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American Quarterly, Volume 61, Number 4, December 2009, pp. 837-854
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/aq.0.0113

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The Borders and Limits of American Studies: A Picture from Beirut

Malini Johar Schueller

When I decided to go to the American University of Beirut (AUB) in May 2008 to give a talk titled “Beauty without Borders and Other Feminisms,” the subject of my talk seemed both appropriate and ironic. Like many postcolonialists, I had an intense suspicion of the buzzwords of globalization—global flows, borderlessness, circulation, smooth spaces, migrancy, and transnationalism—because they ignored unequal distribution, the starkly imperial makeup of global financial institutions such as the IMF and WTO, and the hegemony of the United States. At AUB I was also to lead a faculty seminar discussion about the attacks on Middle East studies post 9/11. But whereas the subject of my talk was the borderlessness of neoliberalism, I was being hosted by the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR), which was interested in bridging the borders created by neocolonialism and imperialism. As it turned out, my travel to Beirut under the auspices of CASAR proved to be an education about the possibilities and limits of American studies as currently configured.

CASAR was created only recently, and with a specific geopolitical agenda. Shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Saudi billionaire prince and Lebanese citizen Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Alsand offered Mayor Rudy Giuliani $10 million toward disaster relief efforts. Giuliani accepted the check given to him following a memorial service at Ground Zero but rejected it shortly thereafter when it was revealed that Alwaleed had released a statement suggesting that the United States take the occasion to “reexamine its policies in the Middle East and adopt a more balanced stand toward the Palestinian cause.” In 2003, soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Alwaleed provided $10 million in funds to initiate programs in American studies at the American University of Beirut and the American University of Cairo. Announcing the donation to establish CASAR at the American University of Beirut, Alwaleed expressed his hope that the center would “bridge the gap that emerged between the United States and the Arab World on the heels of the tragic events of September 11.” From its very in-
ception, therefore, CASAR was tied to questions of U.S. power, militarism, and occupation in ways that were directly related to its location. American studies at CASAR was envisioned as an engagement with, and an attempt to understand, the United States through the prism of the Arab world, a balancing that Edward Said, an ardent proponent of American studies programs in the Middle East, had long advocated.

In recent years, the leaders of the American Studies Association have also stressed the value of understandings of the United States from outside its borders. In her presidential address to the ASA in 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin argues that an understanding of the “multiple meanings of America and American culture...requires looking beyond the nation's borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders.” In contrast to U.S. foreign policy, which is “marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification,” American studies, Fishkin suggests, is a “site of knowledge marked by a very different set of assumptions—a place where borders both within and without the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced.” While the State operated its unilateral militarism by reifying borders between Us and Them—Bush’s infamous cowboy threat “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” comes to mind—American studies rendered borders fluid and subjected to scrutiny the idea of a consensual nationalist identity implied by “Us.”

Fishkin’s vision of transnationalism’s potential to decenter a bellicose nationalism echoes, with a difference, Alwaleed’s utopian cross-cultural mission for American studies programs in the Middle East. Doing American studies from “outside” the United States, through centers that explicitly foreground a transnational focus, might mean engaging in a radically reconfigured field wherein global nodes and networks displace the ubiquity of American power, or create new paradigms through which we raise questions about citizenship and identity. Yet it is absolutely crucial not to universalize this terrain of the “outside” or to fantasize these outsides as sites of possibility. Looking at American studies from a transnational vantage point might help us think about the policing of borders—racial and national—through U.S. power and in the subject called America. In his now classic essay “Traveling Theory,” Edward Said suggests the possibilities of theory’s potential to be transformed by its new locations. In tracing the travel of Marxist theory from Lukacs to Goldmann to Williams, Said writes,

Theory is a response to a specific social and historical situation of which an intellectual occasion is a part. Thus what is insurrectionary consciousness in one instance becomes
tragic vision in another. . . . I do not wish to suggest that Budapest and Paris determined the kinds of theories produced by Lukács and Goldmann. I do mean that ‘Budapest’ and ‘Paris’ are irreducibly first conditions, and they provide limits and apply pressures to which each writer, given his own gifts, predilections, and interests, responds. 7

In the spirit of Said’s essay, I want to argue that any attempts to think of transnational American studies have to be context specific. The numerous American studies institutes and programs—the Clinton Institute for American Studies in Dublin, the U.S. Studies Center at the University of Sydney, the American Studies Program, and the North American Studies Program at the University of Tehran, to name a few—all have different agendas and reasons for being. Some, such as the program in Hyderabad, India, are long-standing and rely on government-funded Fulbright scholars; others, such as in Tehran, are positioned against the U.S. State Department’s “cultural exchanges,” which are designed to bring about “regime change.” 8 The objective of the Clinton Institute is to function as a resource for scholars and policymakers alike, while that of the Center at Sydney is to encourage corporate ties. 9 Each location generates different questions for American studies. The imperatives for doing American studies from one location might not coincide with those of another. So, what are the pressures that Beirut puts on American studies? I’ll use my travel to AUB to explore some of these pressures.

Alwaleed’s donations to further mutual understanding between the United States and the Arab world, although coming at a moment when the discipline has declared itself resolutely internationalist and opposed to the hegemonic narratives of Cold War exceptionalism, point to the consensual fault lines of American studies: the idea of impermeable boundaries between Middle East studies and American studies, an unspoken unanimity about the geography of terror, and a rigidity about what constitutes the Left in terms of the Middle East. I want to explore these fault lines from the vantage point of Beirut and ask how we can rethink the multiple meanings of “America” from an American studies perspective in the Middle East. What kinds of borders does that particular location invite us to transgress? How do theories of borders and border crossings travel in the Middle East? What does traveling theory mean for us as scholars in American studies and what does it mean for us to travel?

Analyzing Terror: The Edward Said Chair in American Studies

For many in the United States, my experience in Beirut would be a perfect illustration of what it means to live with “terror.” Following a call for a labor strike initiated by the Hezbollah-led opposition on May 7, 2008, the streets
of Beirut became strangely spectral. Few stragglers walked the normally busy Corniche, and as the Lebanese army stood by, opposition supporters blocked access to the country’s only international airport. Soon, pro-government Future Movement supporters blocked off the roads between Beirut and Damascus in the east, and Tripoli and Syria to the north. The borders of Lebanon, the product of French and British colonialism, were effectively sealed. A day later, fighting between Hezbollah and government supporters broke out in earnest. Government allied leader Walid Jumblatt had issued a direct challenge to Hezbollah’s army and weaponry; in turn, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah had stated in a press conference his group’s intentions of defending their weapons.

As I made my way through the campus, while debating the innocuous question of which restaurant to try for dinner, gunshots started to ring out from different parts of the city. The next day only men armed with Kalashnikovs, guarding empty streets or blocking highways with burning tires, were out. We, the Americans, along with a host of Syrians and Saudis, were evacuated. To my host, Patrick McGreevy, an expatriate geography professor from Pennsylvania and the director of CASAR, this was hardly terror. McGreevy, like many of his colleagues, had refused to leave Beirut in 2006 and had lived through the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon. For him, doing American studies in 2006 had meant ignoring the advice of the provost to leave for the “safety” of the United States, and continuing to teach in a country that had been effectively blockaded. He was going to do the same now. During the course of the next week of street fighting, Israeli jets flew overhead and the U.S. battleship USS Cole moved in plain sight of Beirut.

Whereas most American studies scholars today would have little difficulty seeing the “terror” wreaked by the U.S. occupation of Iraq or the bombardment of an already beleaguered Afghanistan, it is a terror imagined as different from that perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists. In other words, a politicization of Islam makes possible the deployment of two very different sets of discourses: on the one hand are questions of the state, civil society, power, and democracy (or its perversion as imperialism, which can perpetrate its own species of terror) and on the other, Islamicist groups (Hezbollah, Hamas, etc.) with an anti-Western, fundamentalist religious agenda that cannot be discussed in the language of modernity. Traveling to Beirut, one finds such distinctions muddied up, confused, undermined.

While the audience for my talk was large, vibrant, and intellectually demanding, the exchange of ideas during the session was not markedly different from what it might have been at a public lecture in a university in the United States or at an ASA meeting for that matter. The glaring differences
were evident elsewhere. Lectures at CASAR are attended by students, the community, and a lively group of faculty, many of them American expatriates teaching at nearby universities. As we, the American studies faculty, talked till the early hours of the morning at a classy French restaurant, where we made sure to run up a large tab for the foundation funded by the “Prince,” I couldn’t help but note that these expatriates held political views that were very different from their colleagues in the United States. Like their colleagues, these faculty identified themselves as leftists, but the Left for most of them was associated with postcolonial nationalism, which, in Lebanon, had been under siege: most recently from Syria in 2005, Israel in 2006, and indirectly, the United States. They were proud of the Cedar Revolution of 2005 that forced the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country. The 2006 war had proven decisively that the destruction of Lebanon by Israel would be condoned by the United States under the aegis of democracy. On the other hand, the Hezbollah had emerged as the only legitimate resistance to Israel, necessary for Lebanon to have even the semblance of a state. Moreover, as supporters of Palestinians—hundreds of thousands of whom were refugees in this tiny nation—the Hezbollah was an important anticolonial force. For the wife of one of the American expatriate faculty, being on the left meant volunteering weekly as a teacher at the Sabra refugee camp.

As we feasted on good Lebanese food in McGreevy’s apartment, the conversation occasionally turning to speculation about the strike and the airport blockade, I was unprepared for the reception of my paper on the surveillance of Middle East studies in the United States post-9/11, which I had envisioned as part of a conversation about academic freedom. Now my own self-surveillance and academic freedom were being questioned as I was challenged about the gaps and silences in my paper. I had positioned the Right’s assault on Middle East studies as part of the resurgence of the culture wars and an attack on the culture of civil rights that had facilitated the entry of immigrant Arab scholars in the academy. The Right was recoiling from the focus on subaltern knowledge in Middle East studies. But for the faculty in Lebanon, the paper was woefully inadequate. The proverbial elephant in the room for them was the Israel lobby, which, they argued, had enormous consequences in their everyday lives. Why was it that I had scarcely hinted at what to them was screamingly obvious in my analysis? What was it about doing American studies that disallowed me from even engaging this particular aspect of U.S. foreign policy?

To think about the questions posed by the faculty at Beirut is to confront a curious analytical impasse in which the disjunctures between the national
Imaginary and Symbolic have been rendered seamless. The spurning of Alwaleed’s offer of assistance because it asked for a balanced stance toward the Palestinian cause reflects a long-standing construction of Palestinian self-determination struggles as manifestations of terror. (Cynthia McKinney’s criticism of Giuliani’s refusal of Alwaleed’s money led to her defeat in the Democratic primary in 2002.) The question of Palestine has been the lynchpin through which Manichean political and cultural categories in the U.S. Imaginary have been mobilized. On the one side is Israel, a nation reflecting and valiantly guarding our values of democracy and liberty, and on the other are Muslim fundamentalists who devalue human life and are wreaking havoc on a civilized and beleaguered people we can identify with. This function of Palestinian terror to shore up a coherent, Western, national Imaginary serves the Symbolic function of the imperial nation-state. As scholars have recently demonstrated, long-standing understandings of the nation’s covenantal mission as a New Israel, which have periodically included religious calls to reclaim the Holy Lands, have historically defined America. Such understandings, which supported U.S. missionary efforts in the Middle East in the nineteenth century, have affected both State and popular perceptions of Israel. Thus, being an American national subject arguably involves seeing Palestinian resistance as terrorism. Furthermore, support for Israel’s occupation of West Bank and Gaza, whether seen as part of apocalyptic evangelical narratives that end with the return of Christ, or simply, as historian Barbara Tuchman suggested, as essential to the survival of Western civilization, entails necessarily that any attempt to question the occupation is tantamount to criticizing the mythic core of America’s mission and hence being anti-Western and anti-American.

Being positioned as anti-nationalistic or as providing counternarratives to hegemonic nationalism, however, has not bothered the current generation of scholars in American studies. As Fishkin pointed out in the presidential address referred to above, American studies is home to an oppositional consciousness determined to interrogate the national Symbolic. This was the reason, perhaps, that Andrew Ross received letters at NYU addressed to the “Department of Anti-American Studies.” In the weeks and months following 9/11, as right-wing commentators pilloried academics for their cultural relativism, and Lynne Cheney’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) castigated educators as the weak link in the U.S. war on terror, singling them out as a potential fifth column, American studies scholars rushed to offer careful and complex analyses of contemporary imperial culture. Collections such as *Dissent from the Homeland* (2003), *September 11 in History* (2003), and *Film and Television after 9/11* (2004), as well as a slew of special issues of journals, pointed to the
problems of imagining the nation as singular community, and stressed instead its jagged edges and multiplicities. Yet all these collections, including my own coedited *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (2007), preclude any sustained attention to the imbrication of American nationalist discourses with those of Israeli occupation or the contradictory relationship between U.S. discourses of liberal democracy and human rights, and the active dissociation of these with Palestinians. Controversies over books such as Mersheimer and Walt’s *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* have largely remained within the popular media or isolated within the departments of political science and Middle East studies. It is only very recently that the politics of Palestine and Israeli settler colonialism have even begun to be seen as objects of inquiry in American cultural studies.¹⁸

Although key documents establishing America’s role as that of a New Israel, such as John Cotton’s “God’s Promise to His Plantation,” have long been the object of scholarly interest, the reluctance to read such texts as technologies of settler colonialism or to analyze their relationship to U.S. investment in Israeli colonialism, particularly given the centrality of Israel in U.S. foreign policy for over fifty years, is astonishing.¹⁹ If American studies is currently characterized by a theoretical interest in the fluidity of national, racial, gendered, and religious borders, it seems to be simultaneously characterized by a rigidity about what counts as legitimate analysis in relation to the United States and the Middle East. Certain kinds of transnationalisms are certified as scholarly while others are classified as political alone. While studies of the United States’ political involvement and cultural investment in the Middle East have been forthcoming,²⁰ there is a tacit self-censorship about the question of Palestine and Israeli colonialism. The policed border in American studies, the traumatic Real, one may say, is that of Palestine.²¹

But what if one imagines that doing transnational American studies means taking seriously the vantage point offered by scholars in Beirut? Let us detour for a moment to *Orientalism*. It is a little noticed fact that Edward Said begins *Orientalism* by quoting Thierry Desjardins, a French journalist in Beirut during the civil war of 1975–1976, lamenting the destruction of the war-torn city, waxing nostalgic about its decline as the Oriental locale memorialized by Chateaubriand and Nerval. Said writes about Desjardins’ comments that “he was right about the place, of course, especially as far as a European was concerned”²² and proceeds to give his masterly definition of Orientalism as a discourse of European colonialism and U.S. imperialism. What Said meant about Desjardins being right regarding Beirut “as far as a European was concerned” was that it was the European inability to appreciate Beirut for being
anything other than a locale on which to project Orientalist fantasies that led to an impasse when confronted with the lived reality of a city mired in a violence directly related to the colonial partitioning of Palestine. Of course the intellectual scene has changed considerably since 1978. But while Said’s lessons about Orientalist stereotyping have been accepted by the academy and Americanists, in large part due to the publication of the book itself, Said’s contention that in the United States the Arab Palestinian does not exist politically, “and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental,” is arguably still true.

The inception of American studies at AUB, on the other hand, was tied to the Palestinian question at birth. Alwaleed’s remarks, made shortly after his offer of assistance to the victims of 9/11, were predicated on a view widely shared in the Middle East about the question of Palestine being central to U.S.-Middle East relations. But while Giuliani spurned Alwaleed’s offer of assistance, AUB accepted it to start the Center for American Studies two years later. Research and outreach components of the center stressed the “Arab-American encounter.” Pivotal to the center’s foundation was Edward Said, whose long-standing links to the university were both personal and professional. Said had, for many years prior to 9/11, been urging AUB to establish a program in American studies, to fill, as John Waterbury, president of AUB explained it, “the inexcusable void in the Middle East regarding the study of the United States.” The Middle East, as Said had demonstrated, had been a major object of inquiry for the United States since World War II. That the United States become an area of study for a university in the Middle East was not a call for an Occidentalism, which would be an inverted mirror image of Orientalist institutes, but rather a center that would facilitate a nuanced and complex understanding of the United States and its relationships with the Middle East. On hearing of the establishment of the center, Said enthusiastically expressed his support and offered to teach a course on the American novel. Although Said passed away before he could make good on his offer, the center moved quickly after his death to establish an Edward Said chair in American studies.

The very idea of such an endowed chair raises intriguing questions: Who is the Edward Said being commemorated with this endowed chair and how does thinking about Said as a figure with a chair in American studies in Beirut named after him speak to the possibilities of the discipline? How would, as CASAR’s mission statement puts it, “American institutions and practices (political, social, economic, cultural)” be viewed through the prism of Lebanon? I am thinking of Condoleezza Rice’s characterization of the Israeli bombings
of Lebanon in 2006 as “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.” “And whatever we do,” Rice stated, “we have to be certain that we are pushing forward to the new Middle East, not going back to the old one.” Rice’s characterization of the death shrieks of Lebanese civilians facing a humanitarian disaster as birth, the creation of life, and a new, supposedly democratic Middle East, reveals the extent to which human life in Lebanon, particularly those of Palestinians and Muslims, is devalued in the United States. More recently, the complete absence of U.S. condemnation of the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza in January 2009 reveals the intransigence of the United States in recognizing the humanity of the Palestinian resistance.

If “terror” is Palestinian or any group supporting them, such as the Hezbollah or Hamas, both of which have been democratically elected, collective punishment meted out to their extended families, or to civilians residing near them, must be construed as “life” at one with America’s Symbolic: the civil religion of promoting capitalist democracy. Such a branding of any group effectively blurs its contours, papers over the specificities of regional strife, and saves one from having to understand the sources of local conflicts. If the Palestinians driven out of their homes and forced to live in refugee camps in Sabra, and Shatila as well as the Hezbollah are simply labeled as terrorists, any U.S. supported action against them can be seen, as it was in the U.S. media in 2006, as a war to preserve democracy. A brutal foreign policy, in the name of “American” democratic values, legitimizes colonial violence and disallows analysis of what colonialism has always been about—a conflict over land, resources, and, subsequently, political rights. Similarly, Said was routinely discredited by being associated with images of what Ella Shohat terms the “irrational rage” of the terrorist. It also creates what Judith Butler has termed an American “national subject” (a perfect suturing of the Imaginary and Symbolic) that is resolutely anti-Palestinian. Questions of race in the country—from fears of slave insurrection after the Haitian revolution to Black Power’s solidarity with Third World decolonization—have long been related to questions of Western colonialism. Today the construction of a new, post-9/11 Arab/Muslim/Middle Easterner racial formation, and the discursive consensus through which “Arab,” (bad) “Muslim,” and “Terrorist” signify each other, are intimately connected to Americans’ perceptions of Palestinian resistance.

What kinds of American studies questions could be initiated if one were in Beirut, experiencing the “birth pangs” of democratic bombing? At the very least, technologies of war such as Israel’s use of embedded reporters in its warships as they shelled the coast of Lebanon or its use of surgical strikes, both eerily echoing the U.S. invasion of Iraq, might initiate studies of com-
parative colonial occupation and open up the question of American studies and Palestine and of Palestine in America. (Teaching poets such as Naomi Shihab Nye in a contemporary American literature course would be a good start.) We could, like the heroes of anti-apartheid such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, see the similarities between the violation of Palestinian human rights and those of blacks under apartheid, whose cause was championed by progressives and abetted by divestment campaigns, even as the U.S. government refused formal sanctions. It is precisely such an understanding, Saree Makdisi suggests, that is beginning to energize divestment campaigns against Israeli occupation in college campuses.31 Here too, American studies has a role to play in reaching out to students, establishing teach-ins, and educating the public about an alternative to supporting occupation through the mobilization of the category of terror.

As we think about the inhuman devastation visited on Gaza in January 2009, it is, perhaps, even at the risk of being ostracized from a significant community of American studies scholars, “a time to break silence.” For silence is less a sign of our neutrality than a tacit approval of the status quo, of policies carried out in our name as national subjects. Breaking the silence for us as scholars might mean analyzing the disjunctures between our constructions of (Palestinian) terror and the symbology of the imperial nation-state, a confrontation with the trauma of the colonial Real. It might mean recognizing our intellectual obligations as scholars to not distance ourselves from the consequences of U.S. power in the region.

We Are/Not All Lebanese: Travel and the Geopolitics of Fear

The Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut is seeking a scholar for a one-year position on a visiting academic appointment starting September 15, 2009. Professorial rank is open.

We seek an Americanist from any social science or humanities discipline. We are particularly interested in a scholar whose teaching and research interests are interdisciplinary. Salary is competitive but depends upon qualifications.

For more information please visit our Web site at http://www.aub.edu.lb/~webfas/

Any university in the United States that circulated so broad and general a job advertisement would be inundated with applications. At AUB, on the other hand, applications form barely a trickle. A coveted position like the Edward Said Chair of American Studies, which should attract the attention of senior Americanists, was finally filled this year only after it was advertised.
as a one-year position. Why, in the midst of a perennial scarcity of jobs in American studies, would a prestigious institution like AUB find it difficult to attract faculty from the United States? Can we imagine a similar difficulty for a position anywhere in the United States or in Europe? In one sense the explanation for this situation seems fairly obvious and straightforward. Beirut is an unsafe place to be, a place where, because of the presence of “terrorists,” violence is part of everyday life. The United States is relatively safe because it has few homegrown terrorist groups, with limited impact, and even as we feel vulnerable after 9/11, we are surrounded by apparatuses of security that protect us.

Yet security often functions as terror. As I learned in a very literal way upon my arrival back in the United States, taking the scenic route home via Dubai, apparatuses of security and terror are intimately linked. Any exultation at being considered a national subject by the immigration officer who chatted amicably with me about football rivalries, rather than inquiring about the length of my citizenship, as was usually the case, ended when the officer followed the reassuring stamp on the passport with directions for me to go to a special security room, and my huffy demand to know why I was being detained was met with the predictable response of a “random security check.” As I sat in the interrogation room, I looked around and discovered, predictably, that the color of randomness was brown. All around me sat brown men of possibly Middle Eastern or South Asian lineage. America’s borders were being policed by the most ludicrous racial profiling, one that could not even support the State’s own ill-conceived agenda on “terror.” Presumably a white Hezbollah supporter could slip through. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan domestic working for a Lebanese would likely, in an ironic exchange of status from disdained to despised, be detained. My own visit to Syria, my talk at the American University of Beirut at a center funded by a Saudi prince, my trip two months ago to Istanbul, and Pakistan, the country of my birth (though not of my former citizenship), all became pieces of my potentially terrorist identity that the U.S. border had to be secured against. As I was released an hour later, I wondered how many of the random brown “suspects” sitting in the interrogation room in Atlanta would be subject to extraordinary rendition to excise “terror” from our midst.

And yet, the racialization of Middle Easterners/Arabs/Muslims as sources of terror is only the latest in the construction of minorities as terrorist threats to the nation, in cahoots with enemies abroad. The United States is currently the largest security state in the world, with a prison population higher than that of China’s, and the highest rates of incarceration with a hugely disprop-
portionate African American and Latino/a representation. Yet information about prisons, including torture and abuse of inmates, scarcely surfaces in the media, although the need for incarceration, in the name of keeping law and order, and at the expense of needed social services, is hardly questioned. Indeed, as Barry Glassner has argued, since the 1970s, the circulation of fear through the media, organs of civil society, and the State, has deflected attention away from the State’s neglect of basic services such as health and education and assigned to the State the role of policing. But alongside this production and circulation of fear post civil rights, a fear really about black access to public space—fears of children being molested in schools, fears of being attacked in suburban enclaves, and the surveillance industries that have mushroomed in consequence—has been the total neglect of inner cities, where armed attacks are far from uncommon. Analyzing a survey of schoolchildren in three schools in the Southside of Chicago, where thirty-six children had been killed in a year, James Garbarino suggests that the children’s responses to questions about shootings were similar to those living in Sarajevo during the war, and of those living in the Gaza strip. And yet no media pundits, terrorism experts, or politicians discuss the violence of America’s inner cities, largely populated by African Americans and Latino/as, as in any way comparable to the violence in the Middle East. (Ironically, it was Palestinians who recognized the similarity between their colonial oppression and the internal colonization of African Americans when they offered assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina.)

This is not surprising given the ratcheting up of Orientalist discourses since 9/11, and, despite liberal overtones, a basic acceptance of Huntington’s thesis about the clash of civilizations, an account that naturalizes wars as cultural clashes without so much as a mention of colonialism and imperialism. What is surprising is that American studies scholars who have so astutely recognized and critiqued post-9/11 fear mongering at home, should act upon the basis of this very fear mongering and regard places like Beirut as inherently unsafe, places to be feared, places of “terror,” places where they cannot work, perhaps even travel to. But to construct Beirut in particular, and the Islamic Middle East at large, as spaces of terror, is to participate in a State Department version of “America,” an America that partitions the world into safe and unsafe spaces and projects its power accordingly.

I don’t mean to suggest that as scholars we should travel to Beirut because it’s no different from a major metropolis in the United States. At barely a two-hour drive from its powerful neighbors Syria to the east and Israel to the
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south, and with a sectarian diversity of enormous political consequences, a postcolonial political system based on balancing religious difference, and a visible military presence, Beirut is a political nerve center in ways that the much larger U.S. metropolises are not. On the other hand, as I discovered in my late-night, jet-lagged walks along the Corniche, militarized Beirut at night was safer than urban war zones at home. To travel to Beirut is not to efface the inventory of historical traces that leave different marks on us or to embrace a racial-cultural identification with the Lebanese, Robert Fisk style, by asking how the rest of the world could allow the bombings of civilians in a country where "people . . . don't look like the Arab world, they look like us."40 (Fisk's comment begs the question of how an African American or Asian American could enter this compact.) Neither is it the globalist-universalist one of apprehending a "common human vulnerability" as the basis for a new community,41 an identification that would deny the starkly uneven power positionings of the United States and Lebanon. Rather, it would be to negotiate the partial connections and polyunities that might emerge from the lived experience of travel.42 For the U.S. presence in Beirut is keenly felt—from apprehensions of U.S. actions in the Middle East, to the omnipresence of American pop culture, to the ubiquitous U.S. dollar which is the legitimate currency everywhere, from posh hotels to taxis and sidewalk vendors. America is "in" Beirut in ways that Beirut is not "in" America, and it would be banal to use a homogenized discourse of hybridities, borders, and migrations to suggest otherwise. Yet, although the multiple ways that America is "in" Beirut are by no means defined, an American studies center explicitly inaugurated to turn the gaze back on the United States can be an important locale to begin to understand the complexities of what America means in that part of the world.

Traveling between Middle East Studies and American Studies

When I sat in on Patrick McGreevy’s introduction to American studies class, I couldn't help but think about the differences between such a class in Beirut and one in the United States. The guest lecturer for the day was Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a former professor of sociology from the American University of Cairo, in exile from Egypt for his outspoken criticism of the government. How was the question of democracy in Egypt an issue for American studies, I wondered. But as Ibrahim passionately argued about the compatibility of Islam with democracy, vigorously defending his position to some students who equated Islamic nations with totalitarianism, the relevance of democracy in Egypt and the Middle East for American studies became clear. Not only was
Ibrahim making an argument counter to the hegemonic national narrative that could not reconcile Islam and democracy, but he was also seeing the civil rights and antiwar movements in the United States in relation to the Middle East. Fighting for democratic rights in Egypt, for Ibrahim, was in a continuum with his fighting for civil rights while a student in the United States during the 1960s. As the conversation moved to issues of social justice, the genesis of Hezbollah as a grassroots movement, student activism in the United States, and the election of Obama (in which the students were keenly interested), issues of Middle East and American studies did not seem far apart. Yet in the United States, despite some critical intersections between the fields, scholarly interactions between them are almost nonexistent. It is the disparateness of these fields in the United States to which I will now turn.

If America is “in” the Middle East in ways that the Middle East is not “in” America, America is also “in” Middle East studies in the United States in ways that the Middle East isn’t in American studies. That is, the networks of scholars, institutions, and programs carrying out Middle East studies in the United States, if they happen to do work that is counter to traditional Orientalism, are subject to the same kind of demonization as are groups in the Middle East that question U.S. military and political power in the area. Work in American studies, for all its critiques of nationalism and imperialism, simply does not get attacked with the virulence that anticolonial work in Middle East studies does.

But if we are interested in transnational American studies, we should be interested in how the idea of “America,” with clear borders between who is/not within the nation, is being used to attempt to discipline fields such as Middle East studies. For instance, Right critics of postcolonial Middle East studies routinely revile the effects of new immigration on the field. Martin Kramer, whose work is constantly cited by policy experts on the Middle East, for example, clearly believes that the immigration of scholars from the Middle East is dangerous to the health of the nation. Writing about how Said’s Orientalism became “a manifesto of affirmative action for Arab and Muslim scholars,” Kramer laments the increase of Middle East area specialists born in the region from 3.2 percent in 1971 to half in 1992. He writes, “So total an ‘ideological transformation’ in MESA (which even named Said an honorary fellow) would not have taken place had there not been a massive shift in the ethnic composition of Middle Eastern Studies.”43 Daniel Pipes, whose Campus Watch advertises itself as a surveillance site for Middle East studies, and who published a blacklist of academics, has similarly been concerned with undesirable immigration affecting Middle East studies. Pipes, along with
Norvell B. DeAtkine, a retired colonel and instructor at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg wrote that “indigenization has changed MESA from an American organization interested in the Middle East to a Middle Eastern one that happens to meet in the United States.” “Scholars of the Middle East,” they argue, “are . . . infected with ‘country-itis’—identifying more with their subjects than with the United States.”

Middle East studies has become a major site wherein questions of immigration, diaspora, homeland, hyphenated identities, divided loyalties, and national allegiance are being played out. Scholars of Arab descent, whether immigrants or second generation—Hamid Dabashi, George Saliba, Rashid Khalidi to name a few—have all been slandered with charges of racism and anti-Americanism, and their qualifications to hold university positions have been repeatedly questioned by Right critics and student groups alike. Indeed, the use of Khalidi by the Republicans to associate Obama with “terrorists” suggests the extent to which national racial and political formations determine which kinds of hyphenated Americans or immigrants are interpellated as part of the imagined community of the nation. The visceral attacks on non-Orientalist Middle East studies scholars are therefore part of a continual policing of the margins central to the culture wars; but they are also attempts to silence those in the academy who speak to a transnational audience in ways that don’t run lockstep with U.S. foreign policy. As Fred Lafer and Michael Stein in their laudatory preface to *Ivory Towers on Sand* lament, it is these new scholars of Middle East studies who are “infused with third worldist biases” and “caught up in the passion of its discredited causes. There is a widespread sympathy for Middle Eastern radicalism and an abiding suspicion of America’s global role.”

At a moment when American exceptionalism is being rigorously critiqued, and when studies of post-9/11 militarism and imperialism are virtually becoming a culture industry in American studies, the absence of interchange between Middle East studies and American studies or scholarly dialogues between the two is curious. It reflects, however, the larger disconnect between the concerns of American studies scholars in the United States and those of their counterparts in places such as Beirut. CASAR was formed shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in response to the growing gap between the United States and the Arab world. As Patrick McGreevy, the director of CASAR, suggests, the center was from its birth connected to the “American question,” the concern of people almost everywhere about the power of the United States. What looking at American studies from the perspective of Beirut might mean is understanding how this power functions to create
clear borders within and around the field: it sanctions some questions about imperialism but tacitly closes off others; it questions conceptions of national borders but legitimizes certain disciplinary boundedness. In order to be truly transnational, American studies must be invigorated by a flow of scholars and ideas to and from centers like Beirut. It will be a first step in the important task of understanding how American culture is reconfigured from a margin central to U.S. power abroad.

Notes
I would like to thank David Leverenz, Alex Lubin, Tim Marr, and John Carlos Rowe for their suggestions while writing this paper.
5. Ibid., 21.
15. See Obenzinger, American Palestine, 8–9.
18. South Atlantic Quarterly’s fall 2003 special issue on “Palestine America” includes essays on Zionism as manifest destiny, popular culture representations of Arabs, and the nascent divestment campaigns


21. Several conversations with Alex Lubin have helped me understand this paradigm.


23. Ibid., 27.


