

## New Texts Out Now: Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*

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Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, editors, *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

**Jadaliyya (J):** What made you put together this book?

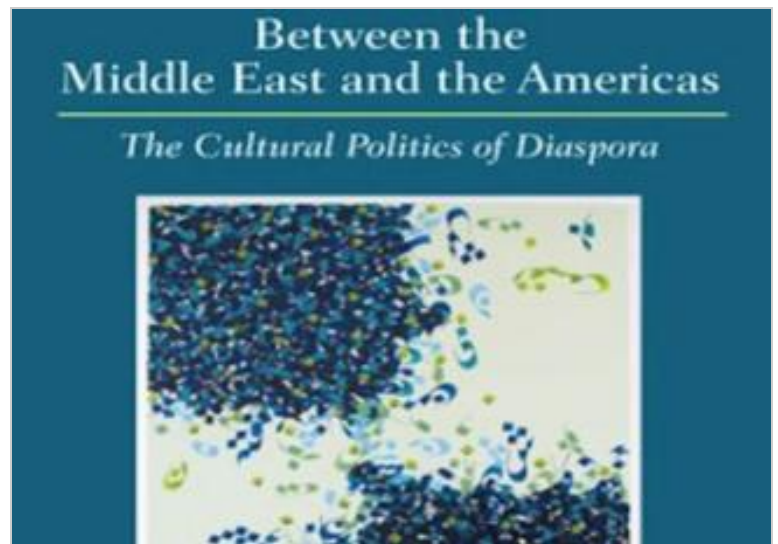
**Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat (EA & ES):**

Growing up in the wake of our families' displacement from Iraq, and having lived in multiple geographies as part of complex familial mixing, we see this project as an attempt to connect what otherwise would be perceived as disparate and disjointed worlds. Gathering essays on seemingly unrelated cultural geographies under one "roof" corresponds to the various diasporic worlds we have been familiar with, or aware of, but which have hardly been travelled together in scholarly publications.

The Middle Eastern diaspora in the United States is often compared to Europe, while the linked analogies to the rest of the Americas are overlooked. The Arab/Latino interface examined in this book was inspired by similar convergences in our own lives. Our respective itineraries, along with Iraq and the United States, have included Cuba and Colombia in the case of Evelyn Alsultany, while in Ella's case, they have included Israel/Palestine and Brazil. It was therefore only a matter of time before we sought to translate our personal trajectories to a book that proposes to view the Americas as a continuum, in terms of both Middle Eastern diasporas and cross-border cultural flows.

Finally, the penchant to regard the presence of Arabs, Muslims, or Middle Easterners in the West as a menacing infiltration, on the one hand, or as exotic unattainable people, on the other, was also at the heart of our desire to highlight a long historical cultural syncretism between East and West, as well as between North and South. We hope that the volume will contribute to reshaping the discursive premises about the world/s we inhabit.

While inspired by our personal experiences and trajectories, the volume seeks to address three lacunae in the scholarly literature: by examining Orientalism and Middle Eastern diasporic culture from a transnational perspective; by



[Cover of Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, "*Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*"]

comparing differing and overlapping forms of Orientalism in North America, Latin America, and parts of Europe; and by insisting on a transnational Arab American cultural studies approach. Our approach engages the question of “cultural politics” or “the politics of culture” to unravel the ways in which identities become sites of contestation in the context of national narratives and transnational cultural flows.

**J: In what ways does your book diverge from and/or problematize the area studies model?**

**EA & ES:** The volume challenges the area studies model in which each geographical area is examined within the confines of its borders. It proposes a shift from area studies to both Inter-Area Studies and Transnational and Diasporic Studies. Transcending a nation-state approach, the book aims to begin a transnational conversation about the production of discourses of Middle Eastern identities across time and space.

*Between the Middle East and the Americas* strives to expand the ways geographies of culture are conceived, imagined, and analyzed. It highlights the way cultural production, consumption, and reception are intimately intertwined, with blurry boundaries made ever more entangled within multiple itineraries. This interdisciplinary project begins from the premise that representation itself is a site of contestation, with profound historical and theoretical implications for area studies, ethnic studies, and American studies. The volume as a whole aims to further illuminate the complex relationship between American studies, ethnic studies, and area studies as it impacts on the analysis of the Middle East in the US and the Americas. In sum, it aims to disentangle conventional geographies of meaning, moving beyond the binarist notion of “here” and “there,” in an effort to transcend a ghettoized mapping of the diverse regions of the world by highlighting an inter-area studies perspective.

**J: What kind of intervention are you trying to make with a cultural studies approach?**

**EA & ES:** In addition to bringing these geographies together and challenging area studies and ethnic studies models, we also seek to bring postcolonial cultural studies methods to Arab American studies and Middle Eastern studies. Within Arab American studies, while ample work develops historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches, few works take cultural studies approaches or cover both North and South America. And while cultural studies approaches have been incorporated into American studies and Latin American studies, such approaches have been largely absent in Middle Eastern studies.

At the center of our inquiry is the question of how cultural texts produce meanings about the Middle East, how these meanings circulate and are consumed, and how they change over time and across space. It is not merely who speaks for the Middle Eastern diaspora, but also within which discursive paradigms it is represented. The problem of representation and discourse analysis, as articulated in this volume, is central to the study of cultural politics.

The following questions are thus central to this volume: How are the discourses and ideologies about and from the Middle East imagined and enacted through cultural practices such as literary translation, hip-hop, and the Internet? What are the social and historical conditions of possibility that produce the simultaneous commodification, demonization, and appreciation of Middle Eastern culture in the Americas? How do meanings about Arab and Muslim identities shift as a function of geographical context and historical moment?

Within a postcolonial cultural studies approach, the volume focuses on meanings produced by cultural texts and the ways in which these meanings participate in a larger contested field of meaning. Rather than merely studying the object of culture, cultural studies has advanced a poststructuralist methodology of reading hegemonic and resistant practices. Overlapping with the volume’s cultural studies concern is also a postcolonial studies perspective that engages the question of “cultural politics” or “the politics of culture.” In this sense, the volume engages the ways in which identities become sites of contestation, politicization, and struggle in the context of national narratives and transnational cultural flows.

**J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the book address?**

**EA & ES:** The contributors address a range of themes, including representations of Arabs/Muslim in US visual culture; Mexican, Brazilian, and Argentine print media; Latin American novels; English-language memoirs by Iranian women;

Danish government discourses on the Prophet Muhammad cartoons controversy; the popularity of belly dancing; gay pornographic websites featuring Arab/Muslim men; French and US translations of Rumi's poetry during the War on Terror; Arab American hip-hop; Arab-Chilean newspapers; and cross-regional Mahjar literature of the Americas. This volume aims to begin a transnational conversation about the politics of culture of diasporic Middle Eastern identities in the contemporary era.

While some of the essays deal with the ways in which hegemonic discourse positions the Arab as exploitable Other or makes Arab culture consumable for a Western audience by diluting, exoticizing, or commodifying it, other essays deal with efforts to imagine more complex understandings of self-representation, whether in literature, visual art, cinema, or Internet sites. This project explores the construction of the idea of "the Middle East" through different cultural sites, whether in the national geographies of the US, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Denmark, and France, or within transnational digital spaces.

Taken together, the essays point to an assemblage of meanings that shift depending on the historical moment and geographic/cultural context. They point to a contradictory field of meaning—where Muslims can be figured as terrorists in the US hegemonic discourse, or as corrupt businessmen in Latin America, yet where such hegemonic discourses can also be defied, as seen in diverse artistic expressions and cultural projects.

### **J: How is the book organized?**

**EA & ES:** It is divided into two parts. The first part is composed of essays examining the cultural politics of "the Middle East" in the Americas through narratives of "the Nation." These contributions focus on how representations of the Middle East and its diasporas shape conceptions of nation, nationalism, and national identity. The second part highlights the transnational dimension of these issues by analyzing the ways that representations of the Middle East and its diasporas circulate and translate across national borders. In addition to our introduction—"The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East' in the Americas"—and as a preamble to both sections of the collection, Ella Shohat's essay "The Sephardi-Moorish Atlantic: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism" explores the impact and implications for ethnic studies and area studies of Edward Said's foundational 1978 text *Orientalism*.

Part one, "Nation, Culture, and Representation," consists of eight essays. Jacob Berman's essay that examines how mahjar writers—members of the first generation of Arab immigrants (1880-1924)—conceptualized Arab and Arab American identity. John Tofik Karam examines the complexities of Arab inclusion in Brazil's self-conception as a "racial democracy," read through the media coverage of São Paulo city government corruption scandals in 1999 and 2000. Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp explores Lebanese Mexican identity, demonstrating that discourses on Arabness in Mexico relate to specific historical, economic, and social contexts that have produced a certain ambivalence among Mexicans. Christina Civantos examines representations of the most prominent Arab Argentine, former president Carlos Menem. Amira Jarmakani approaches the recent surge in the popularity of belly dancing as a counterpoint to the demagoguery of the contemporaneous War on Terror. Evelyn Alsultany identifies a series of strategies deployed by writers and producers of post-9/11 TV dramas when representing Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, such as including a "good Muslim" to "balance" the terrorist representation. Junaid Rana examines the construction of a racialized Muslim within post-9/11 US visual culture through an analysis of the television series *Sleeper Cell* and of the film *Syriana*.

Part two of the volume, "Transnation, Diaspora, and Translation," consists of seven essays. Sunaina Maira explores the ways in which hip hop has become a site for constructing an Arab American identity at once political and cultural, national and transnational. Karim Tartoussieh explores the rise of Arab digital diasporic communities in the US and the ways in which Muslim Arab Americans use cyber technology. Helle Rytikønen compares the US and Danish government and media reactions to the Prophet Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark and the meanings that were produced about Muslim identity. Heba El Attar examines both the dominant representations of Arabs in Latin American literature and Arab-Latin American counter-self representations. Ziad Elmarsafy examines how Rumi's poetry has been packaged, marketed, and sold in the US as compared to France. R. Shareah Taleghani examines the representation of Iran in the United States through the reception of particular English-language memoirs by Iranian women. Shouleh Vatanabadi examines the politics of translation in the context of cultural production in modern Turkey.

Taken as a whole, the essays expand the scholarly landscape by examining the production and critique of Orientalism from a transnational perspective that goes beyond the axis of East and West, and by also examining differing and overlapping forms of Orientalism on the North and South axis, all performed within a postcolonial studies-cultural studies approach.

**J: How does this book connect to and/or depart from your previous research and writing?**

**EA:** The core of my work is concerned with questions of representations, more specifically how the media produces racial meanings about Arabs and Muslims. My work contributes to the current renaissance in Arab American studies by incorporating the methods and theories of ethnic studies, American studies and cultural studies. It is driven by a commitment to expand the conversations between these fields and to develop Arab American cultural studies as a distinct subfield. My book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York University Press, 2012) examines sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the US media since 9/11, seeking to answer the question: Why was there an increase in sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11? The exhibit I guest-curated with the Arab American National Museum, “**Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes,**” examines a longer history of Arab stereotypes. My co-edited volume with Nadine Naber and Rabab Abdulhadi, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging* (Syracuse University Press, 2011), showcases how Arab and Arab American feminists respond to stereotypes about themselves as oppressed. This volume similarly takes up the question of the politics of culture, but expands it beyond US borders.

**ES:** Over the years, I have been exploring the historical links and discursive analogies between the Middle East and the Americas. In the 1980s, I began examining the analogies between Zionist discourse on Palestine and American colonial discourse on Native America. *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representations* (1989) pointed to these analogical representations between “the Indian” in the Western genre and “the Arab” in the Zionist “pioneer cinema,” dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. The recurrent “images of encirclement” that had the Arabs, Indian-like, surrounding the Zionist pioneers mobilized spectators’ identification with the besieged defending civilization against a savagery presumably emerging out of nowhere. I also addressed a related analogy between the representation of blacks in the US and “the blacks” of Israel—the Sephardim/Mizrahim/Arab-Jews—within diverse genres such as comedies, melodramas, and war films. The Israeli racialization of “the Arab” was symbolically split along national lines, one reminiscent of “the Indian” and the other of “the black” of Euro-American discourse. Indeed, the resistant discourse of the Israeli “Black Panthers” was inspired by the African-American movement, a subject partly examined in my 1988 essay “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims” (an essay written in dialogue with Edward Said’s “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims,” which had been published earlier in the same journal, *Social Text*).

In my attempt to chart new maps of cross-border perspectives, I further argued for making this triangular analogy of “the white/red/black” between the Middle East and the Americas. Along with the co-authored book with Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994), in a series of related and overlapping essays written in the early 1990s, I highlighted the historical links between the Middle East and the Americas, dating back to 1492: “Staging the Quincentenary: The Middle East and the Americas” (in *Third Text*); “Columbus, Palestine, and Arab-Jews: Toward a Relational Approach to Community Identity” (in *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and The Gravity of History*); and “Taboo Memories, Diasporic Visions: Columbus, Palestine and Arab-Jews” (in *Performing Hybridity*) Some of this material was gathered in my book *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (2006).

These publications elaborated on the triangular analogy in terms of the discursive and historical linkages between “the two 1492s,” that is, the expulsions of Jews and Muslims from al-Andalus on the one hand, and the so-called “discovery of America” on the other. Iberia’s demonizing images and “cleansing of the blood” tropes with regards to Jews and Muslims “traveled” to the Americas and applied to indigenous and Afro-diasporic people. These publications critiqued the contemporary version of Orientalism that separates “the Jew” from “the Muslim” within the public sphere, while also critiquing the common delinking of “the two 1492s.” The extension of a ready-made ideological apparatus that crossed the Atlantic must be viewed as the point of beginning for Orientalism in the Occident.

One significant event for presenting the "Columbus, Palestine, and Arab-Jews" text took place in a conference dedicated to Edward Said ("The Politics of Identity, Secular Criticism, and the Gravity of History" at the Center for Research in Philosophy and Literature, Warwick University, Britain, 1994), where Said responded to the papers. The literary critic Subhi Hadidi who attended the conference translated it into Arabic (*kulumbus, Filastin, wa al-Yahud al-'Arab: Nahwa Muqarabah 'alaeiqiyyah li huwiyyat al-Majmu'ah*), and Mahmoud Darwish published it in the journal he edited, *Al Karmil*. The essay incorporated Darwish's poem on al-Andalus, "Al Kamanjat" ("The Violins") to illuminate past and present analogical eulogies of forced dislocations between the departing Arabs from al-Andalus and Palestine, but also insisting on the departing Arab-Jews in the wake of the partition of Palestine. (Interestingly, the first time I met Darwish was in Toledo Spain, in the 1989 vital gathering between Palestinians and Sephardic/Arab-Jewish intellectuals, taking place in the historical Iberian center of translation and the symbolic site of "convivencia.") More recently, I addressed Darwish's later poem "The Speech of the Red Indian," in Eyal Sivan's "Montage Interdit: A Web-Based Documentary Project" (2012) focusing on Jean-Luc Godard's anti-colonial themes. In Godard's *Notre Musique* the links between Darwish's Red Indian and Mostar Bridge come together within a mesmerizing literary and cinematic imagination. The linking of the presumably divergent lives of Indigenous Americans, Muslims and Jews — precisely the kind of affinities my writing tried to explore-- further highlight the haunting resemblances and subterranean imaginaries between past and present. Robert Stam and I began to elaborate these connections in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, and continued to do so through the notion of "the red/black/white Atlantic" in our recent book *Race in Translation* (2012).

Since the 1980s my work has addressed the question of Orientalism in cultural representation, including in American popular culture. *Israeli Cinema* looked into the analogies between Hollywood and Israeli cinematic representations of "the Orient," while the essays "Gender in Hollywood's Orient," (1990), "Gender and the Culture of Empire," (1991), and "American Orientalism" (1997) studied Orientalism within the larger context of Eurocentrism. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism* Robert Stam and I analyzed the linked analogies between the representations of diverse imperialized geographies, while also highlighting the intellectual and aesthetic trajectory from "Third Worldist cinema" to "post-Third Worldist" cultural practices. In *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* and in the introduction to my edited *Talking Visions* (1998), I raised questions about the relationship between the notion of studying "the Middle East" as simply "over there" separating it from "the Middle East" in the Americas, "right here." (Mervat Hatem's essay specifically focused on this shuttling between "there" and "here.") The reception of Middle Easterners in the US promoted discrepant narratives of dislocation where some hyphenated identities, a Moroccan-Israeli-American for example would be viewed as "Israeli" while a Moroccan-French-American would be viewed as "Arab," thus persisting to narrate identities along the lines of Arab-versus-Jew.

Over the years, I have given presentations on "geographies of spectatorship" examining the Middle Eastern/Latin American intersections in popular culture. In this context, images and sounds—the Tangos in Egyptian musicals, or the bellydancing in Brazilian musicals—revealed ambivalent imaginaries, at times mediated via French, British, and American popular culture, dating back to the Expositions' Orient. In the case of Brazil, for example, I pointed to an ambivalent mode of Orientalism enchanted by harems and veils but which also is part of a syncretic Brazilian mixing. Much of this research material and conceptualization now forms part of my contribution to *Between the Middle East and the Americas*. More specifically, my essay, "The Sephardi-Moorish Atlantic: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism," explores the impact and implications for ethnic studies and area studies of Edward Said's foundational 1978 text *Orientalism*. Asking exactly when Orientalism begins, I suggest an alternative starting point to that offered by Said. While Said traces Orientalism back to the post-Enlightenment period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the grand European empires, I resituate Orientalism in relation to Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas in 1492. Orientalism, I argue, was constituted in the Americas before it was applied to the Middle East, part of a historically triangulated relationality between the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. (In *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, I referred to Columbus as "the first Orientalist.") Pre-existing Iberian phobias and stereotypes about Jews and Muslims boarded on the boats to the Americas—in a trajectory across the Sephardi-Moorish Atlantic—long before the latter-day flowerings of the British and French empires, and long before the massive emigration of Middle Eastern peoples into the Americas. Dialoguing with coloniality/modernity and Luso-Tropical thinkers, as well as with Said and postcolonial studies, I point to what might be called "the Sephardi-Moorish unconscious of the Americas,"

proposing a different way of looking at Orientalism and Occidentalism.

In the plenary of the Middle East Studies Association, dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of Said's *Orientalism* (2008), I highlighted the need for examining Orientalism within multiple geographies outside of the assumed geography of "the Orient." This conceptual framing of discussing not merely "the Middle Eastern diaspora" but moving into "diasporic readings" of "the Orient" informs *Between the Middle East and the Americas*, appropriately dedicated to the memory of Edward Said.

### Excerpts from *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*

#### From Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany, "The Cultural Politics of 'the Middle East' in the Americas: An Introduction"

Shuttling between Rio de Janeiro and Fez, the hit Brazilian soap opera or *telenovela* *O Clone* tells the tale of the forbidden yet enduring love between a Catholic Brazilian man and a Muslim Moroccan woman. To an audience increasingly curious about Islam and the Middle East, the series, which had its debut shortly after 9/11 (on 1 October), portrayed two worlds, both bursting with sensuality but also tormented by social and religious restrictions. In contrast to US media representations, it was not a case of fear-mongering about "Islamic terrorism" but rather of an Orientalist exoticism rooted in a tropical imaginary long marked by a fascination with a distant Moorish/Iberian past.[1] The *telenovela's* imagery of harems, veils, nargilas, and belly dancing ignited a *Dança do Ventre* craze and generated classes in belly dance across Brazil. A CD based on the original soundtrack of *O Clone's* Arabic music contributed to an already growing music/dance fusion genre, the BellySamba, which gained visibility thanks to the new climate generated by *O Clone*. [2] The ornamented dress of the protagonist, Jade Rachid, was reportedly the most popular costume in the 2002 Rio carnival. [3] It was displayed within the same spirit of carnivalesque hilarity that animated the performance of "Bin Laden's harem," which included sambistas rhythmically lifting their burqas to reveal skimpy Brazilian tangas underneath. [4] Drawing on international news headlines, the performance turned what was usually seen as threatening into a flirtatious scene of ludic corporeality.

*O Clone's* popularity was not limited to Brazil. The *telenovela* was dubbed from Portuguese into Spanish in 2002, and broadcast in the US television network, Telemundo, to one of the largest audiences in the history of the Spanish language American channel. [5] Due to popular demand it was rebroadcast in 2004. In addition to its broadcast in Spanish for Latin American countries such as Peru, Argentina, and Venezuela, *O Clone/El Clon* was also dubbed into multiple languages and aired in more than ninety countries, including Turkey, Israel, Russia, Portugal, and Kyrgyzstan. [6] In 2010, Telemundo and TV Globo, the Brazilian network that created the original *telenovela*, coproduced a completely fresh Spanish-speaking version—*El Clon*—with a new cast. The *telenovela's* original base-country was now relocated from Brazil to North America. The Latin/Arab or Catholic/Muslim cultural clash of the original novella gave way, in a new transoceanic passage, to the cultural contrasts between the US and Morocco, and a narrative shuttle between Miami and Fez.

We begin our introduction to *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* with *O Clone* as a way of hinting at the multiple geographic and transnational foci of the volume. What representations and meanings about Arabs/Muslims, and about Brazilians/Latinos, were produced by *O Clone/El Clon* in the diverse contexts in which it was translated, circulated, and broadcast? To what extent were these discourses shaped by the discrepant contexts of reception? Within the US Latino submarket, Arabs/Muslims were largely portrayed, just a switch of the channel away, as terrorists. What is most striking in the varying representations of Arabs/Muslims in *O Clone/El Clon* are the distinct yet overlapping significations of Arabness and Muslimness in North *vis-a-vis* South America. Indeed the Arabs/Muslims in *O Clone/El Clon* are nowhere marked as potential terrorists. At the same time, they are portrayed within an Orientalist imagery that mirrors familiar European and North American fantasies.

[...]

The case of *O Clone/El Clon* could also serve as a metonymy and metaphor for the ongoing battle over the veracity and authenticity of the representation of Arab/Muslim culture, that is, the persistent debate over “the real.” Heated website discussions, for example on Telemundo forum topics, cover a vast array of themes in and around *O Clone*’s portrayal of polygamy, the veil, the Muslim pillars of faith, women’s role in Muslim society, and so forth. The question of veracity and accuracy was also on the minds of the Brazilian team that created *O Clone*. The *telenovela*’s writer Gloria Perez and director Jayme Monjardim indicated that although they did not alter the script after 9/11, the event did generate a newfound sense of responsibility to “differentiate Islam from terrorism,” especially since “Brazilians are much less exposed to Muslims in their daily lives than Americans or Europeans.”[7] On the other hand, they are also less exposed to the War on Terror rhetoric typical of US politicians. In preparation for the script, Perez reportedly immersed herself in research, visiting the Middle East/North Africa to study Muslim rituals of marriage and birth, for example, while Muslim clerics conducted workshops attended by the director and the cast prior to the filming.[8]

Despite the producers’ efforts to accurately represent Islam and Arab culture, the reception of the *telenovela* underlines the politically charged nature of such representational practices. The novella elicited a heated international debate on websites, with conflicting responses, deriving, we would suggest, from the tensions and contradictions within the narrative itself, which simultaneously exploits Orientalist topoi while also celebrating Arab culture. Living between Brazil and Morocco, the protagonist Jade is painfully torn between pursuing her desire to be with the Brazilian Lucas and performing her duty to accept an arranged marriage with a Muslim man. Lucas, meanwhile, has to reconcile his passion for Jade, and his desire to play music, as well as the imperative of working for the family business and marrying within the Brazilian elite. Both Jade and Lucas tragically spend most of their lives married to people with whom they are not in love, fulfilling familial or cultural obligations while denying their own desire and longing.

While in *O Clone* Brazilian culture signifies relative freedom, the narrative also suggests that Lucas’s life is not completely free. Very much like Jade, Lucas too has to cope with familial and social expectations, in particular the class expectations of a well-to-do son of the Brazilian elite. Although a man enjoying Brazilian-style freedom, Lucas’s life eerily mirrors that of Jade. Jade, meanwhile, is the only woman in her family circle who faces cultural and religious conflict; the other women, such as her cousin, shaped by their religious and cultural assumptions, opt willingly for arranged marriages. Unlike Jade, they are not portrayed as oppressed. Jade marries Said, the man her family picks for her, a kind man who falls deeply in love with her, and who is heartbroken at having to try, day after day, to win the heart of a woman in love with someone else. In this sense the narrative complicates binarist representations of both Moroccan and Brazilian cultures. Although *O Clone* is replete with examples of stereotyping and essentializing Muslim-Arab culture, it also incorporates narrative moments and actions that challenge such stereotypes through more rounded and complex portrayals.

Although in one sense both protagonists lead a life of self-denial to satisfy familial and cultural expectations, in another sense the Muslim woman’s conflictual existence, given her stringent religious duties, is more profoundly dramatic and devastating. This glaring difference has to do with *O Clone*’s narrative contextualization of the protagonists’ ambient cultures. *O Clone* relies on a binary opposition between Moroccan and Brazilian cultures, with Brazil standing in for Western freedom. The *telenovela* frequently juxtaposes scenes of Muslim women wrapped head to toe in hijab with Brazilian women flaunting tangas on the beach. Arab/Muslim culture is depicted as patriarchal, restrictive, and obsessed with rules, in contrast to Brazilian culture, portrayed as flexible, open, and gender-equal. In *O Clone* all Muslim-Arab women must cover themselves while Brazilian women enjoy wearing sexy clothes; Muslim women are prohibited from dating, while Brazilian women date freely, and even have relationships outside of marriage; Brazilians go to discos and dance in the streets, while Arab women belly dance (with great frequency) in the privacy of their homes.

If in *O Clone* the world of Arab/Islam is associated with the struggle with “*maktub*,” (literally, that is which is written, or destiny, and the title of the theme song composed by Marcus Viana), the world of Brazil is associated with fighting and even triumphing over fate. The clone of the title refers to the cloning of Lucas’s twin brother who was killed in an airplane accident. Through the act of cloning, the Brazilian scientist brings Lucas’s lost brother

back into the world. Cloning here signifies the ability to create, to generate, and be God-like in breathing new life into the old flesh. In the encounter between “*maktub*,” on the one hand, and science, on the other, Brazil signifies science-friendly modernity—a refusal to simply accept that which is determined or pre-determined. The notion of a scripturally fore-ordained fate, within the Orientalist imaginary, operates in tandem with other topoi and tropes, such as Oriental despotism (which assumes a passive mass subjected to the despot) and the pop psychology of Oriental fatalism, all alongside the formulaic binarism of an active, agential, modern West and a passive, traditional East.

In sum, despite *O Clone*'s attempt to offer a positive portrayal of Arab and Islam, its narrative nonetheless reproduces a number of paradigmatic Orientalist tropes and binarist oppositions. The *telenovela* mixes customs and traditions from diverse regions and communities, subjecting the varied regions of the Middle East/ North Africa to a “topographical reductionism”[9] that elides the significant differentiations within Arab/Islam's multiple geographies. While the *telenovela*'s theme did feed into a growing Latin American curiosity about Islam, it also provoked discontent about its penchant for a presumably ethnographic representation of polygamy, harems, and veils. One of the *telenovela*'s critics, Morocco's ambassador to Brazil, Abdelmalek Cherkaoui Ghazouani, was especially alarmed by *O Clone*'s image of Morocco. Posting critical comments on his embassy's website bulletin board,[10] he debunked four myths: that polygamy is standard and widely practiced; that women do not study or work outside of the home; that women are subordinate to men; and that belly dancing is how men and women communicate. He clarified that the Moroccan state prohibits polygamy; that women are not confined to the home; and that belly dancing is not the national dance but popular in tourist locations.[11]

The issue of accuracy and distortion is a complex one and can be seen on a number of levels. On the one hand, a fair and adequate representation is vitally necessary within a public and media sphere proliferating in negative images. On the other hand, the discussion must go beyond veristic accuracy and positive images, which revolves around questions of character, to engage issues of voice, discourse and ideology.[12] For example, often the idea of the “real Arab” is articulated within a set of assumptions and axioms about modernity: “the real” Arab is “the modern” Arab. Such criticisms convey an investment in the metanarrative of modernity, where the Arab nation-state is viewed as a vehicle for emancipation and progress. This volume acknowledges the importance of accuracy but it also points to the complex issues involved in the demand for authentic representation. In terms of sheer factuality, *O Clone* does indeed fail to indicate a basic fact, in this case the Moroccan state prohibition of polygamy. It is also factually problematic to portray all Arab-Muslims as practicing polygamy. In doing so, such narratives elide a potentially more complex conflict having to do with tensions between certain traditions and state prohibitions of those very same traditions. At the same time, such narratives tend to portray Arab/Muslim society as inherently patriarchal, presumably in contrast with nonpatriarchal non-Arab societies. But such a formulation elides the issue of patriarchy in Western societies. While Arab/Islamic culture is presented as a space of polygamy, the more subtle “harem structures”[13] of the differently structured patriarchal societies of the West (for example the conventional triad of husband, wife and lover) remain unthematized.

## NOTES

[1] On Brazil and Latin America's contradictory Sephardic/Moorish longing and Moorish unconscious, see Ella Shohat's essay in this volume.

[2] The CD features belly dance music produced by Marcus Viana and includes the Mouzayek Arab Ensemble, and Syrian singer Tony Mouzayek, who resides in Brazil.

[3] *El Universal* 6 (accessed 1 October 2010).

[4] Information supplied by Brazilian film scholar João Luis Vieira in conversation with Ella Shohat, Rio de Janeiro, spring 2003.

[5] Steve Brennan, “*Telemundo Revives ‘El Clon’ for Latino Market*,” *Reuters*, 12 May 2008 (accessed 1 May 2012).



[6] Ibid. and Elizabeth Barbosa, “The Brazilian Telenovela ‘El Clon’: An Analysis of Viewer’s Online Vicarious and Virtual Learning Experiences,” Dissertation, Lynn University, 2005 (accessed 1 May 2012). Also see Meghan Simpson, “Traveling Soap Operas, Brazil to Kyrgyzstan: Meaning-making and Images of the ‘Muslim Woman,’” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (November 2009) 304-324 (accessed 1 May 2012).

[7] [Telenovela-World](#) (accessed 30 September 2008).

[8] Ibid.

[9] See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, New York: Routledge, 1994, 148.

[10] [http://tripatlas.com/O\\_Clone](http://tripatlas.com/O_Clone) (accessed 30 September 2008).

[11] Meghan Simpson, “Traveling Soap Operas, Brazil to Kyrgyzstan.”

[12] This critique that addresses the limits of “positive image” analysis is based on Shohat and Stam’s chapter “Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle Over Representation,” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. For a related critique of the image of the “good Arab” in Zionist representations, see *Shohat’s Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989, republished by IB Tauris, 2010); and Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, New York: New York University Press, 2012.

[13] The term *harem structures* is used by Ella Shohat in her essay “Gender and the Culture of Empire” to refer to gendered /sexualized spaces imagined in ways similar to the Orientalist imaginary, even in the absence of harems, and in the contexts where the Orient is not thematized (*Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 13, Iss. 1, 1991: 45-84), and also in the chapter “Tropes of Empire” in Shohat and Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.

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