

introduction

Playing Eastern

As a historian, I have studied intercultural communication for many years. I have been most compelled by the workings of the entertainment business and the men and women whose bread and butter was live performance. This interest has driven me to consider a phenomenon I seem to find hidden in plain view everywhere I look in the American past but especially between 1790 and 1935: Why did so many choose to perform in the guise of persons from the East? And what practical and cultural rules governed who could speak for North Africa, West Asia, or South Asia in such a way? When we look for them, we can find tens of thousands of such performers in the United States in those years. They all claimed special knowledge of an ethnically and religiously diverse spectrum of predominantly Muslim lands stretching from Morocco to India: poets and travelers who wrote homegrown imitations of the stories in the *Arabian Nights*, traveling admirers of Sufism and Eastern fraternal orders, impresarios and merchants from the Ottoman Empire, dancers, acrobats, turban-wearing magicians, spiritual missionaries from India, and even members of the fraternal order known as the Ancient Arabic Order, Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, or Shriners. To borrow a phrase from Philip Deloria, all these people were engaged in the art of playing Eastern.

For the first 150 years of American history, the most broadly influential people to speak about the Eastern world were people who played Eastern by presenting themselves in Eastern personae—or “Oriental” or “Moslem” or “Hindoo” persona as the patter might have required. Some of these individuals were native-born Americans, some were migrants or immigrants from North Africa, West Asia, and South Asia. They included equal numbers of professional and amateur entertainers, some of whom performed in a serious attempt to depict foreign peoples, some of whom performed a kind of Eastern minstrelsy only in jest. In character, these performers told stories about affluent abundance, guilt-free leisure, spiritual truth, natural manhood, the mysteriously

exotic, feminine self-discovery, romantic love, racial equality, and the creative possibilities for individuation in a market economy.

The men and women who performed in Eastern guise worked in a creative context largely defined by the standards of the commercial entertainment industry, whose comedic and dramatic logic was premised upon the performance of cultural difference. Within this expressive economy, the act of playing Oriental, along with blackface, ethnic, and gender caricature, was only one way of speaking about life and identity in a globalizing nation among the endless opportunities for sincere consumer self-fashioning the nation offered. Nevertheless, Eastern personae were uniquely important among the options for professional and consumer individuation in the United States because the leisure, abundance, and contentment many perceived in Eastern life was the same vision promised by the consumer capitalist ideology that would come to define the American dream.¹

The arts of playing Eastern percolated out into American life by way of two parallel modes: professional personae, normally in performances observers understood as staged entertainment, and nonprofessional personae, which viewers found in contexts that implied that the performer was expressing a sincere sense of him or herself whether this was true or not. In both cases, performers needed to come across in a way that balanced personal motivations and audience expectations. Both professional and amateur performers also shared the problem of financial viability, for the professional as a matter of making a living or financing the next show and for the amateur in using an Eastern persona to demonstrate one's success in the market, either as a breadwinner or articulate consumer. The lines dividing professional and amateur performer, persona producer, and performance consumer were always blurry, always moving. Consumers often recycled and performed their own Eastern personae to create a broader context for those professional entertainers who would follow, and vice versa. The audience was thus not just a ticket buyer at the moment of the show but a purveyor of that content to others and an active player in the meanings and uses of the Eastern world within the United States.

So how should a historian explain the phenomenon of Eastern personation in the United States up until the Great Depression? Once upon a time, one would have begun by reaching for a copy of Edward Said's influential 1978 work *Orientalism*. Said famously asserted that Western-authored representations of the Muslim world were interreferential cultural texts that flattered Western self-conceptions. These representations multiplied, each referring to the last, until

by the sheer weight of their presence they came to hold great cultural and political authority in the West, to the point of defining the objective truth of the East to the world. Because of the superior economic and military power of nations like Britain, France, and eventually the United States, this tradition of knowledge, Said argued, worked to facilitate imperial expansion in Eastern territories.²

Certainly Edward Said had a point. With respect mostly to academic literature and the European novel, he wrote that Westerners argued for a powerful, civilized, righteous, and dynamic West by depicting the East as an oppositional “Other” that was weak, decadent, depraved, fanatical, and unchanging. Europeans and Americans used the ideological concept of the “Orient” to essentialize the ethnically, geographically, and intellectually varied Muslim world as a monolith that scholars could more easily define. Often Westerners did so by way of representations heavily loaded with sexual preoccupations that gendered the East feminine and the West masculine. Drawing from Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, Said went on to create a very persuasive version of the idea that a “discourse,” a body of self-referential knowledge, can wield considerable cultural authority even when not factually true, reproducing and exacerbating imbalances of power between those who create the representation and those who are represented. To describe this discursive system, Said redefined a nineteenth-century literary term, “Orientalism,” that Europeans and Americans had previously used to describe the expressive style associated with Western-authored Oriental tales. Orientalists, in Said’s sense then, were the academics, painters, writers, and other Westerners who assembled and authorized Orientalism as a powerful body of knowledge that often operated largely independently from, but to the disadvantage of, the actual lands and people it described.

Many see Edward Said as the most influential thinker of the late twentieth century, though to be accurate, he was part of a much larger group of academics who were similarly challenging traditional Western scholarship on the Muslim world.³ Many scholars followed this lead and began to look anew at primary sources and scholarly literature created by Europeans, which many had taken as historically contingent to be sure but ideologically legitimate just the same. Said’s work spawned a broad movement within literary scholarship and cultural analysis known as postcolonial studies. At the same time, the flaws in Said’s original work, *Orientalism*, inspired many others operating from various political perspectives—and Said himself—to begin grappling with important

questions about how European Orientalism exercised power over human actions, how the process might continue to the present day, the role of the non-Western “Other” in that relationship, and whether postcolonial theorists can exist outside discursive systems of knowledge themselves.⁴

With respect to our subject, the United States and the Muslim world, many scholars in various disciplines have been equally inspired by Edward Said but have pursued their analyses with far less rigor than their Europeanist colleagues. Scholars of the United States in various disciplines routinely seek out Orientalist affects in American life and culture—in the Saidian sense—to produce accounts that seem driven by ideology rather than historical evidence. Admirers of Said have looked for evidence supporting his theories in film, visual arts, travel writing, fashion and costuming, home décor design, countless novels, magazine publishing, journalism, and just about every other cultural product one can name whether nonprofit or commercial, religious or secular, official or private, influential and profitable or contemporarily ignored and forgotten. These authors undermine their otherwise insightful observations about specific cultural texts because they do not ask how audiences actually understood, misunderstood, or consciously manipulated depictions of the Muslim world. They collect all these depictions under the discursive term “Orientalism,” thereby lumping them together in authorial intent and presumed political effect, suggested by Said’s original theory, as part of an imperial “American” project to define and thus control Eastern lands and peoples.

More often than not, the implicit argument thereafter is that a particular cliché of the Muslim world was replicated over and over because Americans were a uniform, unthinkingly racist mass public somehow timelessly “obsessed with the Orient” or culturally invested in the proposed “imperial” project the scholarly author seeks to demonstrate at work in American history. They often make these determinist presumptions manifest by personifying Said’s term (e.g., “Orientalism perceived itself as a civilizing mission”) or by lazy reduction of the diversity of American experience and opinion over two centuries to “the mind of America.”⁵ Here a stereotyped monolithic, unchanging “Orientalism” directs all American engagement with the Eastern world for all people at all times. Its existence and power to direct human affairs has become seemingly unquestioned academic common sense—indeed, the scholarly idea of Orientalism has become its own “discourse.”⁶

Yet a contradiction emerges when we look at American history from the perspective of historical actors and really press the point of *why* people chose to

refer to the Eastern world *when* and *how* they did. My research has shown me that the most numerous attempts by people in the United States, native-born or foreign-born, to take on Eastern personae occurred before the American moment in the Middle East began in the 1930s. In this earlier period, U.S. political and territorial expansion was focused on the American West, Canada, the Pacific, Central America by way of Panama, and the territories of the Spanish Empire: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. That is, playing Oriental was most ubiquitous *before* Eastern nations or natural resources became practically or politically relevant to the bulk of the population or the U.S. government.

Certainly some have noted American missionizing in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Ottoman Empire and India as well as an enthusiastic scholarly interest in the biblical archaeology of the “Holy Land.” It is true that at times such activities were relatively well funded and well publicized among the Anglo-American middle classes. They were clearly of great spiritual significance, especially in New England, among those who hoped to see the “Holy Land” they imagined from reading the Bible take shape in the Ottoman Empire. The problem with seeing these Americans or their supporters as evidence of a broader imperial public interest in Muslim lands is that they represented a minority opinion, had limited practical power abroad, and were often criticized by their fellow citizens.⁷

In fact, a majority of Americans knew throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the idea of the United States as an imperial power in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, or India was preposterous. To take one example, in 1849 the New Yorker Howard Crosby went on vacation to Egypt. He wrote from his hotel in Alexandria: “We actually found a Yankee steward [here]. . . . He had come from Marblehead, and, in direct opposition to the tide of emigration, had struck Eastward for a new home. Who knows but this may be the germ of Annexation!—the first dawning of the established series of three stages for the extension of empire, . . . viz: Colonization—Declaration of Independence—Annexation!”⁸ Readers in the United States would have found this funny because Crosby was making light of the dangerous national debate around lands of actual Anglo-American immigration/invasion, namely, Texas, a former Mexican territory, then brief independent republic, now the newest state in the Union.⁹ The absurdity that made the joke work came from the fact that even if some Americans hoped to trade, travel, and proselytize in the Middle East, even if they complained that someone should really “relieve” the region of “Turkish misrule” or felt that the sentiment of Manifest Destiny out west in those years

was misguided, there was no actual chance of the U.S. government or its citizens colonizing any part of the Ottoman Empire, a region most acknowledged as sites of overt British, French, and Russian pressure.

Plenty of people argue nonetheless that the Americans who mattered were jealous of British or French imperial activities and sought to ape them in the Middle East and that American colonialism in, say, the Philippines or the American West made U.S. citizens subject to a generalized ethos of superiority in their contacts with all foreign peoples at all times.¹⁰ Such blanket theories are not a sufficient explanation for the expense and effort a broad spectrum of people in the U.S., including immigrants and migrants from the lands in question, invested in depicting the Eastern world, especially through Oriental personae, over the course of 150 years.

Far more serious yet, almost without exception these writers pay lip service to “Orientalism” but do not actually engage with the full theoretical implications of Said’s arguments with respect to *how* subconscious discursive power has supposedly worked through cultural texts and *how*, precisely, this is connected to the formulation of foreign policy and military or diplomatic action. Instead common scholarly interpretation sees a predatory inevitability in American engagement with the Muslim world because authors tend to focus analysis on cultural “texts” in isolation from the moment of production or live display. They do this, David Hall astutely explains, “by privileging an ideal reader (the critic’s own stance) or else a particular interpretation (invariably modernist/ideological) of a given text.”¹¹ Do not get me wrong here. I do not mean to claim that American depictions of North Africa, West Asia, and South Asia did not operate in a global context at times or take on newly politicized meanings after 1935. The imperious attitude held by some Americans toward Easterners over the years is part of American engagement with the Muslim world. However, if we really seek to understand the specific utility of particular cultural products and performances of identity to actual people, some Americans’ imperiousness is not the most prominent part of the story.

Thus, we have arrived at an intellectual moment in which academics use the term Orientalism to define American contact with the exact portion of the globe in which most Americans had no imperial aims and the U.S. government and American business little influence. I. C. Campbell has explained this phenomenon to note that scholars attempting to reconstruct situations of intercultural interaction can often operate under “a teleological fallacy: knowledge of the later outcome of contact influences perception of the nature of early contact, . . .