Chapter Title: Orientalism

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Book Title: Keywords for Asian American Studies

Book Editor(s): Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ and K. Scott Wong

Published by: NYU Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3zv2.50

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## Orientalism

Sylvia Shin Huey Chong

Had the activists of the late 1960s christened themselves "Orientals" instead of "Asian Americans," we might be calling this volume "Keywords in Oriental American Studies." This alternate history is not so unlikely, for both terms expressed a similar desire for a pan-Asian coalition, and both were more inclusive than the skin-color-based calls for "yellow" or "brown" power. One of the first Asian American studies classes taught by Yuji Ichioka at UCLA in 1969 was entitled "Orientals in America," and the UCLA student group Sansei Concern initially changed its name to Oriental Concern in 1968 to accommodate more ethnic groups (Ichioka 2000, 33; Y. Espiritu 1992, 32–33). Like the reclamation of the word "queer" in the 1990s, the term "Oriental" had the potential to confront a history of exclusion, explusion, and discrimination by bringing together and politicizing precisely those groups it had deemed "other" in the past.

However, even before Edward Said's landmark work *Orientalism* (1978), activists felt that "Oriental" simply carried too much negative historical baggage for them to resignify. The "Orient" only existed as a figment of the European imagination, lumping together disparate peoples from Asia and Africa into an undifferentiated mass of colonial subjects, slaves, servants, and unwanted immigrants. "Orientals" were Suzie Wongs, Charlie Chans, and Fu Manchus—fictional stereotypes connoting exoticism, foreignness, passivity, and obsolesence—while "Asian Americans" were figures like Yuri Kochiyama, Richard Aoki, Philip Vera Cruz, and Ling-Chi Wang—real people representing the heterogeneity of Asian American communities, causes, and activities. Thus, when Said described Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978, 3), his term had great resonance with Asian Americans who were themselves contesting the domination and restructuring of Asians in America. As a critique of the racial ideology behind European colonialism, *Orientalism* appeared at the end of a massive era of decolonization that also fed into the energies of the Asian American movement—recall that the student strikes at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State that helped establish Asian American curricula were called for by the Third World Liberation Front, and that anti–Vietnam War protests also contributed to the consciousness raising of early Asian American activists. Thus, although Said never addressed the experiences of Asian Americans, or even the racial ideology of the U.S., he seemed to be speaking to the same concerns that birthed the Asian American movement.

Despite this resonance, Said's *Orientalism* remained somewhat peripheral to the development of Asian American studies as an academic discipline. Although *Orientalism* became a founding text of postcolonial studies, especially as a model for politicizing literary studies alongside broader investigations of the history and dynamics of imperial cultures, it has found less traction within Asian American studies, especially as Asian American literature focused on excavating an alternate canon and Asian American history delved into forgotten peoples and movements left out of narratives of the United States. Because Orientalism seems to name a racial ideology imposed from the outside (ostensibly the "West," or the "Occident"), studies of Orientalism focus more on issues of racist representation than those of ethnic self-expression and agency (Lye 2008, 96). Thus,

when invoked, Orientalism in Asian American studies often stands as a synonym for "racism," especially those forms that focus on making-exotic or making-other. According to this usage, what is Orientalist about American racism is often its denial of Asian American assimilation or hybridity (another key term from postcolonial studies), casting Asians as "forever foreigners" indelibly marked with their racial origins elsewhere. This meaning has been compounded by the fact that some of the "Orientalists" Said targeted were scholars of Asia and Africa, often based in area studies departments like East Asian or Middle East and South Asian studies and employed to produce "useful" knowledge for guiding military or foreign policy in those regions. As Asian American studies found a home in the academy, it has often taken the opposite route, eschewing area studies and aligning either with American studies and English departments, or in coalitions with African American, Latino/a, and Native American studies under the umbrella of ethnic studies.

While these have been useful lines of argument, this collapse of Orientalism into xenophobic racism ignores the useful Foucauldian aspects of Said's original concept, which outlined a discursive realm that was both productive as well as repressive. In other words, Orientalism was powerful not simply as a way of dominating the Orient: it also created the Orient (and Orientals) as objects of knowledge and representation, whether in sympathy or with hostility. This was the key insight that allowed Said to link poetry with anthropology, fiction with science—these were not separate discourses, but related ideologies that constructed racial subjects both rhetorically and epistemologically. Henry Yu's work *Thinking Orientals* (2002) illustrates this more complex deployment of Orientalism within Asian American studies, combining an intellectual history of this particular racial ideology along with an account of how early Asian American sociologists used that ideology to make themselves and their communities legible as racial subjects.

Moreover, the impulse to refute the "foreignness" of Asian Americans also contradicts the transnational dimension of Asian American studies, which has recently become a larger line of inquiry. Scholars have defined the uniqueness of American Orientalism as the doubling or splitting of the Orient into both an inside, represented by the Asian American "foreigner-within" who becomes an integral part of the American racial order, and an outside, represented by those Asian nations whose military, economic, and diplomatic interactions with the U.S. loom large over the course of the long American Century (Ngai 2000; L. Lowe 1991; L. Lowe 1996; Palumbo-Liu 1999; Lye 2004). Thus, unlike the classic model of colonialism in which colony and metropole remain separated geographically and politically, Asian Americans in American Orientalism infiltrate the center of the empire. Furthermore, scholars focusing on Asian America as a transnational or diasporic configuration have challenged the assumption that Asian American immigrants always desire assimilation and sever ties to their countries of origin (Shukla 2003; Hsu 2000; Azuma 2005; Shibusawa 2006; Duong 2012). These scholars, often working with non-English-language archives and sources, do not start from the Americanness of Asian America as a way to refute American Orientalism. Instead, they maintain the otherness of these Asian American diasporas from the U.S. nation-state as a form of critical distance, but one that does not collapse into the romantic projections of Orientalist otherness.

Unlike its European counterpart, American Orientalism has drawn its vocabulary more from mass media and popular culture than from high art and literature, as is befitting the nation that gave birth to Kodak, Hollywood, Disney, and CNN. Accordingly, many of the investigations of American Orientalism have been based

more in media and cultural studies than in literary studies, mirroring the way Said himself turned to analyzing mass media when understanding contemporary Orientalism in his *Covering Islam* (Said 1981; Robert Lee 1999; A. Lee 2001; Capino 2010; Shimizu 2007; Delmendo 2004; Davé, Nishime, and Oren 2005). Among these cultural studies approaches to American Orientalism has been a renewed interest in what I call "commodity Orientalism," or the history of trade in Orientalist consumer goods that has accompanied or even anticipated the movement of Oriental peoples into the United States (Tchen 1999; Yoshihara 2003; Josephine Lee 2010; Tu 2010). Uncannily echoing the complaints of Asian American students that "Orientals are rugs, not people" (Robert Lee 1999, ix), this line of work traces the association of rugs, tea, porcelain, and silk *with* people, but not just to dispute the objectification of Asian Americans. From the early American trade with China that made the fortune of John Astor in the early 19th century to the craze in "Japanese taste" around the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), commodity Orientalism frames the movement of goods not only within a symbolic system but also a materialist economy that mirrors the circulation of laborers. At times, Asian American subjects may even twist commodity Orientalism to their advantage, marketing their goods or products as exotic in an act of "self-Orientalization." For example, Chinese American restaurateurs have been perfecting this art form for over a century, consciously shaping their menus and décor into a Orientalist fantasy for the enjoyment of their non-Chinese customers (Chow 2005; Hsu 2008).

Some recent versions of commodity Orientalism may involve intangible goods such as the popularity of yoga, Buddhism, or the martial arts, sometimes led by Asians or Asian Americans like D. T. Suzuki or Deepak Chopra, but more often enabling non-Asians to take on the role of Oriental master or teacher in these exchanges (Iwamura 2010). Here, an experience of "becoming-Oriental," rather than an object imbued with Oriental culture, is what is being commodified, enabling non-Asian consumers access to an idealized realm of spirituality, authenticity, or cultural otherness that some may view as a form of racial minstrelsy. Another variant known as techno-Orientalism has likewise transformed the process of assigning cultural and/or racial meaning to commodities. This term, coined within East Asian studies and anthropology (Morley and Robins 1995), refers to high-tech commodities that seem devoid of the "Oriental" cultural markers that accompanied the earlier rugs and teacups: Toyota vehicles, Sony Walkmen, Samsung cell phones, Nintendo gamesets, etc. While these products seem to be neutral, even culturally "universal" objects, they are nonetheless racialized as markers of Oriental technological advancement or economic domination. Techno-Orientalism accompanied the rise of Asian economic powers like Japan and South Korea, which aroused anxiety both in the sphere of international trade and also in domestic race relations, most tragically in the killing of Chinese American engineer Vincent Chin in Detroit, Michigan, in 1982 in the midst of a racial panic within the American auto industry. Asian Americanists have begun to take more interest in techno-Orientalism, examining its effects in the popularization of anime, K-pop, video games, and cyberpunk culture (Nakamura 2002; Nguyen and Tu 2007; Tu and Nelson 2001; Chun and Joyrich 2009; J. Park 2010).

Asian American studies has also taken the lead in investigations of America's imperial legacies at large. After all, Rudyard Kipling may have been known as a chronicler of the British empire, but his poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899) was about the American colonization of the Philippines. Here, Asian American studies does not simply replicate postcolonial studies,

but produces an alternate history of American imperialism, as seen in the colonial occupations of the Philippines and Japan, neocolonial relations with Taiwan, South Korea, and Vietnam, and the continued colonization of Hawai'i, Guam, Saipan, and American Samoa (Rafael 2000; Jodi Kim 2010; Kauanui 2008b). In some of this work, Asian Americans are not always aligned with the colonized, but sometimes collaborate with or take on the role of imperialists, as in critiques of settler colonialism in Hawai'i or Asian American conservatives (Fujikane and Okamura 2008; Camacho and Shigematsu 2010; Prashad 2005) These critical, transnational investigations of American Orientalism not only reanimate the Third World internationalism of the Asian American movement, but also break new ground in critical ethnic studies by showing racialization as a complex and continuing process. One outgrowth of this new use of American Orientalism has been the linking of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim Americans with Asian Americans, especially as the ongoing War on Terror intensifies the racialization of "brownness" across all of Asia and beyond (McAlister 2001; Volpp 2002; J. Kang 2002; Bayoumi 2009; Prashad 2008; Puar 2007; Rana 2011). Another development has been the investigation of Afro-Asian connections both internationally as well as within the U.S., connecting the larger realm of Said's Orient with post-Bandung national alignments as well as a politically productive African American Orientalism (Prashad 2001; Steen 2006; Mullen 2004; Deutsch 2001; Ongiri 2002). These two trends are an apt tribute to Said's original formulation of Orientalism, reuniting the black, brown, and yellow inhabitants of that imaginary geography into reinvigorated political coalitions, and allowing the Orient to write its own future.

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## Performance

Josephine Lee

"Performance" can mean the everyday accomplishment of a task or function, or acting in special contexts such as plays, music, or sports. The first meaning links "performance" to the fulfillment of social roles; in both cases, instances of "performance" reference and reiterate the conventions of meaning that define communities, societies, or nations ("as American as [eating] apple pie"). Scholars have adopted the term "performative" (derived from language philosopher J. L. Austin's "performative utterance" in *How to Do Things with Words* [1962]) to good effect in analyzing the everyday enactments that constitute aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, class, and race (Butler 1988; Parker and Sedgwick 1995). These understandings of "performance" and its variants are tied to what Erving Goffman (1959) called the "presentation of self": how words and actions manifest human signification, relationship, status, and power.

The more specific case of theatrical performance is never far from these usages. Different attitudes toward theater, evidenced by those who applaud actors for their virtuosity or those who react with more puritanical suspicion, engage theater's basic tensions between actor and character, action and interpretation, and private motivation and public show. That Asian American studies and other studies of race and ethnicity frequently use "performance," as well as other stage terms such as "acting," "mask," "role," or "character," suggests similarly dramatic tensions in offstage life.