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Farid Laroussi, *Postcolonial Counterpoint: Orientalism, France, and the Maghreb*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. x + 227 pp. Bibliography and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4426-4891-3.

Review by Jimia Boutouba, Santa Clara University.

In an era where a manifestly latent Orientalism is on the rise and where xenophobia and Islamophobia permeate almost every aspect of daily life, Laroussi's *Postcolonial Counterpoint* offers a much-needed and robust intervention, as it addresses precisely the traces of embedded Orientalism in literary, sociocultural, and political constructs. Exploring the postcolonial conditions that shape the relations between France and the Maghreb, Farid Laroussi casts a critical gaze on the subtle and sometimes invisible sedimentations of Orientalism that continue to inform these relations. A key part of the book's mandate is to revisit Edward Said's concept of latent Orientalism and examine how power structures and the "Orient-West polarity" seem to have transmuted into a complex and constantly shifting network of relations. The author thus aims to address the consequences of the most revised versions of Orientalism, which pervades contemporary life and the postcolonial context of France and the Maghreb. Beyond the ideological opposition between the West and the Islamic World or the Islamic other, the author directs critical attention to the way representations of the postcolonial condition and postcolonial subjects disclose the dynamics of renewed cultural imperialism. In this way, one can see in postcolonial representations the process of the re-inscription of hegemonic cultural centers. Even postcolonial studies, the author contends, fails to escape this predicament as it re-inscribes what Laroussi terms the "fantasy of universalism and sovereign subject" (p. 10). Postcolonial theories leave something to be desired: the need to state the complexity defining the subject more clearly, which, in turn, helps to dissipate traces of latent Orientalism.

Laroussi's endeavor calls for a different critical method, one that would attend to historicizing the modes of knowledge of the postcolonial, teasing out the "colonial repressed" through a contrapuntal intervention that takes into account intertwined histories and perspectives and critically reformulates the many crises that constitute postcolonial asymmetry and the predicament of nationalism. The impetus for such a contrapuntal approach comes from the wish to confront Western academia in general, and postcolonial studies in particular, for their inability to break free from the Orientalist grip. After an expository chapter, the author begins his intervention by asking why Said still matters today. After a careful and cogent review of Said's foundational framework, Laroussi re-centers Orientalism as a major signifier for the postcolonial condition, outlining its pertinence but also its limitations. The author then proceeds to examine how the figure of the other has been constituted within Western historical teleology and the

conditions that enabled such constructs. The project of Orientalism, the author tells us, “can be summarized as an effort to merge the past with cultural inquiry and thereby accord Western discourse legitimacy for its own ethnocentric sake” (p. 29). In this process, the Oriental other becomes a strategic pawn, but one that was rendered silent, not by imperial discourse per se, but by the power of representation (p. 45). The author then examines how these constructs have transmuted in contemporary European discourses, with a particular attention to France, where discourses of nationalism and citizenship have been overtly conflated with ethnic and religious considerations. The figure of the Muslim/Arab other has become fully formative for French/European nationalisms.

Pursuing its exploration and moving from representation to self-perception, the book also outlines how postcolonial elites and minority academics have contributed, albeit unintentionally, to the discourse of Orientalism, thus participating in “their own Orientalizing” (p. 47). The author laments how postcolonial theories have flattened heterogeneity and failed to subvert cultural domination. Orientalism continues to shape present-day discourses in Western institutions, both political and academic, hence the author’s unequivocal appeal to postcolonial elites and writers to free themselves from the shackles of what he calls the “stare of Western subjectivity” (p. 60). Maghrebi writers in particular are seen as caught up between representations and identification, and oftentimes commodified or fetishized as native informants in the Arab/Muslim world. Maghrebi literature published and distributed in Europe is thus caught in a neocolonial system and logic that maintain the notion of cultural hegemony in post-independence reality. The quasi-absence of autobiographical writing in the Maghreb, the author contends, testifies to a lack of centrality of oriental subjectivities. The postcolonial condition remains plagued by Orientalism; one way out of this ideological trap would be that the Maghreb “be accepted as an extension of France, not its Other” (p. 87).

Pursuing his critical journey, Laroussi turns to French writing on the Maghreb with a focus on André Gide’s representation of North Africa and ambiguous relationship with Algeria which is elevated, in Laroussi’s words, to the “status of a mirror reflecting French self-desire back to itself” (p. 18). He then moves on to closely examine the intricate relationship between Orientalism and nationhood. While the discourse of orientalism suppressed any notion of the people or nation, the colonized Maghrebi had to reinvent their own sense of nation, against the backdrop of colonial nationalism. The last chapters focus on the postcolonial condition in France, looking at the way children of Maghrebi immigrants interrupt any easy reading of the concept (and imagining) of the French Nation. In examining how the former colonial grid of demarcation transmuted into exclusionary socio-cultural structures, crystalized in the never-ending debate on national identity, the author forcefully outlines how latent Orientalism, or rather what he refers to as “internal Orientalism,” continues to determine the positioning of French citizens born to Arab/Muslim immigrant parents. The postcolonial subject cannot free herself from France’s national imaginary for the old colonial discourse has mutated into a defensive “nationalism.” The interpretative grid that is applied to what he calls “Beur literature,” the 2004 so-called headscarf affair, and, more recently, the way the figure of the terrorist is produced in media and political discourses all testify to the enduring effect of internal Orientalism.

From imperial times to postcolonial France, the author thus charts the way Orientalism imbricates itself into the fabric of Western cultures and turns into a practical orientation. Weaving the notions of latent and internal Orientalism, Laroussi’s book offers an enlightened, well-documented, and somewhat pugnacious account of the ideological violence undergirding

Orientalist discourse and practices that continue to operate in present-day society. *Postcolonial Counterpoint* is erudite, intensely scholarly, but never neutral, which may make it a difficult and somewhat challenging read, especially for those scholars or graduate students who are novices to the field of Francophone and Postcolonial Studies. The first chapter, which serves as a formal introduction, is rather dense and could have benefited from a better organization, so as to better articulate the central thesis and guide the reader. At times, the author, while chastising the West for its politics-driven generalizations, falls himself prey to the same “misdoing”; for instance, when he states that the harkis could not “perceive themselves as proto-national subjects” (p. 179), or when he claims that “academics are so caught up in the ideological dimension of postcolonial literature [...] and its transgressive power that they barely trouble themselves to understand the other vital elements of the corpus” (p. 72). Laroussi’s arguments would have been far more forceful and convincing had he examined or provided specific examples or case studies.

But none of these critiques detracts from the important contribution that Laroussi’s book makes to the field of Francophone Studies, especially as it relates to the intertwined history and cultural relations between the Maghreb and France. Laroussi’s enlightening and audacious critique of postcolonial studies, and Western academia in general, is a valuable lesson as he urges us to turn the gaze inward and reconsider the asymmetry of power and resources between hegemonic blocs and minority groups and address the Orientalism that continues to shape the postcolonial condition.

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