

## *U.S. Orientalisms*



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Race, Nation, and  
Gender in Literature,  
1790–1890

Malini Johar Schueller

ann arbor

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*For my children, Divik, Maya,  
and Neena, and my husband, John*



## Preface

After the Federal Building in Oklahoma City was torn apart by an explosion on April 19, 1995, but before Timothy McVeigh was arraigned, speculations on possible perpetrators ran rife. Several of the most distinguished Middle East experts went on the air to proclaim the explosion an Arab deed, a clear case of the workings of the crazed Arab mind. These analyses forcefully testified to deep-seated anti-Arab sentiments within the national psyche. More recently, when Democratic fund-raiser John Huang was being investigated for accepting illegal campaign contributions, Reform Party nominee Ross Perot seized the occasion not simply to criticize his Democratic opponent but also to ridicule Huang's ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> Scrutiny of Democratic campaign funds is revealing an ever-increasing array of illegal funds by Asian businessmen, channeled through Asian Americans.<sup>2</sup> At issue in the publicity and interest surrounding these donations is not simply their legality (the acceptance and subsequent return of Canadian contributions by the Dole campaign scarcely received publicity) but an anxiety about the devious Asian infiltrating the body politic. Even though conservative columnist William Safire called the Asian money Clinton's "green peril" and not a yellow peril, the very distinctions call attention to the particular genealogy of Asian xenophobia to which the current scrutiny of campaign funds could be connected.<sup>3</sup> While the accusations surrounding the Oklahoma City incident and those surrounding the investigation of campaign fund-raising evoke very different types of representations—the terrorist and the tycoon—and have current, historically specific origins, the former deriving from the Gulf War and the latter from fears

about a recessionary U.S. vulnerability, they are both part of an Orientalist discourse that admits a diversity and multiplicity of often contradictory positionings within an ideal of a whole, inviolate, and strong imperial nationhood, an ideal that these representations at once depend on and facilitate. Ideas about the immoral, cowardly, and bloodthirsty Arab helped define the nation as moral, brave, and peace-loving; images of sneaky, rich but corrupt Asians draw on a complex conjuncture of ideas of the nation as virtuous, legitimately and rightfully powerful, and Anglo.

*U.S. Orientalisms* suggests that the cultural mappings of such an Orientalist discourse, in its multifarious positionings and discrete historical specificities, begins in the postrevolutionary period of the late 1700s and derives its sociopolitical impetus from different imperial discourses about the Orient that are central to ideas of U.S. nationhood. Without positing a unified or transhistorical trajectory, I emphasize the prevalence of intersecting discourses of the Orient and empire for a century before the 1890s, the decade traditionally viewed as the beginning of the imperialist phase in U.S. history. I argue, therefore, that contemporary discourses on the Orient—discourses treating sneaky infiltrators and fanatical demolitionists—can be better understood as latter-day manifestations of earlier U.S. visions of the Orient, refracted variously through millennial fervor, racial-cultural difference, and ideas of westerly empire.

Specifically, *U.S. Orientalisms* examines the construction of the Orient by selected USAmerican poets, dramatists, essayists, and novelists from the 1790s to the 1890s.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the earliest U.S. literary Orientalism was not simply an abstract and mystical phenomenon but an important indigenous discourse in which questions of nation, empire, race, and gender were intimately connected. An important way in which U.S. nationhood in the nineteenth century defined itself was through imaginative control over various Orients, positioned divergently through different historical and ideological contexts: the moral war against the so-called Barbary States; the missionary fervor to head the Western race to save the Orientals; the imperial-hermeneutic imperative (shared by the British and the French) to decipher the real Orient; the desire to fulfill Columbus's original mission to "find" the Orient; and the conception of nation as the latest westerly empire (a continuation of the medieval *Translatio Imperii*), destined for expansion. I argue that the construction of the Orient in these works followed a complex and internally contradictory trajectory. It enabled the compensatory

projection of a protoimperial narrative for the nation based on versions of the dichotomies of USAmerican righteousness, morality, energy, and vibrancy versus Oriental corruption, deviance, lassitude, and passivity, dichotomies which helped mystify internal racial schisms. Yet, the imperial body of the nation constructed in these texts was always a figure in crisis, dependent upon the cathected Orient it sought to control, and fraught with raced and gendered anxieties.

*U.S. Orientalisms* examines literary constructions of the Orient through three major contexts. The Orientalism generated by the U.S.–North Africa conflict of the late eighteenth century is evident in such works as Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* and Susanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers*, in which the idea of the nation embodying freedom and virtue is both contested and evoked through narratives in which the hero or heroine simultaneously participates in and condemns slavery and sensual excess. In the Near Eastern Orientalism of the nineteenth century, fueled by Egyptology and missionary fervor, writers like John DeForest and Maria Susanna Cummins satirize yet proclaim the hermeneutical presumptions of the missionary/archaeologist; in contrast, Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Herman Melville critique the idea of New World hermeneutic power by reversing the gaze, destroying the raced and gendered certainties on which the imperial-hermeneutic identity of the hero depends; simultaneously, former slave David F. Dorr reveals the omnivorous appeal of Near Eastern Orientalist discourses by appropriating and rewriting their imperial imperatives. The Indic Orientalism of the nineteenth century, I suggest, was spurred by both scholarly Indology and visions of the westerly movement of empire. Emerson's raced construction of India as a passive and spiritual Other is an anxious attempt to co-opt the idea of unified space to negotiate the idea of a fragmented nation, at the same time as it is an effort to redefine the New World as the new empire. Similarly, Whitman's embodiment of the nation as youth/child embracing the Indic Orient is dependent on yet contoured by a strategic exclusion of presentness and historicity.

I intend my use of the term *Orient* throughout this study to both evoke and delimit Edward Said's usage. For Said, the term *Orientalism* has three applications: those that write about or research the Orient; a style of thought based on ontological and epistemological distinctions between the Orient and the Occident; and, most importantly, a Western style for having authority over the Orient.<sup>5</sup> In all cases, Said sees a syncretic and unchanging Orient. I retain the use of the term *Orient* (and its

derivatives *orientalist* and *oriental*) to evoke the issues of power inherent in Said's usage, but I emphasize the deformative power of both particular writers and specific contexts. As my study demonstrates, many writers enunciated challenges to dominant cultural discourses on the Orient, while, as Reina Lewis puts it in her study of women writing the Orient, "dominant ideological formations" partially recouped some of these transgressions.<sup>6</sup> My study also demonstrates how the nineteenth-century cultural imagination was responsive to discrete varieties of specific locations—Algeria, the Near East, and India—all of which might well be othered, but in distinct ways, each site producing an internally complex discourse.<sup>7</sup> My use of such terms as *Near Eastern Orient* or *Indic Orient* emphasizes the specificity of the Oriental configuration.

I also intend my use of the term *Orient* to call attention to the shifting gendered valences inherent in cultural constructions of different Orients. Whereas Said sees Orientalism as a male domain and theorizes desire to be exclusively male, I rely on the work of contemporary feminists who question the unproblematic association of the feminine with the oppressed, lacking its own agency.<sup>8</sup> In addition to examining the work of several women writers in this book, I also foreground the numerous moments when the Orient reverses its gaze, as it were, questioning both the masculinity and the power of the USAmerican subject.

Methodologically, this book is situated at the intersection of postcolonial and feminist analyses. Nineteenth-century U.S. literature has traditionally not been seen through the lens of postcoloniality, because it lacked the dominion over far-flung locations characteristic of, for example, the European empires of Britain and France. Instead, recent critics have suggested a colonized status for early U.S. literature.<sup>9</sup> As my analysis of the investment in Oriental discourses suggests, however, the nineteenth-century literary imagination was acutely sensitive to the imperial possibilities of the New World. Throughout this book, I also pay particular attention to the coextensive investments in racial and gender differences of literary Orientalist works. In revealing the interrelationships of the two categories, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship by feminists who have long questioned the singular attention to gender.<sup>10</sup> My focus on the blurring of raced and gendered boundaries in these texts at the very moments when a vibrant, whole nationhood is being proclaimed reveals the mutual imbrication of categories of nation, race, and gender stimulated by the Oriental context.

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