

EVELYN ALSULTANY & ELLA SHOHAT, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013). 348 pages. \$85.00 cloth, \$40.00 paper. ISBN 9780472069446.

REVIEWED BY JUAN POBLETE, University of California at Santa Cruz, email: jpoblete@ucsc.edu



This ambitious and pioneering collection of essays sets out to map diasporic territories not easily recognized by Area Studies-based approaches. While the latter often stress a durable history of borders and a series of historically defining and stable national traits, the former speak of processes of movement and displacement, of instability and migration. Recognizable territories and the cultural formations developed within them are thus contrasted with the socio-cultural and affective processes impacting those who live in and at the borders of different national communities. In effectively showing the importance of these de- and re-territorializing dynamics, however, the volume also amply demonstrates why the proper understanding of the cultural politics of Middle Eastern immigrant populations in the Americas is not as much an issue of fully displacing nation and area-centered paradigms as it is one of introducing cross-border processes into the specificity of national and regional geographies.

The first of the volume's three sections includes two chapters – "The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East' in the Americas: An Introduction" by Shohat and Alsultany and "The Sephardic-Moorish Atlantic: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism" by Shohat – providing a common thread to the reader of the following thirteen essays. Shohat's "The Sephardic-Moorish Atlantic" originating in a piece written to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Edward Said's *Orientalism* has two central points to make: that the genealogy of Orientalism proposed by Said needs to be expanded to encompass a previous historical period of a broader phenomenon (Eurocentrism) in order to show that "the formation of Orientalism as a discourse

preceded and anticipated Orientalism as a field of study" (45). This previous period is marked by what Shohat calls the "two 1492s." If the first one, highlighted by Walter Mignolo, is a critique of Said proving that the colonial Eurocentric discourse underpinning his book's Orientalism from the eighteenth century onward actually originated with the Spanish and Portuguese Conquest of America; Shohat's second 1492 is meant to correct Mignolo's Occidentalism by showing that underneath the colonial Occidentalism of the conquerors lay the "proto-Orientalism" of the Spanish Reconquista and "the forcing-out of Sephardic Jews and Muslim Moors from Spain" (51). In this view "Anti-Semitism or Judeo-phobia, along with anti-infidelism or Islamophobia, provided a conceptual framework projected outward against the indigenous people of Africa and the Americas" thus historically connecting for centuries "the various 'questions': the Jewish, Muslim, 'Indian', Black, and the African question" (52). Shohat's second main point is that we must, as a result of this intertwined history, rethink the possible links between Middle Eastern Studies – as a self-contained epistemological endeavor studying people in that far "there" – and American, Ethnic, and Latin American Studies. "[B]oth area studies and ethnic studies marginalize Middle Eastern Americans by positioning them as 'foreigners' to be studied merely 'over there,' denying their entry into a scholarly framework of race and ethnicity in the Americas" (56). Middle Eastern Studies is equally altered as it now must concern itself with diasporic Middle Eastern communities in Europe and the Americas. Shohat concludes proposing an "inter-area studies" approach researching the "co-implicatedness of regions, for example, of America in the Middle East and the Middle East in America" (56).

The volume's Introduction – "The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East' in the Americas: An Introduction" – by Shohat and Alsultany clearly outlines the space of intervention for the book: if until now comparisons on Arab/Muslims in Canada and the US are mostly made in relation to Europe (and thus to the context of what Shohat has called one of the Global Souths), Shohat and Alsultany's collection is meant to bring forward the relevance of "the rest of the Americas" for such comparative effort (thus including the other Global South, not just "the Arab/Muslim Mediterranean as Europe's South" but also "Latin America as the United States' South" (Shohat, 49). This implies focusing not just on "the parallel and separate immigrations to the Americas but also onto their interconnectedness" (8), going beyond the axis separating East/West and North/South to investigate "South-on-

South cultural flows" (13). For this effort a comparative analysis of the relatively new position of Muslim/Arabs as the other and the enemy in post 9/11 United States and the historical construction of foreignness affecting so-called "Turcos" (Turks) in Latin America (immigrants from the Ottoman empire towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth) can prove fruitful. What have been the respective historical processes of racialization of the Muslim/Arab other in these two contexts? How are cultural production, circulation and reception both on and by Middle Easterners connected in the Americas?

Reclaiming both cultural studies and postcolonial studies for the analysis of the politics of culture and representations in Middle East studies, Shohat and Alsultany's volume is divided into two additional parts: "Nation, Culture and Representation" (chapters 3-9) and "Diaspora, Transnation, and Translation" (chapters 10-16). While it would be too long to cover all chapters in detail, it seems possible to give a good indication of their overall orientation by making reference to a few of them in each section.

The first part includes essays by John Tofik Karam – "Turcos in the Mix: Corrupting Arabs in Brazil's Racial Democracy" – and Theresa Alfaro Velcamp – "From 'Baisanos' to Billionaires: Locating Arabs in Mexico" – that show both the currency of the Arab in national representations in Mexico and Brazil, and how the resulting 'foreign' identities are never simply the outcome of a unilateral process of outside racialization but involve, instead, a strategic self-positioning of Middle Eastern immigrant communities in reaction to and against such discourses. Christina Civantos's chapter on "Ali Bla Bla's Double-Edge Sword: Argentine President Carlos Menem and the Negotiation of Identity" and Amira Jarmakani's "They Hate Our Freedom, But We Love Their Belly Dance: The Spectacle of the Shimmy in Contemporary U.S. Culture" delve similarly into the complex and contradictory forms of representation affecting Carlos Saúl Menem as a neoliberal president of Arab descent in Argentina and the construction and circulation of discourses of freedom (personal and political) in the US apropos belly-dancing and the so-called War on Terror.

Two excellent chapters on media representations of the Arab/Muslim in the United States – Evelyn Alsultany's "From Arab Terrorist to Patriotic Arab Americans: Representational Strategies in Post-9/11 TV Dramas" and Junaid Rana's "When Pakistanis Became Middle Eastern: Visualizing Racial Targets in the Global War on Terror" – close the first part. Alsultany proposes the concept of

'simplified complex representations', i.e. "the appearance of seemingly complex images that are in fact quite predictable and formulaic" to advance her argument that "simplified complex representations are the representational mode of the so-called post-race era, signifying a new era of racial representation" (154). While all seven strategies she identifies are the result of the efforts of media producers to respond to criticism of anti-Arab/Muslim prejudice and thus intended to break the conflation of Arabs with terrorists, "they remain wedded to a script that represents Arabs and Muslims only in the context of terrorism" (155). Thus they simultaneously vilify and affirm "the identity of the perceived enemy as a sign of US progress during times of crisis," performing "the ideological work of producing a post-race moment in which denying the severity of the persistence of institutionalized racism becomes possible" (171). Junaid Rana's chapter seeks to explore the construction of a racialized Muslim other in two American "imperial spectacles:" the TV series *Sleeper Cell* and the Hollywood film *Syriana*. For Rana, while in very different ways, both "are elements of an ethnographic cinema that index the Global War on Terror through the terms of U.S. racial formation and a broadly constructed global racial system" (179). Ethnographic cinema in this context signals a technology for the visual naturalization of categories of race and it involves strategies such as "dissimulation, passing, multiracialism, and class warfare" (190) in the casting and construction of these cinematic spectacles.

Part two of this volume opens with Sunaina Maira's chapter, "A Strip, A Land, A Blaze: Arab American Hip-Hop and Transnational Politics," on Arab-American hip hop artists. According to Maira these artists are contesting "the silencing of Palestinian histories" in the overwhelmingly pro-Israel US context and opening the possibility of shared inter-ethnic disidentifications with Whiteness while bridging artistic political pedagogies and aesthetic practices. Heba El Attar's essay – "Turcophobia or Turcophilia: Politics of Representing Arabs in Latin America" – opens a window of relative hope as she describes how two novelists (Gabriel García Márquez in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, and Jorge Luis Oviedo in *La Turca*) move Latin American representations of the Arab from turcophobia to a certain form of turcophilia when "questioning the portrayer/'us' instead of the portrayed/'them,' hence deconstructing the anti-Arab prejudice – Turcophobia" (256). She also studies two examples of Chilean-Palestinian diasporic writing and self-representation in the work of

poet Mahfud Massís and the Spanish-based monthly publication *Al-Damir*.

A number of chapters in this second part of the book convincingly prove that the process of cultural translation is never restricted to the text and the languages involved but instead encompasses whole cultural and nation-specific fields that refract the text as complex alignments of discourses, forces, and positions. Hence, chapter 12 by Helle Rytikønen – “Drawing the Line: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Mohammed Cartoons Controversy as It Unfolded in Denmark and the United States” – shows the quite different play the controversy had in those two national settings: while the Danish insisted on the alleged inability of Muslims to understand free speech, the American media and government, much more cautiously, highlighted the newspapers’ obligation to use prudence and cultural sensitivity when exercising their right to free speech. Ziad Elmarsafy’s essay – “User-Friendly Islams: Translating Rumi in France and the United States” – underscores how the same body of work, successful in both contexts, depended in France on an emphasis on its Muslim and Qur’an-based identity while in the US it was de-Islamicized to satisfy the universalism of a New Age readership.

Finally, R. Shareah Taleghani’s chapter on “Axising Iran: The Politics of Domestication and Cultural Translation” focuses on very successful “English-language Iranian memoirs, authored primarily by women” (283) and especially on the Ur-text of the genre: Azar Nafisi’s 2003 *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Using translation theory the author shows how, long before we get to the text itself, already the selection of which and how works are translated are field-produced. In this case, following a long American tradition of privileging domesticating translations of foreign texts “stressing fluent rather than foreignizing interpretation” (283), *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is “produced” for American consumption following three basic processes: in the first ethnographic process, “Iran comes to be textually, politically, and culturally transmuted to be read, received, and reinstated as fluently coherent and monolithic” (284) along the negative lines of US preconceptions on the ‘problems’ of the Middle East nations and populations. Secondly, certain mostly middle class and West-educated writers are heralded “as ‘authentically’ entitled and authoritative cultural translators” (284). Finally, “the mechanisms of the US book market and mainstream [critical] reception do not allow for a translation of Iran that could resist dominant values” (288) and insist,

instead, on the confirmation of prejudice and “an uncritical reconstitution of the familiar for a US audience” (288).

As the essays in this second part and the volume in its totality show, the issue at stake in reconsidering the Middle East not just as a stable traits-defined region but a complex network of diasporas extending at least to Europe and the Americas is less overcoming the basic limitations of an Area Studies paradigm than using its full potential to understand transnationally the cultural and historical specificity of regional and national situations in global circulation and diasporic contexts. This excellent volume is a remarkable contribution to that urgent task.