

Peripheral Transmodernities

Peripheral Transmodernities:
South-to-South Intercultural Dialogues
between the Luso-Hispanic World
and “the Orient”

Edited by

Ignacio López-Calvo

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To Charlotte Craig

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INTRODUCTION

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Frequently, large metropolitan cities have subway services that extend from suburban neighborhoods to the center; however they do not offer connecting service between the suburban subcenters themselves. This is an analogy for what occurs in intercultural dialogue.

—Enrique Dussel¹

This volume is a collection of essays dealing with the critical dialogue between the cultural production of the Hispanic/Latino world and that of the so-called Orient or the Orient itself, including the Asian and Arab worlds. The term “Transmodernities” used in the title is borrowed from the Argentine philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel to suggest a transmodern “pluriverse” (including European and postcolonial worldviews, such as the Asian, African, Latin American, and Islamic ones) that refuses to be homologized into a globalized (or Americanized), univocal hegemonic culture. As we see in these essays, the Europeans’ cultural others (peripheral nations and former colonies) have established an intercultural and intercontinental dialogue among themselves, without feeling the need to resort to the center-metropolis’ mediation (hence the epigraph to this introduction). These South-to-South dialogues tend not to be as asymmetric as the old dialogue between the (former) metropolis (the hegemonic, Eurocentric center) and the colonies. Dussel’s term also contests the idea that Modernity is a uniquely European phenomenon. In this way, it attempts to transcend (and calls for moving beyond) the concepts of Modernity and Postmodernity by incorporating non-western knowledges, always from a critical and ethical perspective. In his view, many other now peripheral (but formerly central) world cultures have

¹ “Frecuentemente las grandes megalópolis tienen servicios de subterráneos que van de los barrios suburbanos hacia el centro; pero falta conexión de los subcentros suburbanos entre ellos. Exactamente por analogía acontece con el diálogo intercultural” (Dussel 18).

contributed to Modernity: “A future *trans*-modern culture—which assumes the positive moments of Modernity (as evaluated through criteria distinct from the perspective of the other ancient cultures)—will have a rich pluriversity and would be the fruit of an authentic intercultural dialogue, that would need to bear clearly in mind existing asymmetries” (18).²

These essays about Hispanic and Latino cultural production (most of them dealing with literature but some with urban art, music, and film) attest to the veracity of these abstract, philosophical thoughts, echoing and providing vivid examples of de-colonizing impetus and cultural resistance. In some of them, we can find peripheral subjectivities’ perception of other peripheral, racialized, and (post)colonial subjects and their cultures. They also reflect critical diasporic thought, border thinking, and everyday living in contact zones. Others problematize the hegemonic and Occidentalist discourse of the center as well as its echo: the colonized minds in the periphery. According to Dussel, this transversal and transmodern intercultural dialogue should produce the “mutual liberation of universal postcolonial cultures” (16).³ Yet, as Ramón Grosfoguel reminds us, our knowledges are always situated: “we always speak from a particular location in the power structures. Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’” (4). From this perspective, it is important to take into account the locus of enunciation of this volume: there is no denying that, while several of the contributors were born in Mexico, Chile, India, Korea, and other peripheral and semiperipheral countries, all of them (except for Suk Kyun Woo, who writes from Korea), belong to the American academy. In any case, this social location does not necessary mean that the critics are on the side of western hegemonic discourse. By the same token, critics writing from the South are not always on the subaltern side.

Moving on to the essays themselves, in hers, Debra Lee-DiStefano, opens the discussion regarding the role of theory, specifically orientalism, in the study of Asians in the Americas. She attempts to open a dialogue regarding what is, and perhaps what should be, the relationship between theory and texts written by Latin Americans of Asian descent. She points to Saidian Orientalism as a useful tool and briefly discusses its reception within the Academy.

² “Una futura cultura trans-moderna, que asume los momentos positivos de la Modernidad (pero evaluados con criterios distintos desde otras culturas milenarias), tendrá una pluriversidad rica y será fruto de un auténtico diálogo intercultural, que debe tomar claramente en cuenta las asimetrías existentes” (17).

³ “mutua liberación de las culturas universales postcoloniales” (15).

In “Walking the Talk: Saris, Sarapes, and Elephants in green Suits,” an essay that completes the chapter on theoretical and practical approaches, Roshni Rustomji (with Luz de la Rosa) describes their project on the construction and uses of collaborative and contrapuntal narratives in the different processes of colonialism and counter-colonialism. These narratives are collaborative and contrapuntal in the sense of a discourse in which dual or multiple “voices” discuss a set of personal and public narratives focusing on the themes of construction of resistance to colonialism. A series of personal and public narratives are presented as examples of Orientalism and its off-shoots, followed by a brief exploration of the possible uses of the concept of assimilation in counter-colonization, or resistance to colonization.

Chapter 2, *Spanish American Literature and Culture*, includes five essays. In the first one, Rosario Hubert analyzes three Latin American novels that are set in Asia: *La Gruta del Toscano* (2006) by Ignacio Padilla, *Mongolia* (2003) by Bernardo Carvalho, and *Los impostores* (2002) by Santiago Gamboa. She argues that the representation of the Oriental in these works responds to a cosmopolitan gesture that negotiates the relationship between displacement, literature, and the marginal site of enunciation of the Latin American writer in three ways. Firstly, the narratives’ extraterritorial impetus questions the mandate of articulating an exotic Latin America (magical realism) as a way of universalizing itself. Thus, instead of presenting a vision of Latin America, these novels present a Latin American vision of the world. Secondly, the construction of Asian poetic spaces denounces the exoticizing notion of Orientalism. These novels remove, refute, and ridicule the cultural particularities of the Oriental spaces to theoretically critique exoticism. Thirdly, the authors discuss the travel literature that universalized the exotic images of the Oriental. They reveal its one-dimensional rhetorical apparatus through a fragmentation of voices bound by one single fictional narrator that edits and rewrites the traveler’s account. Thus, according to Hubert, these authors recast, from a peripheral site of enunciation, the vast catalogue of European travel writing through fiction.

In turn, Sandra M. Pérez-Linggi looks at José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi’s use of the Orient in *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816). She explores how theoretical tools such as Said’s *Orientalism* fall short in determining how to interpret Oriental “otherness” from the marginalized Spanish colony which was New Spain. By looking at the details of Lizardi’s life, the novel itself, the colonial relationship between Mexico and the Philippines, and Chinese history, it becomes clear that his ideology mirrors that of the *Criollos* of his time. As a marginalized Spanish-American male of

European ancestry whose career as a journalist had been brought to a halt, Lizardi finds ideological refuge in the liberal ideals that inspired the French Revolution. Lizardi is not concerned with the fate of marginalized Mexicans but with himself and those like him who must become national fathers capable of transforming the nation. Given this political goal, Pérez-Linggi reveals how Lizardi uses the Chinese island of Sauchefú to represent the ideas of that alternate European hegemonic discourse which he supported. Since so little was known about China in Mexico, Lizardi's utopia uses the Orient as a blank canvas on which he paints his French-inspired idyllic society.

Suk Kyun Woo, in the third essay of this chapter, argues that José Martí's image as a hero of the independence of Cuba and a prophet who foretold the US imperialist expansion, has not always contributed to the full understanding of his thought and career, since it tends to lock him within the frame of the nation-state or Latin America. As Martí lived in an era of reconfiguration of the map of imperialism in which some countries came on stage and others were leaving, a broader approach is required. Under this premise, his article locates Martí's time and life in the context of "early globalization" between late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Defining Martí's times as an era of "global coloniality," Woo examines Martí's ideas about racism, a basic mode of operation of the global coloniality.

In the fourth essay, after a brief historic contextualization of R. H. Moreno-Durán's novel *Mambrú*, Moisés Park focuses on two instances in the book: Marilyn Monroe's visit in 1954, and the confession of a Colombian soldier who had an erection when he saw the ruins in Seoul. Park reads these fragments taking into account Marcusean notions of Eros and Thanathos, and recalls Picasso's representation of the Shinchon Massacre, depicted in his 1951 oil painting *Korean Massacre*. He concludes by reflecting on trauma, the misuse of sexual signs to compel forgetfulness, and how hegemonic powers take biopolitical dimensions in what Park refers as the *Marilyn Monroe Doctrine*.

Rebecca Riger Tsurumi closes chapter 2 with a study of three short stories by the Peruvian Carlos Yushimito del Valle. In "Oz," Yushimito tells the story of how an old Japanese inventor and his friend, a mechanical brainchild whom he has promoted as a gifted chess prodigy, deal with ethical dilemmas that will change their lives completely. In "Ciudad de cristal," a young Peruvian *Nisei* boy is forced to adapt when he is left in the care of his elderly grandmother, after his father is taken away to the U.S. internment camp in Crystal City, Texas. Feeling friendless and alone, he becomes obsessed with the image of fighting spiders and learns some of

life's lessons when he goes about trying to capture one for himself. In the third story, "Criaturas aladas," which forms the basis for Yushimito's future novel, we follow the path of a Japanese-Peruvian entomologist/photographer who ventures into the central Peruvian jungle in search of a rare, possibly extinct butterfly. Taking risks that belie his cautious nature, he is suddenly forced to wrestle with the dangers of this unpredictable, untamed land.

Chapter 3 is devoted to cultural production from the Iberian Peninsula. Timothy P. Gaster studies the role of gender and the feminine in the discourses of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish and Portuguese authors. He analyzes the image of the Japanese woman in one fictional epistolary novel, *Cartas d'um japonuez*, written by the Portuguese author Alfredo Gallis, as well as in some articles and images found in Spanish and Portuguese literary and art journals of that time period, as examples to highlight certain ideological elements that appear in Portuguese and Spanish discourses on the East. Gaster shows that due to the Spanish and Portuguese desire to reform the nation, the image they create of the Japanese woman often took on the idealized form of a submissive, obedient, clean, beautiful woman, as a contrasting model to/for the supposedly dirty, ugly, unfit, and libertine Iberian woman. He also argues that the use of the Japanese woman as a model became a social and political discourse of hygiene, social control, and discipline promoting obedience and a lack of difference that were intended to reform both societies. His essay highlights the link between making the nation strong, certain conservative political discourses, and gender (hygiene and reform of women) as part of that project. However, it also explores how that conservative discourse was contested and subverted from within through encounters with and explorations of the perverse/other.

Moving on to the second essay of Chapter 3, according to Axel Gasquet, Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyats* have a special place within Oriental classical works disseminated in the West at the end of the nineteenth century thanks to Edward Fitzgerald's philological project, whose first English translation was published in 1859. Juan Dublan was responsible for the first Spanish translation, which was published in Mexico in 1904. Between this year and 1930, eleven different translations into Spanish and several re-editions were made. In this essay, Gasquet addresses two points: a) what motivated the publication of so many translations and editions by young Latin American intellectuals; b) what was the new cultural atmosphere that made this literary and spiritual interest in the Orient possible. In his view, it was not just a trend. The exploration of new models of intellectual inspiration outside Europe, which was particularly

urgent after World War I, propitiated the search for new and universal ethical and spiritual values.

Closing the chapter, Svetlana V. Tyutina argues that a direct application of Said's term "Orientalism" is problematic in the case of the *Cantar de mio Cid* (1140), where the process of Orientalization has more than one vector and is defined by a variety of factors. First of them is the gradual shift in powers from Moorish invaders to their Christian opponents during the process of Christian Reconquest. Another factor is the existence of multiple cultural and religious groups, the most prominent ones being Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In the *Cantar*, these three selves are portrayed differently. While the first two groups are always represented in a dichotomy caused by their military and religious opposition, the third group is alienated from the society by the two. While the Christian-Muslim relationships generally fit the paradigm proposed by Said, the relations between these two groups and the third group follow a different Orientalization paradigm.

The three essays included in Chapter 4 are devoted to Brazilian narratives. Juan Ryusuke Ishikawa focuses on the analysis of the introduction of the Brazilian *haikai* through the arrival of the Japanese immigrants at the beginning of the 1900s. He explores the connection of this poetic form with the Japanese migratory phenomenon. After reviewing the arrival of *haikai* in Brazil, its propagation through Japanese immigrant communities and the establishment of a Brazilian *Saijiki* or reference book of *kigo*, Ishikawa addresses the importance of the current *grêmios* or groups practicing *haikai*, especially the "Grêmio Haikai Ipê," whose work has been fundamental in disseminating the *haikai* with publications, competitions, workshops and regular gatherings, all done in Portuguese. He also analyzes a recent book of *haikai* by contemporary poet Teruko Oda, a Japanese descendent and member of the Grêmio Haikai Ipê, to see how the *haikai* has been incorporated into contemporary Brazil. As Ishikawa points out, the *haikai* is a poem that, through its more than one hundred years of presence on Brazilian soil, has served as a cultural artifact that has bridged life experience and artistic expression.

In turn, José I. Suárez's essay summarizes the history of Japanese migrants in Brazil, and analyzes an autobiographical work by one of those immigrants: Katsuso Yamamoto's *Toda uma Vida no Brasil* (*A Lifetime in Brazil*, 1984). This work is a series of essays written in Japanese and translated into Portuguese. Questions regarding community identification and reflection are also addressed.

In the third and last essay of the chapter, Martín Camps focuses on the Bernardo Carvalho's novel *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, which concentrates

on Japanese migration to Brazil during World War II and on the contemporary immigrant neighborhood of *Liberdade*. Carvalho's writings are characterized by postmodernism because of his use of paradox, unresolved contradiction, and the blurring of the borders between fiction and reality. The settings of his narratives are always countries abroad and the characters are always looking for someone in another place besides Brazil. Travel is an important trend in his work, which portrays distant places such as Mongolia, Japan, and Russia in his most recent novel. His travels build bridges of a "horizontal orientalism" (Ruy Sánchez) built on mutual respect and recognition of both histories. This study uses the insights of Said (Orientalism), Pratt (Imperial Eye), and Baudrillard (Simulacra) to establish a framework. This novel attests to the idea that Brazilian identity is a work in progress that continues to be negotiated today.

The two essays included in Chapter 5 explore the dialogue between Chicano cultural production and the East. David Simonowitz argues that although Los Angeles claims to be the capital of public art, Tehran, capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran, can boast more mural paintings. Coincidentally, themes in the murals of both cities concern historically-grounded mythologies of displacement, martyrdom, and resistance. In Los Angeles, it is rendered in the topos of Aztlán, the ancient, imprecisely-determined yet colonized homeland of the Aztec-Mexica-Chicanos; in post-Revolutionary Tehran, it is embodied in the narrative of martyrdom of the third Shi'ite Imam Husayn at Karbala, Iraq in 680. Concomitantly, displacement is evoked in the former in the polyvalent maxim "we didn't cross the border; the border crossed us." In the latter, the usurpation and subsequent re-emplacement of Shi'ite authority is enunciated in the pragmatic, performative dictum "everyday is 'Ashura'; everywhere is Karbala." These spatial topoi engender different, yet comparably powerful visual discourses. Based on primary sources and fieldwork in Tehran and Los Angeles, and re-applying theoretical approaches refined in one context to the other, this comparative study of how two peoples visually represent themselves also sheds new light on the ways that others imag[in]e them. That the largest population of expatriate Iranians resides in Los Angeles adds further relevance to the comparison.

Jungwon Park, in the second essay, reveals how in early foundational Chicana/o narratives, the transpacific perspective is addressed primarily through war and post-war experiences. His essay examines the representations of Korea and the Korean War in the novels of Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa, and José Revueltas. "Korea" is depicted as a dangerous and unfathomable place for Mexican American protagonists.

Thus, the war experiences are employed to reflect on Chicanos' precarious condition in an American society that has yet to accept them as equals. Chicanos' identity is created and confirmed through the awareness of their marginality and "otherness" in the war. However, the encounters with another "Other" (Korea and Korean people) serve to provide possibilities of ethics and ethical relationships that constitute a sense of transnational community.

Roselia Barragán-Ekhouse's essay, in Chapter 6, focuses on the work of the Spanish-language Moroccan author Ahmed Ararou and its dialogue with Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges's opus. She explores how a critical dialogue between these texts is possible through a "southern-subaltern" intercultural exchange. Borges's and Ararou's works enter a dialogue without the necessity of transversing the "center" of hegemony. Barragán-Ekhouse studies the literary strategies they use to address the trope of the *other* and identifies two main aspects: the labyrinth structure of the narrative and the psychological aspects applied to the individual's ability for scission. She also highlights the importance of the *Arabian Nights* as an infinite text in their works.

The two essays in Chapter 7 that close the collection are devoted to cultural studies: one focusing on music and the other one on film. Alicia Ramos-Jordán analyzes two music artists who are characterized by not belonging to a national identity and by being products of hybridization processes of different languages, cultures, and countries. As is well known, the link between these three elements is indisputable. She also highlights how the mixture of these ingredients leads to the creation of a new language, a different culture, and a country without borders. Ramos-Jordán claims these new processes of mixing and identity search are based on new forms that differ from those used in modernity or postmodernity; they are new identities that are created particularly in large cities and border areas, and that, due to permanent exiles and migrations, follow their own creation processes, which differ from the classic concepts of identity, culture, and country.

Closing the volume, Marco Valesi analyzes the approach to otherness and its impact on intercultural relations in two Clint Eastwood's films: *Gran Torino* and *Invictus*. Cinematographic representation, according to Valesi, has replaced socio-economic control forces in the classical Marxist scheme and created spaces of intermediation in which social narratives converge, generating dynamic representations of cultural identities.

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CHAPTER ONE:
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL
APPROACHES

THEORY, ORIENTALISM AND A PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR PLACE IN THE STUDY OF ASIANS IN THE AMERICAS

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In 1998, when I submitted a prospectus to my dissertation committee, I had no idea that I was beginning a journey that would lead me down the paths that it has. At that point the concept of analyzing literature by Asian-Hispanic writers was still rather foreign to the Academy, much as had been the study of literature by Afro-Hispanics when my dissertation advisor, Dr. Marvin Lewis, began his research. Indeed, there was no codified term by which to define exactly what group I was working with, given that I would be working with Spanish Americans from differing Asiatic ethnicities and varying Latin American nationalities. While the journey has taken me physically to Spain, Cuba and Peru, my imagination has ventured to even greater places and spaces where, as an academic, I am free to question not only my field of study but also the social constructs that have created the spaces we occupy, and the signification and power structures that have emerged from those spaces.

Along this journey, I met Roshni Rustomji-Kerns. Her co-edition *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas* was the first codified attempt to open a dialogue with Americans from all countries who bore some connection to Asia in its greatest sense. Indeed, the work does not focus only on published writers but rather anyone who lay claim to this ethnic connection and had a story to tell. When Rustomji-Kerns and her cohorts Rajini Srikanth and Leny Mendoza Strobel were putting the collection *Encounters* together, the goal was to begin placing the pieces of a never-ending puzzle on the playing board and to attempt to reconstruct a past or several pasts that had been largely overlooked. The text is a landmark text in this field of study because it embodies the very human experiences of people of varying backgrounds and allows them to tell their stories of what they have encountered and what, if anything, it has meant to them to be of Asian descent on these continents. The introduction is not

a theory laden treatise that attempts to fit every voice into a one-size-fits-all mold or to demonstrate an acute knowledge of all the theories that are en vogue. It is an approach that reveals years of thought, consideration, and academic rigor regarding the very real situations in which humans from particular ethnic backgrounds find themselves when they try to mediate between their own visions of who they are and how they are perceived to be. It provided a space for people to define themselves rather than be defined.

The goal of this study is to continue this project of investigation by briefly examining three points of inquiry and exploring how they fit within the realm of study of Asians in the Americas. The first question regards theory and how prominent a place theory should hold. The second question explores the concept of orientalism and what the issues are regarding its use in this field. Finally, the very concept of Asians in the Americas has to be questioned and we must explore how we, as academics, conceptualize the term. An open approach to these issues can often reveal points about the field that perhaps had not been broached in the past as well as about academia and the hand it plays in ethnic/cultural studies. The reader should note that this essay does not attempt to reach a conclusion, but rather its intent is to question some of the ideas that have emerged as this field of study in the Academy has developed.

The role of theory

Barbara Christian began the discussion questioning the role of theory with her article "The Race for Theory" in 1987 and, to this day, it still has not been resolved. Indeed, there does not seem to exist a clear answer to this issue. This essay is too brief to appropriately question what could undoubtedly be argued in books. Moreover, the discussion is difficult because it is at times philosophical and ephemeral. There is nothing concrete or cut and dried. It also calls into question centuries of established academic tradition and knowledge. Moreover, it often takes on an essentialist tone and hints at a presupposed truth, when there is not one. In the end, the hope is that it encourages us to consider the place of theory in our research and to what extent theory should be an appropriate force.

By this definition, theory refers to both scientific and unscientific processes. Obviously, what we do in Liberal Arts is not as scientific as we often hope it would be. Our analyses tend to rest more in the lines of hypothetical questioning and speculation. In a time of budget cuts when nonessential programs are being discontinued, it would be nice if we could point to theory as a means of confirming that we do is valid and can be

proven through the scientific method, or serve as an anchor in a realm of Platonic certainty. Instead, theory, in the way we approach it, is a continuation of the rhetorical debates that for centuries have cut across cultural boundaries. We take ideas regarding political or social theory and apply them to human cultural product as a means of understanding not only writers and their works but also their communities, and by extrapolation, the world as a whole.

The use of theory as a basis for our analyses has allowed two phenomena to occur. First, it changed our approach to literature. With post-structuralism and post-modernism came the desire to see the text with meaning outside its construct as well as the many parts that traditionally had been used in literary analysis. It was a very real codified approach to use information from outside the text as a means of examining the contents of the text while placing it in a particular human context. Theories are often attached to or derived from philosophical trends related to human history. The cultural product speaks and can say many things; the use of theory helps the critic tease out these many loci of meaning, by placing the theoretical framework alongside the cultural product as a means of searching for signification.

What has happened, though, is very much akin to what Foucault describes in his examination of the modern day judicial system. The analogy is quite compelling. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault asserts the following, "The whole penal operation has taken on extra-juridical elements and personnel . . . But what is odd about modern criminal justice is that . . . it has done so in order to make them function within the penal operation as non-juridical elements. . . . Of course, we pass sentence but this sentence is not in direct relation to the crime" (22). Essentially, theory has become the "extra-juridical element," the extra-textual element. Yet the study of literature has become so saturated with theory and is so inextricably linked that for many it is impossible to see the text without theory attached to it. It has become an essential part of the process of textual de-codification. Indeed, oftentimes the relationship has been inverted. Whereas theory was once an outside element to use as a possible aid in uncovering possible textual significance, the texts are now being used as a means of substantiating theory. Just as Foucault shows that the sentencing act has become bigger than the actual crime and has little to do with the crime itself, theory has overshadowed the text and our analyses become a study of theory rather than text.

Perhaps if we were dealing with philosophical or rhetorical games, this would not be an adverse relationship. Much can be learned when concepts such as truth and power relationships are taken to task. However, many

scholars who partake in cultural studies or focus on minority literature do so with the initial desire to promote authors and social figures whose ideas and experiences are outside the norm of the dominant power structures that govern what is and is not part of the canon or a recognized official cultural element. Cultural/Ethnic Studies, if nothing else, try to give voice to the voiceless, to place the spotlight on what has been hidden, and to replace the histories that have been forgotten or ignored, a sort of academic social protest. Ironically, when academics shift their focus from the text to the theory, they are repeating the same process of isolation and alienation that the power structures they wish to debunk or take into question exert. Authors and other social figures that they proclaim to give voice to, become secondary elements. The theoretical, rhetorical games of words and signification become greater and more prominent than the texts we wish to bring forth to the public domain.

Therefore, in reference to the study of Asians in the Americas, a cautionary stance should be taken into consideration where theory is concerned. Those who have visited and worked with some of the crucial figures of varying backgrounds are aware that we are dealing with people who are very active in their respective social spheres. In my own experience, authors are very willing to talk about their works and experiences. They are eager to expose their literary body to a greater academic audience with the hopes that this audience will take their works to the classroom and educate students about the varying perspectives of what it means to be American in the greatest sense of the word, perspectives that are not normally included in the dominant national discourse. Theory can be a useful tool as long as it does not overshadow the text or self-select texts that work with the theory. Although somewhat an essentialist approach, if care is not taken, writers once again become objects in the academic game of publishing, promotion, and tenure. Works become secondary and only as useful as the publishing establishment allows them to be.

Another point of contention regarding theory when considering the study of Asians in the Americas is that most theories are Western-based. They find their roots in the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, most theories we use today are products of the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and subsequent post-Enlightenment thought. The Western tradition, or logic, of seeing the world is at the heart of all of these traditions. They presume a priori a Western philosophical consciousness, which is in and of itself a fairly homogenous vision, and disregards that within the colonized world there exist other logics, consciousnesses, or ways of viewing the world. Indeed, the Americas have been a destination for continued migration

since the advent of colonialism. Therefore, we see the convergence of three different spheres: the indigenous population, the colonizers, and then post-colonial migration, which includes peoples from many diverse ethnic backgrounds. Within these three spheres, we see the emergence of several smaller spheres. The attempt to unravel signification, especially in regards to identity, becomes muddled. Theory cannot, in the wink of an eye, clarify this entire structure, as so many critics attempt to do. Moreover, numerous critics on all spectrums have called into question theory's western framework when applied to people of color. Theorists such as Edward Said, who will be discussed in the next section, and Asian American critics such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, have dismissed to a great extent many literary theories because they are written from the privileged position of being white and Eurocentric. Theory oftentimes takes on the racial vision and ideological assumptions that its creators or proponents possess. Moreover, theory inadvertently takes on the guise of truth when, in essence, it is simply theory.

In the next section on orientalism, a theory that seems to dominate the study of Asians in the Americas, it will be questioned how orientalism is being used in the discussion and if it is an appropriate theory to be used. It is an inquiry as to whether anyone ethnically connected to Asia in a recent or distant past presupposes any connection to the "Orient" or the "Oriental" (a crucial piece of Orientalism), or whether this element can be separated from "Orientalism." In the next section, Edward Said's Orientalism will be discussed, along with the controversy surrounding his definition and implementation of Orientalism as a critical force. In the end, we must question as to whether orientalism is an appropriate framework in any discussion of Asians in the Americas.

Orientalism

When Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1977, he was attempting to describe a relationship of power and hierarchies that pertained to the very real historical realities that existed in regards to the Palestinian situation. He did so through a critique of how the West defined/described the oriental, and how this vision manifested itself textually. He described, in his now famous words, that "orientalism is a style of thought based upon the ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and (most of the time) the 'Occident'" (2). He proposes that we have to consider the following when trying to conceptualize orientalism: 1) it is man-made; 2) their relationship as one motivated by power; and 3) orientalism really speaks more about the Occident than it does about the

Orient (3-4). Said openly discusses the influence of Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punishment* as a means of conceptualizing his argument, pointing to the fact that he, to a great extent, was basing his logic on previous Western or Occidental discourse (3).

Said's *Orientalism* is often touted as being the origin of post-colonial studies. Indeed, his focus on power structures and the conflict between the imaginary/symbolic/real images created about the Orient, to put it in Lacanian terms, brought great attention to members of society who exist on the periphery, who are marginalized and voiceless. He was one of the first to point out that the Western body of knowledge is held up as being THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE, the master signifier per se, because what we understand today was born out of an understanding of the world by the West. He questioned, in a very postmodern fashion, the very fabric of signification and truths upon which the world has been delineated, separated out, and geographically defined. In a sense, the West's understanding of the world and its spaces was written onto and into it. That which was non-Western, and in this specific case, oriental, was always the object being discussed and defined, but never really allowed to voice an opinion or add to the discussion or defining process.

For many critics, Said was almost a type of academic Messiah. He eloquently articulated what had been alluded to previously but not directly said. Chandreyee Niyogi, in his edition *Reorienting Orientalism*, asserted that Said was misunderstood because he focused on the geopolitical (Preface). Ziauddin Sardar, in his own work *Orientalism*, concurs with Said's analysis. He writes that "there is nothing about orientalism that is neutral or objective. By definition, it is a partial and partisan subject" (vii). Sardar wishes to debunk the assertion that "somewhere within or about the subject there is real knowledge about the Orient, and that this knowledge can be used to develop an understanding of the cultures East of the West" (vii). Sardar continues on to agree with Said's notion regarding who or what is truly being defined by orientalism:

Orientalism is a form of inward reflection, preoccupied with the intellectual concerns, problems, fears and desires of the West that are visited on a fabulated, constructed object by convention called the Orient . . . The Orient of Orientalists is a constructed artifact through which the West explains, expounds, objectifies and demonstrates its own contemporary concerns. (14-15)

Drawing particularly from the tenuous relationship between the West and Islam, A. L. Tibawi, in *English-Speaking Orientalists*, addresses the Saidian notion that the West defines what it sees, not what is there. He

writes that most people who write about Islam know little about what they are writing, regardless of how buried it is in research (Sardar 58). He adds that Said's contributions extend beyond his definition of Orientalism. He brought in literary criticism and Foucault, both of which catapulted the discussion into numerous fields from which critics from many disciplines could participate in the discussion and see the relevance of orientalism within their respective disciplines (67).

There are critics, however, who disagree, almost vehemently, with Said. The contention is often based on a very different understanding of the orientalism that is being discussed. Saidian Orientalism starts with the Crusades and arrives at the modern day era. His vision of Orientalism rests, as discussed earlier, on socio-geo-political interference, and this interference is made manifest by revealing it in the literary discourses. Critics often point that this is not the only approach, that orientalism is much more than Said's vision and is not so politically motivated, or rather, should not be examined from only this one limited perspective. Thus, Abdullah Al-Dabbagh writes that "Orientalism cannot remain in the 19th century idea of expansionism and colonialism. It predates this but in our understanding we traditionally accept this approach as the only approach" (2). In his discussion, he points to three different orientalisms, one of which is akin to the Saidian version. He asserts that Said's definition is "absolutist and ahistorical . . . It regards the orient as an abstract category and cannot distinguish between the different orientalisms or the various stages of orientalism" (3). According to Al-Dabbagh, to truly understand orientalism, all three must be taken into consideration. He states that Said does not see the nineteenth and twentieth century as their own movements but rather as an extension of the crusades, which, for Al-Dabbagh, is an erroneous supposition. He also claims that Said overlooked the fact that many writers were "truly sympathetic to the East" (4).

Other critics also take issue with Saidian Orientalism. Daniel Varisco points to the fact that Said's definition, perhaps not due to any fault on Said's part, is often seen as an ending when it is more appropriately a beginning to the discussion (11). Although his critique is oftentimes tongue-in-cheek, Varisco's discussion of orientalism's history is very complete and his point is well taken. Critics have taken Said and codified his thoughts in a stagnant position, not allowing for much diversion from what is perceived to be his line of thought. In the collection *Interrogating Orientalism: Contextual Approaches and Pedagogical Practices*, the goal is to accomplish that very task, to question Said and his theory. In the Introduction, it is agreed that the initial political desire after contact between East and West was made was to control the East. It states that the

“imperial desire was to keep the profits of the East while maintaining as strict a social and intellectual distance as possible from its cultures and peoples” (1). However, there should be a separation made between the political and other realms of contact that were made. In regards to the literary manifestation that Said takes to task, they state that “literature written about or out of an awareness of this empire participated in an ongoing, complex attempt to understand what it meant for the British to come into contact with other alien (both attractive and repellent) societies, languages, cultures and religions” (1). In essence, orientalism was a method that the West employed as a means of understanding otherness, although not necessarily with the negative tone that Said implies. They add that the Britons who were traveling “were not seeking some “Oriental Other” to appropriate or control (as Edward Said has claimed in *Orientalism*). They were doing something much more interesting and complex: “they were hybridizing (as Homi Bhabha has defined the concept) and modernizing” (2). Indeed, they assert that critics such as Homi Bhabha serve as a more neutral counterpoint to Said. They also point to Timothy Powell’s criticism of the current system:

It has become clear in recent years . . . that a binary form of analysis that collapses a myriad of distinct cultural voices into the overly simplistic category of ‘Other’ defined in relationship to a European ‘Self’ is theoretically problematic. The time has come, therefore, to initiate a new critical epoch, a period of cultural reconstruction in which ‘identity’ is reconfigured in a midst of a multiplicity of cultural influences. (Beyond the Binary 3)

Powell’s quotation, while accurately depicting the social reality of our time, does not necessarily disagree with Said’s *Orientalism*. It simply reaffirms what Varisco pointed out, that Saidian *Orientalism* cannot be taken as an end but rather as beginning to a new discussion.

Does any of this criticism in any way bring into question Said’s framework that he is laying at this point? Essentially, it does not. It does, however, bring into question our use of Said’s words. It is precisely Said’s admission to his study of Foucault that I wish to point to. Said is referring to a very real historical situation. His use of Foucault is a means of pointing more to what he stresses over and over again throughout the book: he is referring to power relationships. Realistically, anything he says, as he states in point three, has little to do with the Orient per se and speaks more to how the Occident conceptualizes its relationship with the Orient. Indeed, the Orient does not exist outside the Occident’s definition because it is a creation. The logic(s) of the peoples, the little “o’s” that occupy these spaces, are never taken into consideration; instead, a

magnanimous, monolithic and homogenous big O is created. The geographic spaces and the people who occupy them only come into play in Orientalism and are necessary in the discussion in as much as they serve as examples of this power relationship. This is not a means of diminishing them or silencing them. Said is very well aware of their human subjectivity. He is simply asserting that their importance as the Orient (big O) in this discussion is only in conjunction to how they are perceived.

This brings the discussion back, in a very roundabout way, to the issue regarding the dominance of and reliance on theory and the concern that often presents itself. When a theory becomes the overriding approach to a discussion, the critic is in many ways orientalizing the subject. The subject matter oftentimes gets lost in its deference to the theory, meaning that the subject matter is seen only in its relationship to the theory. It becomes an object that is to be discussed rather than a subject that speaks. Specifically, our use of Said's theory regarding orientalism is oddly enough mostly applied to relationships that involve people from some varying form of Asiatic background. In a sense, our use of orientalism, as a means of deconstructing a text or trying to mark the power relationships in which Asians in the Americas oftentimes find themselves as they negotiate with the hegemonic power structures, can in turn re-orientalize the situation. I recognize, to an extent, my own participation in this process. In our attempts to give voice to the voiceless, we mistakenly and ironically replace their voices with a theory that usurps their voice and speaks for them. Barbara Christian writes that "the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world which it attacks" (459). We essentially re-colonize the text and partake in the same process that, as Christian points out, we are trying to dismantle. If this is the case, how do orientalism and theory fit into our study of Asians in the Americas?

Theory, Orientalism and Asians in the Americas

Throughout this essay, the ideas of theory, orientalism, and their purposes have been briefly explored. It must now be questioned as to how valid are they in the field of Asians in the Americas and to what extent they should be applied? This brings us to the very groups we are addressing: peoples who have some connection to Asia and it should be determined to what extent they are represented in the discussion? Therefore, what needs to be addressed is the very theory of orientalism and its implications in the field.

First, orientalism is often used as a starting point because of the oriental part of orientalism. However, by Saidian definition the term