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The Essential Fallacy of Europe: A Study of Edward Said's Nietzschean Language Problems

Edward Said's groundbreaking essay *Orientalism* takes as its object of study a body of literature largely generated by French and British scholars during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. In Said's opinion, the Orientalist school of thought amounted to little more than a corrupt literary corpus created through Eurocentric vanity and naïveté while operating under the pretense of scientifically observing and defining the area known as "the Orient." Through analyzing the discourse of the time, Said sheds light on Europe's cultural consensus about the Orient and Orientals while emphasizing a connection between arrogant Orientalist rhetoric and rationalizations for the institutional domination of the region by foreign imperialists. Though rarely the Orientalist's goal, Said holds that Orientalist observations of the region we now mainly refer to as "the Middle East" or "Western Asia" contributed to and concretized the enthymeme that Europe occupied a civilizationally superior status when compared to other global regions. As such, seemingly benign Orientalist writings—e.g. ethnographic studies, travelogues, and quasi-scientific surveys—later lent themselves to moral, religious, and ethical justifications of colonizing the "other." Of this Said writes, "Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice" (6).

Said's objections to the project of Orientalism cannot be reasonably disputed, as Orientalist literature is riddled with: exaggerations of cultural differences between Europeans and Orientals; ethnocentric judgments; authorial bias and unexamined prejudices; guesswork; ignored language barriers; and literary misrepresentations of Orientals that doggedly conform and homogenize diverse human populations into forced sameness. Said maintains that Orientalists aggressively lumped together lands on the periphery of Europe (most notably Northern Africa, the Levant, and the Middle East) and sought to identify characteristics in these populations that justified the mass stereotyping of Orientals as an "other." What mattered most to European Orientalists was not the boundless heterogeneity Oriental cultures exhibited amongst themselves, but rather the quality that they did not exhibit—that of being European.

Almost anything about the Oriental could change—whether he was Muslim or not; what food she prepared and ate; what languages he spoke; what her daily customs were—but nothing could change the fact that an Oriental was considered an alien of Western civilization.

Ironically, this alienation carries the mark of being *unheimlich* or uncanny to the European observer, as the Oriental and his customs are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Of this, Said writes, “One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing” (58). For the Orientalist, the Orient was enough like Europe for it to be understood analogously, but different enough to be spoken of scathingly as a decadent and degrading land. One result of this type of thinking was the common Orientalist assertion that Islam was a degenerate form of Christianity, similar enough for the links between the two monotheistic religions to be apparent, but different enough for Islam to be denigrated and feared. Of course, the use of the uncanny analytic often led the Orientalist to erroneous assertions of truth. One such assertion was “that Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity,” though in fact the two historical figures—one a savior, one a prophet—are incomparable in their respective theological roles (60). This miscalculation, however, did not prevent Orientalists from referring to Islam as “Mohammedanism,” a malapropism that further invited comparisons between Mohammed and Jesus, and, for Christian audiences, relegated the former to the status of messianic imposter.

For Said, believing what Orientalist discourse had to say about Orientals was and is tantamount to believing in unscientific “Platonic essences” (38). Said’s reference to Plato suggests that the Orientalist’s conceptions of “The East,” “the Orient,” and “Orientals” were based more on metaphysical speculation than empirical observation. The Orientalist’s motivating question “What is the true *nature* of the Orient/al?” presupposes: a) that such a thing as an Oriental does in fact exist (it should be noted that residents of the Orient did not themselves create the term “Oriental”; its origins can be traced back to the Roman Empire); and b) that cultures have unchanging natures—or essences—by which they can be identified. By searching for the *a priori* criteria of the Orient and its residents, the Orientalist scholar narrowed his field of study and necessarily ignored stark qualitative and quantitative differences populations exhibited. In order to define the Orient, Orientalists greatly exaggerated the cultural similarities between disparate peoples, creating the illusion of unifying traits and an imagined community of the “other,” which Said argues reflected little more than prevailing European biases about non-European lands and peoples. Instead of seeking objective truth, the Orientalist searched for unifying traits all Orientals shared, failing to comprehend that these traits did not exist and were therefore not observable.

Ironically, critics of Said's *Orientalism* have accused him of simultaneously gainsaying the methods of Orientalist scholars while using similar methods to create post-colonial discourse. Aijaz Ahmad notes in *In Theory* that Said relies on an over-generalized, imaginary, and static cosmopolitan Europe without ever questioning whether his own conception of a Eurocentric globe should be redefined or dismantled. Others have expressed similar questions about the veracity of Said's depicted Europe, some of which include: 1) In treating European scholarship as a thing unto itself, does Said add credence to the Orientalist assumption that Europe is/was distinct from its environs? And 2) does Said's survey of Orientalist discourse use inductive logic to generalize and make truth claims about the West, Europe, and European subjects in much the same way Orientalists used selective findings to generalize the East, the Orient, and Oriental subjects? In regard to the latter question, I suggest that the Europe Said invokes in *Orientalism* (and later in *Culture and Imperialism*) results from the same metaphysical constructionism that he openly criticizes in the works of Orientalists. I also maintain that Europe as a continent and isolatable culture is itself an imaginary creation. In regard to the latter point, this is somewhat acknowledged by Said himself, though an incomplete application of the Nietzschean methodology he uses in devising his analytic prevents him from fully exploring or exposing the fantasy of a distinctly "European" space.

In order to engage with these questions, I will first examine how verily Said adheres to the Nietzschean strategy of analysis alluded to throughout *Orientalism*. On multiple occasions, Said uses Nietzschean strategies to help scrutinize the ability of Orientalism to reveal humanist knowledge. For Said, the hubristic desire to understand the Orient telegraphed the project's lack of success, an opinion most likely stemming from the Nietzschean tradition of doubting and denying objective truth claims. Nietzsche frequently wrote that what we understand to be true, scientific knowledge is little more than a battery of selectively reinforced presuppositions. As such, that Orientalist studies pre-viewed Orientals as inherently and essentially different from their European counterparts, but still similar enough to be understood through facile observation, tainted all hopes for objective understanding.

Nietzsche's influence on Said's project is explicit—the German philologist and philosopher receives no fewer than 16 references throughout *Orientalism*—and many of Said's contemporaries have written about the connections between the two thinkers. In the essay "*Orientalism* and its Problems" (1983), Dennis Porter traces the Nietzschean tendencies in Said's work, stating that *Orientalism* operates largely through "the character of a Nietzschean genealogy which delimits a given field of inquiry in order to expose the multiple mystified relations between knowledge and power, culture and politics" (150). For Said, a critical step in exposing these "mystified relations"—which I read as being similar to metaphysical ideas or

Platonic essences because they confuse approximate definitions with epitomic truth categories—involves addressing where Orientalist scholars fell back on false logic and syncretistic thinking in order to conceive of and rationalize preconceptions about Oriental/European difference. Because Orientalist thinking is so totalizing in its representations, so dedicated in its aim to reveal the truth about the European “other,” Orientalist authors such as William Lane, Richard Burton, Duncan MacDonald, and T.E. Lawrence often make statements that extend beyond the scope what they can possibly know or see. The definitions they came up with typically invoked the essence of the Oriental or Mohammedan characters that, as Said has noted, are more likely influenced by personal opinion and perspectival manipulation than by a commitment to reporting unbiased truth. Said argues: “Thus [Duncan MacDonald’s] vision of Islam, as much as [T.E.] Lawrence’s of the Arabs, implicates *definition* of the object with the *identity* of the person defining (emphasis in original). All Arab Orientals must be accommodated to a vision of an Oriental type *as constructed by the Western scholar*, as well as to a specific encounter with the Orient in which the Westerner regrasps the Orient’s essence as a consequence of his intimate estrangement from it” (my emphasis) (248).

There are several important critiques going on here, but the most significant one, in my opinion, is that the Orientalist shapes and warps his observations of the Orient in order to reinforce his prior beliefs. Because all “Arab Orientals” exhibit relative cultural similarity based on criteria like geographic proximity, language, religious custom, and ethnic background, the Orientalist will use his observations to argue that all Arab Orientals are generalizable, while also arguing that the witnessed criteria helps secure the notion that East and West lead incomparable and incompatible lives. (Never mind the fact that until 1492 the Iberian peninsula housed large populations of Moorish practitioners of Islam who were essentially living in “The West” as “Westerners” despite having ancestors who emigrated from Northern Africa and the Middle East.) In returning to the Nietzschean thread of Said’s analysis, by creating categories of human existence constructed under the rouse of geographical anthropology, the European Orientalist does a sort of violence to the Orient by using categorical thinking to translate his experiences into words that promote false understandings.

Said argues that the principle folly of Orientalism is one of representation, and he uses Nietzsche’s thoughts on the deceptive nature of language to affirm that this folly takes seed in the Orientalist’s desire to understand the Orient by writing about it. When Porter acknowledges that the mistake of Orientalism is that it “implicates *definition* of the object with the *identity* of the person defining” (emphasis in original), he shows us the psychological process by which words—in the form of definitions—corrupted the Orientalist agenda. Nietzsche’s 1873 essay *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* delves into the problematic structure and function of

language because, Nietzsche observes, words are ultimately unreliable: “the contrast between truth and lying comes into existence here for the first time: the liar uses the valid tokens of designation—words—to make the unreal appear to be real” (143). Said’s distrust of Orientalist literature and its ability to construct factual statements through language is familiar territory for Nietzschean analysis because, for Nietzsche, all systems of words (read: all discourses) warrant suspicion; words themselves are an inexact system of communication, and in turn become vessels of deception. This misleading happens not because of rhetorical persuasion, but because the nature of language is to incompletely, incongruously, or inaccurately represent that which is being represented. Words lend authority to representational illusions, and in so doing they make the unreal real. Nietzsche suggests as much when he asks in *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* (a text Said uses in Chapter 3 of *Orientalism*) “Is language the full and adequate expression of realities?” (143). While he leaves the question to linger without an answer, the knowing reader surmises the proper response is an implied and emphatic “No!”

Occupying the position of a Nietzschean skeptic in regards to language, Said concludes that the problem with Orientalist language is that it *is* a language and therefore invokes the unreal when it speaks. When Orientalism attempts to put into words what is observed outside of language, a critical component of the observation becomes lost in translation and replaced with representational meanings that only gesture at half or partial truths. Additionally problematic for projects that aim at revealing truth is that representational language often takes on additional semantic variance and probability. “So far as it existed in the West’s awareness,” Said writes, “the Orient was a word which later accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations, and connotations...that...did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the word” (203). As in the case of substituting “Mohammedanism” for “Islam,” the language of Orientalism became more polemical and less representative the longer it persisted in the cultural consciousness of those exposed to it.

The difficulty in using a Nietzschean critique of language as a methodology is that not only does Nietzsche question the relative value of words, but he also frequently disputes that such things as objective knowledge and truth exist at all. In an iconoclastic fashion similar to Nietzsche, Said’s *Orientalism* questions presumed knowledge and cultural assumptions about East and West, forcing us to ask whether the belief that these cultures are radically different is a factual reality or an intellectually inherited misapprehension. A Nietzschean argument would have us believe that what we claim to know and to be self-evident (e.g. that the Orient *is* different from Europe because it is not European; that Europe and the Orient are distinctly separate cultural forms; that any similarity between a European and an Oriental will be overruled by the determining geographic factor that one lives in Europe and the other in the

Orient) are more often than not beliefs lacking proper justification. Nietzsche argues this specifically in *Philosophy and Truth*: “Knowledge, strictly speaking, has only the form of tautology and is *empty*....The omitting of what is individual provides us with a concept, and with this our knowledge begins: in *categorizing*, in the establishment of *classes*” (emphasis in original) (51). In this respect, a Nietzschean critique of taxonomies would insist that there exists a positive correlation between believing in the categories used to divide peoples, regions, religions, etc. and the frequency with which these categories are heard. In other words, repeated exposure to X produces a firm belief in X regardless of whether or not X in and of itself is a verifiable category.

More often than not, these categorical exposures take the form of a discursive language. Following the plan laid out by Nietzsche, Said maintains that the more European audiences read and heard about the differences between themselves and Orientals, the more likely these audiences were to believe in the factual and definitive relevance of these differences. “Look at how different Orientals are from Europeans,” the Orientalist audience might tell himself after reading Orientalist literature, “simply because they are not European.” It is the profound influence of tautological categorization—the reinforcement of ideas about the Orient through circular logic and the repetition of unquestioned precepts—that informs the Orientalist’s notion of the Oriental race, and it is this tautology that Said uses Nietzschean methods to expose.

Said’s position in regards to the encoded fallibility of Orientalist language is unwavering. He argues that Orientalism’s

objective discoveries—the work of innumerable devoted scholars who edited texts and translated them, codified grammars, wrote dictionaries, reconstructed dead epochs, produced positivistically verifiable learning—have and always have been conditioned by the fact that its truths, like any truths delivered by language, are embodied in language. (203)

Immediately after stating this, Said goes on to cite from *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, using Nietzsche’s words to draw a connection between definitional or essentialist language and its use as a political instrument. For Nietzsche, language, power, and truth are related in that language is:

a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.

(203)

Said's stance on discursive language itself, and his use of Nietzsche to inform his position, begs the question: In creating a post-colonial discourse, can Said negotiate a space for his own scholarly observations that does not suffer from the same trappings as the Orientalist's language?

It is true that questioning the Orientalist's expression and claims of knowledge are qualities that help make Said's study of Orientalism profound and brilliant, and yet one of the complexities of his study is that he uses a fairly nihilistic philosophy regarding language and truth to introduce a book-length essay (a collection of linguistic statements) meant to create a body of knowledge (tautologized "facts" that produce a discourse) to serve as a summary statement (typifying, essentialist, or categorical thinking) about the Orientalist tradition. One can only hope Said was aware that creating a new discursive field of study that both responds to written language and attempts to present facts in the form of written language would inherit the same epistemic and language-based vulnerabilities that invite criticism of Orientalist scholars' work, the most polemical of which is the casual use of metaphysical and essentialist terms.

Said's casual use of metaphysical language can most evidently be seen in his frequent use of "Europe," "Europeans," and "the West" as terms that represent concrete factual realities when a more rigid Nietzschean skeptic would regard these concepts as little more than tautological classes created and repeated for convenient categorization. It is unclear to what extent Said compels his readers to treat "Europe," "Europeans" and "the West" as little more than creative constructs, though in tracing the epistemic genealogy that allowed Orientalists to develop their field in the first place we see that Said understands the fictitious nature of the Europe/Orient division even if he himself does not gesture at fully dismantling it. In Chapter 2 of *Orientalism*, "Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental," Said acknowledges that categorical psychologizing is in and of itself an arbitrary imaginative process that—while representing reality in the mind of the thinker—may not truthfully correspond with the external composition of reality. Of this arbitrariness he writes:

It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call 'the land of the barbarians.' In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' is a

way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word 'arbitrary' here because imaginative geography of the 'our land—barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own 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).

Even while acknowledging that arbitrary othering plays a part in the constructed partitioning of geography and culture, at no point does Said question whether Europe as a continent or culture is separate from the Orient only in the minds of those who consider themselves Europeans (subjective difference *a la* subjects), or whether Europe is itself markedly different land whose people, customs, and geography empirically cordon it off from bordering regions (objective difference *a la* physical reality). While Said tacitly admits to the arbitrary nature of the Europe/Orient divide, does studying European scholarship in a vacuum that continues to treat it as a unique intellectual tradition adequately scrutinize the cultural division Europeans themselves perceived to be in place? Or does treating European scholarship as its own thing merely add objective credence to the ostensible East/West binary? To put the question another way, can Said earnestly study a "European" school of thought or field if "Europe" itself is an arbitrary category that only served to emphasize false differences between Europeans and others?

The issue at hand is not whether or not Europeanism exists as an identity—it most certainly, does despite the obvious fact that this identity is a contrivance that merely serves the subjective demands of those who adopt it. The more pressing issue is whether or not terms like "Europe" and "The West" are used within *Orientalism*—and thereafter post-colonial studies—in ways that do not: a) homogenize all European identities as sharing permanent and unshakable markers, of which fierce Orientalizing is one; and b) ignore the grand diversity of the peoples and the intellectual traditions hitherto lumped under the rubric of Europe. Just as the term "Orient" advocates a false sense of monolithic sameness that encapsulates "every known Asiatic and North African civilization, ancient and modern," so to does "Europe" create the erroneous impression that modern and ancient Iberians, Romans, Greeks, Slavs, Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, Germans, Franks, Basques, and others live/lived in a spirit of metaphysical conjunction that trumps trivial national, cultural, religious, political, intellectual, and linguistic idiosyncrasy (52). Where Said stands in regard to resolving the debate as to whether Europe/the West are objective categories in their own right, or whether they are just as much fabrications as the Orient/The East, remains unclear. At times, he speaks of these categories as though they

are far from arbitrary. In part three of the introduction to *Orientalism* Said writes: “Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an ‘Oriental’ as a child growing up in two British colonies. All of my education...has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted” (25). One could argue that because Said applies scare quotes around the term “Oriental” but not around the approximately antithetical term “Western,” he subtly encourages readers to continue viewing The West (and by extension Europe and Europeans) as being characteristic only unto itself. The misstep, in my opinion, is that Said curates the metaphysical West here while simultaneously asking readers to dismantle their essentialist notions of the Orient and disbelieve the work Orientalist scholars. This then begs the question: if the Orient is an essentialist idea ripe for deconstructive examination, shouldn’t the same level of intellectual dedication be applied to dispelling the rumor of Europe?

In using staid concepts without questioning their validity as demarcated cultural or geographical categories, Said could be accused of helping to further the pre-colonialist/colonialist notion that Europe and the Orient were essentially different types, a distinction that exists to this day as a line drawn between Europe and Asia. For some readers, Europe will simply signify a geographical region: the continent that lies East of the Atlantic Ocean, north of Africa, and west of the Orient/Asia. However, it should be noted that as a geographical region, Europe is not a true continent. Historian and retired Columbia professor Jacques Barzun has expressed similar frustrations with the term “Europe” in his book *From Dawn to Decadence*. “Europe would be inexact,” he writes in reference to using the word to suggest an entire continent. “Europe is the peninsula that juts out from the great mass of Asia without a break and is ridiculously called a continent” (3).

The division between Europe and Asia is certainly imaginary, and as a result, the presumed distinction between “Europeans” and “Asians” (which takes genealogical root in the division between “Europeans” and “Orientals”) also originates in fantasy. While cartographers might regard the division between Europe and Asia as the Ural Mountain range, the Eurasian continent is the only one that is subject to division through landform. (By comparison, the Rocky Mountains of North America are both longer in span and higher in altitude than the Urals, and the western and eastern halves of North America remain intact.) It is well noted that if a legitimate division between Europe and Asia doesn’t exist, culture, language, and religion have stood in lieu of true geographic separation as the signifiers of difference. However, as Samir Amin notes in *Eurocentrism*, even though the East and West exist as concepts, the idea of the West is much more influenced by the East than its citizen practitioners acknowledge. Amin argues that Indo-European languages, Greek Hellenism, and Christianity are all dominant phenomena in the Western culture narrative that have roots in the Orient and blur the line

between European and the European “other.”

When presented as a problem of language, the continued belief in the division between the Orient/Asia and Europe has the tendency to reinforce the binary opposition between East and West (extending into the binaries of Orient/Occident and Asian/European). As such, post-colonial studies must lead the movement to replace such an erroneous binary with a more sophisticated and contemporary understanding of cultural and global geographies. The division between Europe and the Orient/Asia is not geographical, it is ideological; it is a division based on the intellectual tradition of observing ostensible variation (e.g. race, religion, location, appearance, power, technological development, political rule, etc.) within human populations as designators of essential human types. From essentialist thinking it is only a short leap to thoughts of cultural superiority, and it is this mode of thought that generated and bolstered belief in the righteousness of the colonialist project.

It is shocking that debates over the legitimacy of the terms “Europe” and “European” don’t enter post-colonial discussions more frequently. Equally strange is that Said never addresses how Europe came to be viewed by itself or others as essentially different from the Orient. Neither does he mention which differences between the regions justify separate categorization. The very fractioning or cleaving off of European scholarship from that of Asia/the Orient is a fundamental aspect of Said’s study, though Said never provides evidence for the existence of a culturally independent Europe, thereby leaving an entire tautology unaddressed. Instead, Europe is assumed at the outset of *Orientalism* to be a linguistically, aesthetically, and culturally separate from the Orient even though Said acknowledges the arbitrariness of the European distinction itself. This oversight, while not fully undermining the importance of Said’s project because it is true that the European scholars who participated in Orientalism staunchly considered themselves different than the objects of their study, does reveal a vulnerability: by inheriting the fallacy of a distinct Europe from the Orientalist tradition itself Said awkwardly incriminates Orientalist discourse for its obsession with difference without then being able to completely dispel the illegitimacy of said difference. As such, he adopts and reiterates Orientalist global partitions that isolate Europe and the Orient. The effect of this reiteration is that instead of reimagining Eurasian geography, readers are given no other option than to use the same metaphysical demarcations Orientalists espoused.

The real issue here is not simply one of Said’s geographic or cultural inexactitude when talking about Europe and the Orient. The issue is that using pre-colonial/colonial categorical language to talk about the shape and regions of the world reinforces the very binary thinking that produced Orientalist and colonial discourse in the first place. Despite his professed Nietzschean tendencies and disbelief in the validity of linguistic categories, Said falls victim in

both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* to writing as though the difference between these regions is precise and self-evident when it is anything but. Even as Said asks us to tear down our conception of the Orient, he continues to conceive of the world as having a pre-colonial/colonial shape by conceiving of *a* Europe or *a* West populated by Europeans and Westerners. Though he acknowledges that geographical limits are largely arbitrary, statements like “that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’ in discourse about it” (22), and “the Arab and Islamic world as a whole is hooked into the Western market system” (324) do little more than confirm that that Said is inclined to apply Nietzschean scrutiny to the findings of Orientalists and while unreservedly mouthing the binarisms promulgated by the Orientalist tradition itself. When Said uses terms like “the Arab and Islamic world” and juxtaposes them against “the Western market system,” he denies that Arab or Islamic components or individuals could possibly occupy, be entrenched in, or share elements with Western market, economy, and consumer. Instead, the Arab/Islamic Orient and the non-Arab/Islamic West remain so categorically opposed, even in the modern world where digital economies and increasing migratory flux have vastly changed the demographic landscape of the Eurasian continent, that when “East” and “West” confront one another the result is still interpreted to be the hybridization or interfacing of two divergent metaphysical forms.

Ahmad’s *In Theory* is similarly critical of Said’s acceptance of a self-evident Europe reality, though Ahmad doesn’t identify Said’s error in logic as having to do with an incomplete application of Nietzschean scrutiny. Nevertheless, his points are not dissimilar to mine: “It is rather remarkable how constantly and comfortably Said speaks...[throughout *Orientalism*] of *a* Europe, or the West, as a self-identical fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, an imagination and a will; and of the Orient as its object” (183). Though Ahmad does not draw the connection, his reading here is clearly dubious of Said’s methods because they do not abandon metaphysical thinking. To wit, Ahmad accuses Said of falling victim to imaginary categories: “[Said] seems to posit, stable subject-object identities, as well as ontological and epistemological distinctions between [the East and the West]. In what sense, then, is Said himself *not* an Orientalist...? (183).” And later, Ahmad touches on Said’s fictionalization of *a* Europe:

Said quite justifiably accuses the ‘Orientalist’ of essentializing the Orient, but his own essentializing of ‘the West’ is equally remarkable....Said of course gives us the same ‘Europe’—unified, self-identical, transhistorical, textual....[t]hat this Athens-to-Albion Europe is itself a recent fabrication...and that *any* Aeschylus-to-Kissinger narrative is

therefore also equally a fabrication (or a fabricated reflection of a prior reflection), is something that does not seem to have occurred to Said. (183)

Ahmad continues to take Said to task, arguing that Said was the first writer to propose “that Europeans were *ontologically* incapable of producing any true knowledge about non-Europe” and that “Said was emphatic on this point, and he mobilized all sorts of eclectic procedures to establish it” (178-179). While I might defend Said by arguing that his snubbing of “true knowledge” has much to do with his support of Nietzschean dismissals of the knowledge project at large, what is important to note here is that Ahmad also reads Said as believing in a European essence that categorically differentiates it from the Orient. In so doing, Said must disregard internal European differences and view these differences as assimilatable into an overarching European essence. This is the same move made time and time again by Orientalists as they attempted to define the Orient through hackneyed observations. As soon as Said introduces the Europe/Orient binary into post-colonial discourse, he unwittingly promotes the continued estrangement of Europe from the lands it is contiguous with. In doing so, he also estranges Europeans from the peoples and cultures they are most similar to. Use of the words “Europe,” “European,” and “the West” might seem relatively benign, but belief in Europe as a place apart from the rest of the world is the start of the othering that has dominated the globe since before the days of High Imperialism.



When Said writes in *Orientalism* “The principles of identity and noncontradiction clearly do not bind the Orientalist,” one gets a sense of the falsity with which he believes the terms “Orient” and “Oriental” were constructed through faulty representational methods (236). In this quote, Said directly references the Orientalist’s tendency to exclude or ignore particular information about the Orient (e.g. the realization that not all “Orientals” are necessarily Muslim) that might trouble preexisting or pre-established conceptions of the region’s demographics. For Said, Orientalists’ metaphysical understanding of the Orient allowed for gross contradictions and inconsistencies to exist under the same heading because the essence or spirit of the Orient is a false sameness that trumps all evidence of dissimilarity. As seen in numerous Orientalist tracts, the nature of the Orient is: to change and to remain the same; to exist as a land defined by romantic antiquity and a modern degradation of spirit; and to be both religiously and socially restrictive while at the same time shamefully libidinous and licentious. To the modern reader, these contradictions indicate a need for further cultural analysis and an intellectual teleology not bent on definitive assessments; to the Orientalist, these contradictions

indicated the very spirit or essence of the Orient. Whereas modern scholars might look at these contradictions as proof that the Orient was not a homogenous or unified field—that it in fact *was not* a single idea but an amalgamation of facts and observations about regions without firm boundaries where various languages, ethnicities, cultures, customs, religions, and classes all created microcosmic social phenomenology—Orientalists made exceptions in favor of metaphysical definitions. Almost as though shrouded in magic, the Orient could exhibit any character or quality and still reinforce the Orientalist’s notion of what it was.

The same, however, could be said of the unified idea of the West that Said references in *Orientalism*. For Said, the West and Europe are equally magical, reduced to an essence, and full of contradictions that are ignored. The belief that Europe is a separate geography from the Orient/Asia and a homogenizable region holds true even in Said’s later work *Culture and Imperialism*, where he uses the terms “Europe” and “the West” without discussing what he precisely he means by them, what their limits as signifiers might be, and what flaws these terms might introduce into his study. In the first paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism*’s introduction Said makes a reference to “the modern metropolitan West” (xi). In the second paragraph he points to “the general European effort to rule distant lands and peoples” (xi). Of course, one can easily find regions in what is regarded as the West that are not modern or metropolitan just as easily as one can find historical evidence of European nations that did not participate in century-long colonial expeditions. While it is true that nations such as Great Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and others were horrible perpetrators of colonial cruelty, so too were nations such as China and Japan. To call colonialism a “general European effort” is to categorize and generalize millions of non-participants as participants while at the same time ignoring other participants in colonialism simply because they are not “European.”

While Said generously cheers on other authors who have tackled literary and cultural projects that explode larger categorical stereotyping in favor of specific, localized, and revelatory scholarship, he himself does not holistically accomplish this aim in *Orientalism* or *Culture and Imperialism*. Instead, Western Eurasian colonial nations are nominally merged and regarded as having the same cultural history as their non-colonial neighbors. Furthermore, Orientalist discourse is suggested as representing a zeitgeist across the entirety of Europe’s ill-defined ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic sprawl. According to Said, examples of successful scholarship have broken “up the geography of the Middle East and India as homogenous, reductively understood domains” thereby elimination “the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise” (xxiv); however, Said himself does not break up the geography of Europe, and neither does he aid in the suspension of tired binary oppositions. While there is no doubt that more scholarship exposing the cultural diversity of the

Middle East and India is needed (as these regions have long been held to be isomorphic and homogenous when in fact they are anything but) a similar dismantling of the notion of “Europe” and “The West” would help free post-colonial studies from a Eurocentric partitioning of the globe that is neither based on reality nor particularly useful in understanding the origins and effects of colonialism. Sadly, Said doesn’t take this plunge. Instead, he writes that the “power to narrate, or block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” without realizing that he has the power to dispel notions of a monolithic Orient *and* a monolithic Europe but chooses not to (xiii).

Like the terms “The East,” “the Orient” and “Orientals,” the mythic narratives of “The West,” “Europe” and “European” have been exhausted of their descriptive, geographic, ethnic, and political utility. These words are themselves outdated, obviated, and inaccurate in what they are intended to describe and circumscribe—namely, an imagined community. So long as we continue to view Europe and the Orient/Asia as essentially remote, the Eurasian continent will forever be obfuscated by binarisms. A more accurate understanding of Eurasia would not divide the continent and its people’s shared histories and intellectual traditions, but instead consider it a vast area of varied—but etiologically related—cultural permutations. As for the words “Europe,” “European” and “The West,” it is time we started thinking about giving them up.

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