethnic and racial minorities. Their divergences and disagreements notwithstanding, the final four essays in this collection all corroborate this tendency while underscoring that the specter of Orientalism continues to haunt poets of all shades of color. In his essay “Forms of Exile: The Example of the Ghazal” David Caplan reengages a part of Adrienne Rich’s large oeuvre that, for some time, has played a major role in the discussion of the politics of her writing, yet – partly due to the poet’s own critical distance to her ‘formalist’ beginnings – has hardly been dealt with in terms of aesthetics. Resisting the term appropriation Caplan explores what it means to transfer a verse form from one cultural (con-)text to another, thereby readdressing the question of how poetry and politics are in fact interdependent. While Rich had little respect for the poetic conventions of the ghazal, Caplan shows how her use of its argumentative structure in “Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)” (1969) and “The Blue Ghazals” (1971) impacted in distinct ways on other poets, including Agha Shahid Ali, and how the ghazal has become a means to render a poetics of exiled positions rather than representing current politics.

Language Poetry, of course, operates its own politics of difference. In doing so it also readdresses, as Kornelia Freitag argues in “‘Holding the pencil like one lonely chopstick,’ or: Re-Writing the Gaze,” the Orientalist tradition and the anthropological gaze handed down by High Modernism. As Frank Kearful reminds us, Van Wyck Brooks considered Amy Lowell, for instance, a promoter of modern poetry, aligning her with “the shrewdest of salesmen [...] like the old china traders” (qtd. in 232). Taking off from T. S. Eliot’s 1928 claim that “Chinese

poetry, as we know it today, is something invented by Ezra Pound,” Freitag explores the work of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and John Yau, two Chinese American poets who by their very ethnicity defy the binarism of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and reengage both an Orientalist U.S. tradition and an invented China. In the process Berssenbrugge and Yau create, Freitag argues, a Chinese American tradition that acknowledges and works through a U.S., a Chinese, and an Orientalist heritage, neither of which either poet can nor would want to escape from.

As Roger Sedarat reminds us in his interrogation of anthologies of Iranian American poetry, Iranian American writers inhabit a particularly precarious position in contemporary US-American culture. Aimed at legitimizing their formative position between two seemingly irreconcilable cultures, Iranian American poets, on the one hand, seem to adopt, as Sedarat argues in his essay “Veiling Hyphenated Identities: Iranian-American Poets’ Appropriation of Orientalism,” a “*latent Orientalism*” (311) and reproduce the common biased depiction of Iran. On the other hand, their use of the trope of the veil as hyphen and “refiguration of the Persian chador” exposes some of the more hidden effects of such Orientalisms (314). These effects both risk reducing the cultural impact of Iranian American writing and, by affirming a recognizable difference, create the very space for articulations of otherness. As the forms and functions of this recurrent trope transform even within a single collection of Iranian American poetry, so the position of the American Iranian subject in contemporary US-American culture keeps shifting.

Our collection closes with a contribution by Mihaela Moscaliuc which moves our attention once again to the very Far East while addressing an issue that seems ‘closer to home.’ Her essay “Unbecoming, a desperate homesickness / even at home”: Kimiko Hahn and the Poetics of Exhumation” engages the conditions and potential of a female voice between (multiple) forms of cultural subjection, resistance, and (artistic) self-fashioning. Focusing on Kimiko Hahn, Moscaliuc engages a Japanese American poet who, as she argues, is no longer primarily concerned with a politics of ethnic difference. Exploring in at times highly disturbing ways (individual) experiences of and (poetic) experimentation with Orientalist stereotypes and violent ascriptions of Asian femininity, Hahn interrogates an Asian American aesthetics as well as a poetics of heritage. She aims, Moscaliuc argues, at both exhuming Japanese traditions and “de-orientalizing the female Asian body and Asian sexuality” (330). As she illuminates the complexity of this poetic project and the many ambiguities it exposes, Moscaliuc also celebrates the potential of a writing practice located at “a space of generative in-betweenness” (352), a space where boundaries between East and West, between Orient and Occident, between ‘us’ and ‘them’ have ceased to exist. It is these very nuances of Hahn’s writing practice and the fragility of the voice it projects which are easily subdued, though, in the face of hegemonic

political discourses that more often than not build upon and reinforce well-traveled Orientalist roads, especially in a world post-9/11.

Orientalisms Now: On Political and Poetic Binaries

Reflecting on the scope and quality of ‘Orientalism now’ what comes to mind are Western and especially US-American anxieties over the rise of China and India to economic – and potentially political – superpower status. While we feel threatened by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, see workers’ and consumer rights in jeopardy, and fear accelerated global warming, this image of China clashes with our respect of what we Occidentals have come to appreciate as ‘Chinese culture.’ And yet the rigor of images handed down to us by Orientalist discourse seems to be even more pertinent in the case of Arabs and Muslims of the Middle East. Said’s assessment in *Orientalism* still seems true for the U.S. post-9/11: “The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed” (27). Representations of the (gendered) Orientalized body after 9/11 rely heavily on preexisting stereotypes of militant martyrs and suicide bombers (Jiwani 273), and the Bush administration as much as the media have framed public discourse by stark binarisms: “Bush versus Osama bin Laden, West versus East, modernity versus primitive tribalism, freedom versus oppression, democracy versus totalitarianism, Christianity versus Islam” (265). It can well be argued, as L. H. M. Ling does, that the Bush administration has “taken on an Orientalist discourse for its foreign policy” (377).

In his article “The Clash of Ignorance” that appeared in *The Nation* in October 2001, Said responded to such an Orientalist discourse that powerfully held sway over politicians and the media in the aftermath of 9/11 and that crystallized most prominently in Samuel Huntington’s thesis of an emerging clash of civilizations. Said takes issue with what he calls the “basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold war opposition reformulated).” He senses that the media tries, with a new vengeance, to “inflare the reader’s indignant passion as a member of the ‘West,’” instead of relating the 9/11 terrorists to similar, yet less spectacular cults like the Branch Davidians (12). Debunking Huntington’s ideas, Said highlights – as he did throughout his career – the close ties between Islam and the West and asks us to recognize the “interconnectedness of innumerable lives” and the “bewildering interdependence of our time” (13).

Yet if Said had paid attention to the burgeoning popularity of poetry in the aftermath of 9/11, he might have taken notice of other, less disturbing responses to the terrorist attacks, responses that take their point of departure from the “paradigm of West versus the rest” to consider the “interconnectedness of innumerable lives” and call into question the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them.’

One obvious example is “First Writing Since,” a widely circulated poem by Palestinian American Suheir Hammad, in which the speaker ponders the implications of the terrorist attacks on her life. Sharing both the hijackers’ Arab ethnicity and the victims’ nationality, she reiterates her thoughts during the terrorist attacks: “please god, after the second plane, please, don’t let it / be anyone who / looks like my brothers” (89). It is ironical, of course, that though inhabiting a multicultural society “most Americans do not know / the difference between Indians, Afghanis, Syrians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus” (90), that vilification and xenophobia affect both the speaker and her brother, who is a sergeant in the U.S. Navy, “on alert, / and praying five times a day that the orders he will take in a few days’ time are righteous / and will not weigh his soul down from the after-life he deserves” (93). “First Writing Since” thus presents us with a messy reality that both eschews simple views – such as the belief the U.S. ‘had it coming’ because of its foreign policy – and transcends clear-cut binaries of West versus Islam.

Twisting Alicia Ostriker’s point that poetry became so popular after 9/11 because it serves as “survival tool” in times of crisis (xi), Hammad literally applies this claim to the poet herself. It comes as no surprise that a Palestinian American would write a poem that seeks to undercut a distorted discourse that may turn into a physical threat. But merely the fact that the poem was distributed widely in emails and thus gained much visibility bespeaks the diversity of contemporary poetry and its audience as well as an increasing acceptance of ‘marginal’ voices. Following the paths of other ‘minority’ or ‘resistance’ literatures and confronting a precarious political climate after 9/11, Arab-American writers like Hammad proclaim the “imperative to write or be written” (Majaj 130). Likewise, more established poets have shown a great sensitivity toward the impact of Orientalist discourse in their responses to 9/11, even in poems that seem to refute such a claim.⁶

Among the many 9/11 poems, Frank Bidart’s “Curse” is surely one of the fiercest lyrics because it refuses to put forth explanations that may attenuate the atrocity or serve for self-righteous purposes. If Ostriker considers poetry a “survival tool” after 9/11, Bidart’s “Curse” envisions a harrowing after-life for the terrorists. This is the poem in its entirety:

May breath for a dead moment cease as jerking your

head upward you hear as if in slow motion floor

collapse evenly upon floor as one hundred and ten

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of poems written in response to 9/11, please refer to Christian Kloeckner’s forthcoming book *9/11 and Poetry* (Lang: Frankfurt, 2009).

floors descend upon you.

May what you have made descend upon you.
 May the listening ears of your victims their eyes their

breath

enter you, and eat like acid
 the bubble of rectitude that allowed you breath.

May their breath now, in eternity, be your breath.

•

Now, as you wished, you cannot for us
 not be. May this be your single profit.

Of your rectitude at last disenthralled, you
 seek the dead. Each time you enter them

they spit you out. The dead find you are not food.

Out of the great secret of morals, *the imagination to enter
 the skin of another*, what I have made is a curse. (25-26)⁷

The poem does not state explicitly who it is cursing, its references, though, points to one or all of the 9/11 terrorists. From its first section which centers around the trope of “breath” (ll. 1, 7, 9, 10), the poem’s leitmotif evolves in numerous mutual invasions. Still invoking the narrative of the creation of Man, breath turns into a force hurling the terrorists into an eternal state of hell here. The speaker, searching for a punishment that fits the crime, is guided by the simple rationale: “May what you have made descend upon you.” Wishing for the perpetrators to perpetually live through the horrors of their own deed, the speaker responds to the label George W. Bush attached to the terrorist attacks by calling them “cowardly acts” (1). Accordingly, one could read Bidart’s poem as a poetic call for “Infinite Justice.”

However, if we look beyond the ostensibly obvious strategies of ‘othering,’ we realize that, in fact, the terrorists get integrated rather than simply cordoned off. The poem continually reinforces the link between the terrorists as agents, their acts, their victims’ experiences, and their eternal consciousness of each other. In the first part of the poem, this affiliation is worked by repetitions (“breath,” “descend”; “hear,” “listen,” “ears”), juxtapositions (a movement

⁷ “Curse” from STAR DUST by Frank Bidart. Copyright © 2005 by Frank Bidart. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

slowing down from “jerk” to “dead moment”; “upward,” “downward”), and the visual appearance of the poem whose lines resemble floors crashing down on the “you” addressed in line four. Following the asterisk we encounter more, yet inverted invasions of terrorists and victims. Eternally rejected by the victims, the terrorists are granted one, albeit doubly negative, achievement: “you cannot for us / not be.” Peculiar here is the introduction of “us,” which compromises the speaker’s subject position. Since throughout the poem the victims of the terrorist attacks are referred to in the third person plural as “they,” the introduction of “us” reads as an intrusion of the surviving outside world onto the poem’s scene of a hellish after-life. At the same time, preceded by the temporal marker “[n]ow,” this phrase also creates a strong link to the scene when the victims’ breath entered the terrorists. This suggests that the speaker is not simply speaking on behalf of the survivors of 9/11 and of bereaved families; temporarily identifying speaker (and, by extension, the surviving community) and victims, the former comes to speak for the latter. Thus, the phrase “you cannot for us / not be” expresses the eternal ‘bond’ between victims and terrorists, whose acts remain unforgettable for survivors and witnesses. And indeed, as they enter history books, immortality will be the terrorists’ “single profit.” However, the eternal bond with the victims is the very curse the speaker lays on the terrorists.

Significantly, though, the poem ends not in this Dantesque vision, but projects an *ars poetica*. The last couplet, “Out of the great secret of morals, *the imagination to enter // the skin of another*, what I have made is a curse” echoes Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” (1821, published 1840):

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. (7:118)

Quite self-consciously, “Curse” perverts Shelley’s ethical notion of poetry by turning empathy into violent intrusion. Yet, the seemingly clairvoyant and cold-blooded “pathological voice of ‘true feeling,’” characteristic of so many of Bidart’s speakers (Gray 723), is not as authentic as it may seem. Both the poem’s form and graphic elements and its intertextual affiliations complicate a straightforward reading and invite us to take into account that in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) the *recantation* of a curse allows the protagonist to prevail over his foe Jupiter. As Simon Haines points out, Jupiter is “defeated at the moment when the oppressed [Prometheus] stops seeing himself as oppressed and the other as an oppressor, himself as merely not-Jupiter and Jupiter as everything which is not himself, and begins to see both as equivalent beings”

(171). Bidart's reference to Shelley can thus be read as a way of deconstructing the curse as an ultimately inappropriate and counterproductive strategy to deal with one's 'enemy.' In this way, Haines's observation may in turn prompt us to take "Curse" as a critique of what Said called the deployment of the "basic paradigm of West versus the rest."

Let us substantiate this claim by briefly considering acts of "making" in the poem. Independently published in 2002, "Curse" is included in Bidart's poetry collection *Star Dust* (2006), a volume whose overarching theme, according to its author, is the inescapable "human need to make" (83). For Bidart, "making" is a fundamental anthropological predicament, involving both potential self-recognition and destruction; making and un-making are merely two sides of the same coin:

Making is the mirror in which we see ourselves. Making [...] proceeds from the twins within us, the impulse to create as well as not-to-create, to obliterate the world of manifestation, to destroy. [...] It is a species of the will to power, which is inseparable from survival and creation. It is inseparable from the impulse to destroy. (85-86; 88)

Such mirroring structure and twinning of disparate phenomena is what we find in "Curse," as well. Quite tellingly, both the speaker's curse and the terrorist deeds are fashioned as acts of making. "May what you have *made* descend upon you" corresponds to the speaker's final concession: "Out of the great secret of morals [...] what I have *made* is a curse" (emphases mine). This parallelism indicates the proximity of the Dantesque concept of just punishment and the terrorists' wish to obliterate their enemies. It signals a convergence, in quality, of the terrorists' debased, self-conscious act and the speaker's kindred response. And indeed, if we reconsider the poem's opening lines, the archaic character of the curse begins to strongly reverberate with our own projections of perpetrators obsessively taking revenge for a devastatingly imperial U.S. foreign policy: "*May breath for a dead moment cease [...] as one hundred and ten // floors descend upon you. // May what you have made descend upon you.*" The terrorists could themselves have addressed these lines to the employees in the World Trade Center, even if Bidart vigorously refutes such a reading: "The 'you' addressed here brought down the World Trade Center towers; when I wrote the poem I didn't imagine that it could be read in any other way, though it has been" (83).

A reading that attributes the first lines to the terrorists is probably misguided; however, it is not necessarily counterintuitive. Particularly since 9/11, discourse of terrorism has interpreted Islamist ideology as a response to globalization that seeks refuge in pre-modern barbarism. If modernization and secularization have successfully shattered beliefs in witchcraft and black magic in the West, the curse in the very first lines of Bidart's poem feeds the assumption that an abject Other performs this archaic speech-act. Realizing that the curse issues from a

Western position is all the more shocking because it undermines the established distinction between archaically-minded Islamist terrorism and a civilized Western response. The curse thus becomes a kind of double-voiced discourse that lays bare how so-called Islamist terrorism is the displaced and violent other of postmodern Western cultures; its performative ‘othering’ falls back onto the speaker. Ostensibly intensifying the difference between “I” and “you,” the poem actually affirms their alikeness. Introducing “us” and twisting the dominant discourses of terrorism in its first lines, Bidart’s poem foregrounds the instability of supposedly distinct subject positions. Likewise, terrorists and target (society) are wedded in the “single profit” that terrorism yields from the destruction of paradigmatic symbols of capitalist economies, the *Twin Towers*. If West and East are so much alike, it is only consistent that the speaker resorts to the circular logic of revenge, privileging retaliation over exiting from this vicious circle, thus implicitly accepting her potential self-destruction.

Although Bidart’s “Curse” seemingly shuns staples of exoticism and Orientalism, it enacts and dramatizes the essential mechanisms pertaining to Orientalist discourse – a discourse in which George W. Bush’s foreign policy, for instance, is firmly grounded, erecting strict binaries that, as Bidart shows, crumble on closer inspection. Said and other postcolonial writers have long understood this game of ‘othering.’ In the aftermath of 9/11, Indian author Arundhati Roy caught much fire when she observed a kinship between Bush and Bin Laden:

What is Osama bin Laden? He’s America’s family secret. He is the American president’s dark doppelgänger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilised. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America’s foreign policy [...] Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and gradually becoming interchangeable. Their guns, bombs, money and drugs have been going around in the loop for a while. [...] The important thing to keep in mind is that neither is an acceptable alternative to the other. (33-34)

Bidart’s poem is haunted by the “doppelgänger” figures of Bush and Bin Laden, by the crashing differences between West and East, and subtly dramatizes what Said and Roy critically analyze and advocate politically. Perhaps “Curse” is even more successful than Said in drawing attention to what Said called the fundamental “interconnectedness of innumerable lives” and the “bewildering interdependence of our time.” By portraying 9/11 as a “pathologically motivated suicide attack and mass slaughter” carried out by a “small group of deranged militants” and “tiny band of crazed fanatics” (12), Said disassociates the terrorists from Islam “proper,” marginalizing *and* medicalizing them as psychopaths. Whether we accept Bidart’s notion that violence – or unmaking – is merely the flipside of a human need to engage in “making,” in creating, or rather prefer Said’s dichotomy of the sane and the insane, cannot be the issue here. Yet Said’s portrayal of the Islamist terrorists remains problematic and has cautioned

us against reducing US-American poetic texts to the Orientalist “Us/Them” dichotomies that they also display. In fact, all poetic encounters with the Orient work *multiple* connections and disconnections, identifications and projections of Otherness, and map a topography far more complex than a space governed by clear-cut divides between East and West. This insight is one major thread running through all contributions to this collection.

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And this geographical de-limitation of space of the Orient is perhaps due to Said's being a native of Arab. There are very little references to India in Said's study of Orientalism. Moreover he never substantiates his views to the given references. Thus one can undoubtedly put it in this way that the West has created the Orient but Said has bifurcated the Orient. It appears quite ironical that Said lived in US but talked about Palestine. In order to build up one's grounding one has to connect himself to his roots; one has to encounter all challenges, but Said was never ready to leave his comfort zone. Moreover, Said never stayed at any of the Islamic countries and even the South Asian countries (only dropping of names) that he talks about in Orientalism. "the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice". By this, Said is saying because we treated the East like a school subject, we have learned to treat the East as an inferior. Which has developed into something called Orientalism. The poets, authors and statesmen of the nineteenth-century have made Orientalism every thing that it is. They started out with the intent of learning about a civilization of people that This collection of essays explores the poetics and politics of US-American poetry's diverse and distinct investments in the imaginary space of 'the Orient'. Reading American poets - from Emily Dickinson to Frank Bidart, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Kimiko Hahn - the contributions show how tropes of the Orient have fabricated screens onto which we project matters by no means This collection of essays explores the poetics and politics of US-American poetry's diverse and distinct investments in the imaginary space of 'the Orient'. And, on the way, they reassess what Edward Said, thirty years ago, conceived of as Orientalism, and how far this concept has travelled in the meantime. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon.