Orientalism and the Presentation of Cultures
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In 1978, Edward Said published his book, **Orientalism**, a controversial work that has significantly challenged the way in which Eastern cultures are viewed, described, depicted and represented by Western academic scholarship, affairs of state, literature and other art forms. Relying heavily upon Michel Foucault's notion of a *discourse* and the political and economic interests which shape that discourse,[1] Said's main critique is aimed at the way in which the Western (defined more specifically as British, French, and to a certain extent more recently, North American)[2] economic, political and academic powers have developed a dichotomized discourse in which an ascendant West is juxtaposed with an Eastern Other according to terms and definitions specified and determined by the West itself.

> Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny and so on.[3]

Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient....In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action."[4] Thus, it is predicated upon and is a product of an imbalance of power which has existed between the West (read "Europe" and most recently, "North America") and, basically, the rest of the World, but most particularly the areas of North Africa and the Middle East, India, China, Southeast Asia, and Japan. The origins and development of Orientalism as a way of producing knowledge about the non-West[5] is directly coincidental with the rise of European exploration and colonization of non-European lands and peoples. Noting the oft-quoted maxim that knowledge is power, Said asserts that Western study of non-Western peoples was based not

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[1] E. Said, **Orientalism**, *op. cit.,* p. 3. See Michel Foucault, **The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language**, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith and Rupert Sawyer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), and **Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison**, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

[2] E. Said, **Orientalism**, *op. cit.,* pp. 1-2.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.,* p. 3.

[5] The term "non-West" is my own rendering of Said's argument. Said deliberately focuses his analysis upon Western notions of the "Orient" in reference to the (Muslim) lands of the Middle East. He recognizes that his analysis can be extended to other parts of the "Orient," such as China, India, Southeast Asia and Japan, etc. My terminology of "non-West" is meant to acknowledge that the Orientalist style of discourse also characterized the description of African, North and South American indigenous peoples. In like manner, it was Europeans who were describing these lands and peoples according to self-referential categories and concepts which had been determined by Europeans themselves, and which did not allow or make room for the indigenous peoples to speak for and about themselves. Thus, my use of the term "non-West" is intended to anticipate my concerns with how cultures are represented by other cultures in intercultural performance.

in a desire to know those peoples as distinct and unique *human* peoples, but rather as a means to subjugate them and to gain access to and control over the resources of their lands.

> The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony, and is quite accurately indicated in the title of K.M. Panikkar's classic *Asia and Western Dominance.* The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could* be -- that is, submitted to being -- *made* Oriental.[6]

The idea of Orientalism as being a way of speaking *about* as well as presuming to speak *for* the non-Western Other is central to Said's argument, and is (or should be) a key concern for anyone doing intercultural performance work. James Clifford summarizes Said's argument by saying, "At issue are the ways in which distinct groups of humanity (however defined) imagine, describe, and comprehend each other." [7]

> If Orientalism, as Said describes it, has a structure, this resides in its tendency to *dichotomize* the human continuum into we/they contrasts and to *essentialize* the resultant "other" - to speak of the Oriental mind, for example, or even to generalize about "Islam" or "the Arabs." All of these Orientalist "visions" and "textualizations," as Said terms them, function to suppress an authentic "human" reality. This reality, he implies, is rooted in oral encounter and reciprocal speech, as opposed to the processes of writing or of the visual imagination.[8]

What Orientalism does in speaking about other cultures is to substitute a *textual presence* for a *real human presence*. To speak of a *textual* presence is particularly significant because Orientalism is a mode of discourse practiced especially by scholars, academics, imperial administrators, poets and novelists through the medium of the printed word of travel diaries, guide books, academic papers, administrative diaries and documents, published novels and poetry. This textual presence serves to describe and categorize what can be, at first encounter (and subsequent encounters) with the non-Western Other, an overwhelming, "disorienting" and confusing experience. In part, this reliance upon a textual presence is due to a (common?) "human need" or, at least, a preference to bring order out of disorder, and so humans "grasp at formulas rather than actuality**;** they prefer the guidebook to the confusion before them." [9]

> It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human. But is this failing constantly present, or are there circumstances that, more than others, make the textual attitude likely to prevail?
> Two situations favor a textual attitude. One is when a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant. In

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[6] Said, *op. cit.,* pp. 5-6.
[7] James Clifford, "Orientalism," review essay in **History and Theory** 19 (2): 209.
[8] *Ibid.,* p. 207.
[9] *Ibid.,* p. 212.

such a case one has recourse not only to what in one's previous experience the
novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it…
A second situation favoring the textual attitude is the appearance of success.[10]

Success is determined by a repeatable congruence between the description of a thing (or place or people, etc.) and the experience of other persons with that which is described. This leads to theories and epistemologies and genealogies as to why the thing is as it is, etc. An intensely self-referential and interwoven logic emerges, in which the thing is not only described, but categories for its appraisal and description are created and applied to it, as well as delineations of what are appropriate ways to speak about it and, implicitly, what is inappropriate (or potentially dangerous and not allowed).

> Additionally, the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.[11]

In speaking of a non-Western Other, the Orientalist maintains an attitude or posture of exteriority with regard to the non-West.

> Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact.[12]

What results in this exteriority is a series of *representations* of the non-Western Other, which, as representations, are not actual or "natural" depictions, but are encoded and interpreted already. Also, as representations, they are not *self-presentations* by the non-Western Other.[13] To a certain extent, this problem of representation is also rooted in the nature of language itself, as well as cultural discourse.

> Another reason for insisting upon exteriority is that I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not "truth" but representations. It hardly needs to be demonstrated again that language itself is a highly organized and encoded system, which employs many devices to express, indicate, exchange messages and information, represent, and so forth. In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation. The value, efficacy,

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[10] Said, *op. cit.,* p. 93.
[11] *Ibid.,* p. 8.
[12] *Ibid.,* pp. 20-21.
[13] *Ibid.*

strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as "the Orient." Thus all of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: 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. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient.[14]

Thus, Orientalism operates as a hardened system of representations about the non-Western Other (in this case, the "Orient"). It is the product of Western domination and control of non-Western lands and peoples, and this control is exercised not only through military prowess, but also through the portrayal and analysis of that which is constructed to be Other, different, non-Western. The Other, whether it be Arab, Muslim, Indian, African, Native American, etc., is constructed by Orientalist discourse to be an Other precisely because it serves the interests of the West (whether economic, political, religious, etc.) to be distinguished and kept separate from those peoples over whom the West exercises dominance and control. Thus, non-Western cultures are kept from presenting themselves, precisely because the human to human contact of *real presence* seriously challenges the assumptions and discourse of the *textual presence*.

It remains important to point out that the assumptions and representations made in the Orientalist discourse also characterize the portrayal and representation of the West by non-Western peoples. Annemarie Schimmel, one of the leading scholars of Muslim, Persian and Arabic literature in the West today, in an article reviewing Said's book, asks if it is possible to reach an unbiased picture of a foreign culture:

> The descriptions of Muslim travelers in the nineteenth century depict a Europe that looks as strange as the "Orient" of western travelers, and modern Islamic literature, even when written by well-informed writers (such as Muhammad Iqbal), tends to give a prejudiced picture of the West and its vices, and generalizations about "the Americans" or "the Germans" are used everywhere. Therefore I doubt whether "Orientalism" can be seen as an isolated phenomenon; it rather seems to be an expression of a widespread attitude toward a strange culture which one tries to "conquer" by either scholarly or political means, or which one simply misunderstands because one lacks insight into its history and its cultural roots.[15]

Said's main critique of the entire political, economic and academic superstructure which constitutes Orientalism, however, seems to me to still stand. The West has dominated the world stage for the last three or four centuries, and so its "misunderstanding" of other cultures and "conquest" of them by scholarly or political means has been much more pervasive, effective, and with farther-reaching consequences than the misunderstandings, etc., of other peoples. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that inaccuracies and distortions can and will

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[14] *Ibid.,* pp. 21-22.
[15] Annemarie Schimmel, "Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,*" review article in **Journal of Ecumenical Studies**, 17 (1), Winter 1980: 149.

characterize any portrayal of another culture or people. What is required is for those inaccuracies and distortions to be acknowledged and critically evaluated.

For intercultural performance, then, Said's critique of Orientalism provides us with cautions and caveats about the perception and portrayal of cultures by other cultures. These caveats can be summed up in the question formulated earlier in this paper: "Who is presenting the one culture to the other, and under whose terms and through whose lens is that culture being viewed?" Is the presentation by the culture itself, or is it by another culture? What is the nature of the relationship between the two cultures? What political, economic and religious interests obtain between the two cultures? What interests are being served by the presentation? If another, non-indigenous culture is doing the presenting, has there been consultation and communication with the culture being presented and what has been the nature of that consultation? What assumptions have been made about the culture presented, and upon what are those assumptions based? A certain critical skepticism is important in this period of the dismantling of European colonialism and the expansion of other hegemonies, such as American cultural and economic hegemonies, etc., and the increasing occurrence of intercultural contact, exchange and communication.

But at the same time it also argues *for* intercultural encounters and convergences wherein each culture presents itself, and humans meet other humans and get to know them as individual people who are situated within and speak from out of their own particular culture. This is reminiscent of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's argument for a humanities-based study of religion which stresses an encounter with real human persons rather than reliance upon or the development of a methodology for studying and interpreting "other religions."

> Humane knowing - the knowledge of man by man (sic) - is an exercise in the meeting between persons, be it across the centuries or across the world. It is, therefore, not technical, not subordinate to methodological rules. In personal relations, whether face-to-face or mediated by man's symbolic forms of expression, the use of technical procedures, unless rigorously subordinated to primarily personalist considerations, is not merely inappropriate but potentially disruptive. Man cannot know man except in mutuality: in respect, trust, and equality, if not ultimately love.[16]

Thus, a critical posture informed by Post-Modern critiques such as Edward Said's critique of Orientalism should be characterized not only by a healthy skepticism concerning the motives and hidden dynamics of intercultural encounters and performances, but it should also be characterized by a willingness and desire to bring more people into direct human contact with peoples from a wide variety of cultures, if for no other purpose than to dispel myths, false pictures, inaccurate analyses, and to expose the hidden interests and distortions which may characterize official, institutionalized descriptions of other cultures and peoples.

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[16] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings," in Robert D. Baird, ed. **Methodological Issues in Religious Studies,** (The School of Religion of the University of Iowa, 1975), p. 9.