

TRAVERSING MEANINGS:
REMAPPING EAST AND WEST

by Daniel Drennan

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culture critique, the online journal of the cultural studies program at CGU, situates culture as a terrain of political and economic struggle. The journal emphasizes the ideological dimension of cultural practices and politics, as well as their radical potential in subverting the mechanisms of power and money that colonize the life-world.

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Every evening, like many in my central Beiruti neighborhood, I convene at my street corner and catch up with my neighbors and friends on events of the day – local, regional, global. On the evening of December 15, 2008, many wondered aloud whether I had seen the footage of Iraqi journalist Muntadhar Al-Zaydi hurling his shoes at the head of the President of the United States,ⁱ while cursing him aloud in the name of the Iraqi people. Whereas I cannot remember a single person emphasizing the shoe aspect of the event, many instead voiced a wish that the thrown object had been larger, or heavier, or of a different material (such as iron), or that it not be even a shoe, but something much more lethal. And everyone expressed regret that the shoes (or whatever might have been launched in their place) did not connect with their target.

This is in stark contrast to the Western media portrayal of the event, where the thrown shoes took precedence as (symbolically-speaking) the single worst gesture an Arab or Muslim (depending on the given trope) is capable of, and deserving in and of itself – devoid of context and history – extensive analysis. Despite the fact that the Arab-shoe-as-potent-symbol has been debunked by various academics and writersⁱⁱ who are much better informed about such things, the sheer gusto and glee which has been brought to bear on the object – instead of the subject – by various media reporters in print, on television, and on the radio exemplifies a particular pride in dubious knowledge concerning the Eastern Other that has kept Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* in reprint all these years. This is testament to Saïd's premise that the West as subject has endeavored to literally pin down the East as object, employing baseless, self-referencing, and self-aggrandizing pseudo-scholarship. If we discount as artificial the given East/West dichotomy as expressed these days, it nonetheless stands if we instead remap it, focusing on economic and class disparities, as opposed to ethnic or cultural ones.

I will therefore define my use of the concepts West and Western to mean the

economically dominant powers to whom belong the hegemonic or dominant discourses of maintenance of power structures, and including the globalized (or globalizing) East following in these footsteps, as well as their compradors and class representatives found in every country of the so-called developing world. This is opposed to the use of the term East, which will be employed to describe economically dominated populations, often referred to in the past as the Global South, the Third (and Fourth) Worlds, and the periphery of the centers or core of Capital, and including their class representatives working (not living) within the First World, or in the West.

The point is to differentiate between geographic and economic space(s), to reflect the mixing of these populations, as well as their potential for action across politically defined entities such as national, confederated, or economic borders as well as ethnic, religious, or other identifying lines; also to render a bit vaguer what has often been a binary distinction used predominantly in a pejorative way. This then becomes the central premise, that these are false designations that yes, have demanded rebuttal, but have been rebutted; at some point one has to start truly carving out a separate space and claiming one's place pro-actively, not just defensively. It should be possible to go against prevailing tendencies of entrenchment and delineation and instead seek common cause and similarity of frameworks.

The words of Hamid Dabashi, noting a reference to Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (Sacred Man), expand on this starting point:

The entire function of Orientalism, and by extension Islamic Studies, or Chinese Studies, Indian Studies, Iranian Studies, etc., is nothing but "to explain" the foreignness of these languages and cultures to their "Western" readers. To explain something is ipso facto to constitute its foreignness, and thus by definition point to the quintessential inexplicability of the

phenomenon in its own terms – and thus to constitute the foreign as the enemy and the enemy as the foreigner, as he who does not speak one’s language (literally, “the barbarian”), the enemy who speaks a foreign, estrange, and thus dangerous language, and thus acts in a strange and inexplicable manner, and is thus in need of a native informer (Fouad Ajami) or an Orientalist (Bernard Lewis) to explain him/her, and is thus outside *the form of the political* [polis] squarely in the realm of *zoë* or bare life. The singular function of Orientalism over the last 200 years has been nothing but to constitute the “Orient” as the enemy of “the West” by trying to understand and explain it – the same holds true for all Area Studies fields. They make strange and thus constitute as the enemy that which they seek to explain and make understood.

This extension of Orientalism to Area Studies raises a few major points. The positing of East and West is not a geographic binary, but a counterpoint of dominant to dominated, which can thus be both internal as well as external to societies thus studied. The “explanation of foreignness” – as in the specialization of minority studies – despite its intentions, can be seen to echo the discourse of the dominant over the dominated by the willful setting up of oneself as an internal foreigner. Furthermore, this alienation within a dominant culture fits into a functional aspect of that culture that seeks not to focus on or bring forward such studies and their represented minorities, but to eradicate their agents – the “constituted enemy;” not to bring attention to minority groups, but to co-opt and, ultimately and ideally, destroy them. For in Agamben’s separation of the political body from those disenfranchised – literally dis-placed – we can see that this disenfranchisement is useful for those maintaining a dominant position, as well as for those who willingly marginalize themselves in order to claim such place. In order to understand the scope of such destruction (literally or via incorporation), it will be necessary to refocus attention on dominant and dominated populations in economic and political terms, as

well as the methods of said destruction in order to truly be able to ascertain actual popular resistance to global hegemony.

This economic and political focus is required in order to not only avoid theories that posit the end of the author, the meaninglessness of words, the sheer inability to express or communicate, the inescapability of the spectacle, etc., but to challenge them directly. For despite their often unstated claim to challenge centers of power, they can be seen to in fact enable them, by removing agency from the *voicer* and meaning from the *voiced*, and by avoiding the major problematic of the one theorizing: the inability to step not only outside of one's role, but down from one's class position; to call into question or otherwise unanchor one's place. For such theories to work, they need to ascribe to Agamben's separation of the politicized citizen from his "merely alive" brethren. This leaves the politicized landscape to work within the over- or super-mediated space [see "Defined Terms" below] of the dominant dogma, thus assuring a remove or attenuating distance from those whose *voice* is now seen as marginal and non-existent.

For example, Rachael Ray, the American cooking show celebrity, recently appeared in an ad for Dunkin' Donuts, and was excoriated in the American media for her wearing of what was perceived to be a *kufiyeh*, and which marked her, according to her critics, as a "terrorist."ⁱⁱⁱ Notwithstanding the volumes written about the patterned scarf and its reduction from a symbol of the Palestinian people to a mere object of fashion, a minimum of research would have pointed out that the scarf's pattern was not that of the traditional cloth from Palestine, nor that of other countries in the region whose patterns' similarity to that of the targeted Palestinian scarf might be excused if this were the case, or even that the object in question has a myriad of quotidian uses, not just one, which may or may not paint the wearer as making a political stand. Nonetheless, protests against the company saw the ad pulled from circulation.

A counter-protest focused on the caving in of the company to blatantly stereotypical news stories that couched their racism in question form: “Does the wearing of a kufiyeh make you a terrorist?” All of this was played out in the super-mediated space initially occupied by the advertisers, the virulent bloggers, and the subsequent blogger response. The larger unseen and unspoken, however, is that the Dunkin’ Donuts chain is now owned and operated by the Carlyle Group, which, with its close ties to former world leaders and its portfolio of defense contracting somehow escapes being branded as “terrorist” by both the media going after this story and those protesting the story itself. Even more salient in terms of our analysis is the fact that the kufiyeh as object is currently manufactured mostly in China. The last remaining kufiyeh factory in Hebron, owned and operated collectively by Yasser Hirbawi,^{iv} is unable to compete with globalization and GATT, further marginalizing this people and their *voice*.

This super-mediation thus alienates *voices* found outside of the Western canon or Western understanding that work collectively or in a manner that challenges the currency and commodity of art and words, or which are considered external or outside of the realm of accepted existence, as defined above. Theoretically distanced from the outset, they are viewed as primitive or vernacular, and are marked for silencing in ways that are inherently tied to this theoretical distance, most notably by reduction to a consumable style that has no substance, to form without content; to cynical pastiche and textural backgrounding. Once thus rendered, removed from any valid agency, these *voices* are then free to be rediscovered and subsumed, often in a commercial or commodified context, while their substance is discarded. This kind of retrospective interest in-existent at its manifestation – paying attention to Rachael Ray's scarf but not to the recent war on Gaza – is often complicated by a safe geographic and/or temporal distance from the original cultural manifestation as well. Historical examples of this can be seen in the use of Abstract

Expressionism to “sell” the Cold War,^v or the replacement of the social realism and printmaking tradition of the *Taller de Grafica Popular* during the Mexican Revolution and the production of artists working for the WPA during Depression-era America with the individuated and introspective work of Modern art movements that used the same technique but eschewed the embodied message.

Unlike an equalizing-in-the-end *Danse Macabre*, this particular song and dance between hegemonic discourse and those supposedly critical of it is, in fact, insidiously one-sided. For within the dominant discourse are a multiple of strategies or functions often emphasized – albeit not overtly – by its cohortive theorists, that aim to re-impose the structural underpinnings of current economic and political stasis. These unstated goals are often revealed by the reaction of true resistance movements to the hegemonic discourse – such as an impromptu lobbing of a shoe at a U.S. President's head – and included among them are the desire to control all aspects of communication; to reduce human capability in deference to the machine; to co-opt dissent in substance and in style; to remove culture and its manifestations from historicity and context; to impose a false equality in terms of dominant and dominated discourses; to repeatedly dis-place people in complex and overlapping ways; and to ignore primary symbologies while explaining (away) secondary ones, all the while obfuscating greater meanings. To cover all of these aspects is beyond the scope of this article, but the major points will be covered nonetheless.

Similarly, within these troublesome theorized discourses is a self-deluding refusal to acknowledge the role of unifying markers such as class as functional aspects of society (and hence one's position in society), in preference for a focus on affected, static, and disintegrative ones such as religion, race, gender, or phasic sexual orientation, which we can now see as actually disempowering. This is only complicated by a deliberate self-deceit that claims and

proclaims a superior status for this mediated distance, resulting in a panoply of self-contradictory stances: passivism as activism (various multi-colored memorial ribbons; charity through shopping), servility as defiance (the bling-bling mode of reactionary rap; the stylized politics of conformist outsider fashion and body modification), and the conveyance and perpetration of this supposedly antithetical discourses as a jamming of signals and signifieds (*Adbusters* magazine; the Semiotics industry).

As seen in our shoe example, this convergence of the prevailing discourse and its purported antithesis in one dominant entity currently governs most of what is mediated and communicated today: a confluence of meaning and non-meaning encircling each other, with each defined and enabled by its supposed binary opposite yet saying the same thing and working toward the same goal. What is most absent and yet what is most obvious from the above entanglement is the conspiratorial ignorance of this coupling by the dancers themselves. They remain willfully oblivious to this aspect, that which is most weighty, like the black matter of space, or the water that fish blissfully ignore. More so, it becomes evident that there can be no disentangling if an attempted resister likewise denies this greater unstated; for any true resistance to this unified preponderant discourse can take place only from a firm position completely outside of this entwisted tango, ideally from a solidly grounded, non-individuated, and non-mediated space.

Obfuscated by a newspeak that describes itself in antipodal terms, enabled by various theories that promise a radicalism that is diametrically belied by their reactionary implementation, and demanded and sustained in various ways by structural systems that dominate current discourses, this prevailing purposeful ignorance of what is most important or most obvious symbolically-speaking, thus becomes all the more telltale in light of cultural

manifesters who are thus complicit in their creation of distorting lenses and the destructive reflections thereof. In this light, signs and images need to be examined not just for what they manifest, but more importantly for what they occult. For this deliberate omission discloses a bigger picture in terms of the functioning as well as the enabling of hegemony through culture, especially as derived from media industries which ironically pride themselves on concepts such as objectivity, communication, rebellion, and community, but which can be seen to be the very opposite: conveyors of the dominant discourse, connivers with the current neo-liberal paradigm, and dampers of dissent masquerading as champions of rebellion.

On current newsstands that display, for the most part, a gamut of airbrushed white faces, the stylistically speaking out-of-place illustrated cover of the *New Yorker* readily stands out, as it did in July of 2008 in one of Beirut's Librarie Antoine bookstores, with its striking image of an Osama-ized Obama and his Black-(em)Powered wife.^{vi} The cover appeared during the United States' 2008 presidential campaign which featured among many unsavory mudslingings, the defamatory subtext that candidate Barack Obama was, in fact, a Muslim. The *New Yorker* magazine represented this in a cover by illustrator Barry Blitt, supposedly satirizing the epithet, and sparking a great amount of controversy in the process.

Much of the discussion centered on defending the image on two fronts. First, by portraying the cover – and, by extension, the candidate himself – as an agent of change, since it discredited the Republican strategy of using “Muslim” as a negative attribute of an American, especially one heading for the White House. Second, as an issue of free speech concerning the artist involved. It can be stated, however, that given the elitist nature of the *New Yorker*, the inherently provincial character of New York City itself, as well as the present digerati mode of being *in the know* concerning the mediation of current events as opposed to *knowing* their history

and context, the discussants revealed themselves as being more desirous of seeing *themselves* as rebellious, or liberal, or at the very least, Democrats, and thus ignored the single most sinister character to be found in the actual illustration: the White House itself.

For much of the planet, the reality is that no matter who occupies the Oval Office, he or she will be responsible for the destruction of any actual agent of change domestically speaking (as disturbingly represented in the illustration by a clichéd radicalized Michelle Obama), not to mention the additional outright murder of millions of people around the globe – including but not limited to Muslims – who are reduced in their greatly diverse entirety to the image of Osama bin Laden, a man who was, in fact, supported by this same office and its agents. For until the *New Yorker* itself manages to attain an internal equality concerning writers/artists of minority voices, until the United States gives equal stature to its voiceless, until there is an even playing field for discussions concerning Islam, or the definition of “terrorist,” or the notion of a Black man as president – until such a time, the debate surrounding the *New Yorker* cover as well as the image itself hugely sidestep the true problems – of race and of class, of freedom and of dissent – not just within the discussion, but within the industry as a whole, the country at large, and by extension the whole world.

In stark contrast was a caricature of bin Laden that appeared in the left-wing Lebanese daily newspaper *Al-Akhbar*.^{vii} The accompanying article describes America's so-called “War on Terror” as enabling and strengthening al-Qaeda, with a pun implying the “fortressing” or “hiding” of Osama himself. Here we have an actual critique of content, as opposed to the endless focus on form; due primarily to the fact that there is nothing comparable in any current American newspaper to *Al-Akhbar*’s place in Lebanon’s political spectrum. Furthermore, in view of the *New Yorker*’s coverage of European Muslims as well as the Maghrebi, Levantine, and Southwest

Asian regions of the world and their peoples, it is impossible to take this cover other than as portrayed: not a subversive sending up of the fears of the Republicans, but a re-inforcement of these fears as representative of the dominant discourse of the West.

It would not be for some months before an American public official – in this case, former Secretary of State Colin Powell – would actually manage to state that the correct response to the “epithet” of Muslim was not “I am in fact Christian,” but instead:

Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer is no. That's not America. Is there something wrong with a seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing he or she could be president? Yet I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion that he is a Muslim and might have an association with terrorists. This is not the way we should be doing it in America.

Here was the radical departure from the status quo, coming from another Black American. Yet this was still not the complete picture, since to acknowledge one's roots in slavery is also to acknowledge that ten to twenty percent of slaves came from Muslim Africa; that in their forced arrival and conversion was a great loss of culture and tradition that continues apace in the current desire to destroy Islam in any if not all of its forms. The complete picture would also point out that the soldier that Powell eventually refers to, Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan, is representative of American troops that are for the most part (and for class reasons) from minority groups within the United States.

In his rebuttal, Powell refers to a picture that he saw in the *New Yorker* showing Khan's mother sitting behind her son's gravestone.^{viii} It might be perhaps ironic to consider that the place one does not have alive in one's society be bestowed upon one's death, in one's final resting place. This, however, is belied by the desecration of Jewish and Muslim graves in Europe, for

example, or the bombing by Israel in 2006 of Lebanese funerals for those dead from the previous day's attacks, or the destruction of graveyards as happened in Gaza in 2008. Even in death there is no rest, no peace, no *place* for the dispossessed.

More ironically, at the time of the *New Yorker* cover's appearance, New York City was considering banning advertising of an Islamic organization^{ix} from the subway system, since their appearance would co-incide with the anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks. The defense of the illustrator's "freedom of speech," as opposed to that of the subway advertiser, reflects the insular nature of the debate itself, the exclusion of those outside of the mediated space, the preference for a passive instead of a truly activist stance, as well as a loathness to step outside a given social circle, or below a certain economic class: a tacit acceptance of the hegemonic verdict cast against minorities locally, as well as Muslims worldwide.

This willful exclusion of huge portions of the world's population is matched in terms of those espousing this discourse by their outright *dismissal* of those who might be seen as "of" them; a sort of political banishment. To illustrate via our introductory example, the fact that the *New York Times* felt the need to explain (or explain away) what Mr. Al-Zaydi's motivation might be by painting him as a leftist reflects the dominant dogma's view of what is valid and what is invalid discourse. Furthermore, that no one in the media noticed that their own figurative and quiescent projectiles – namely, their words – have gone unused these past years, or most astoundingly that no one considered that the left wing of most countries in the world has been decimated by U.S. intervention, or that this might be considered a valid reaction in the face of the wanton destruction leveled against his homeland during three long American administrations or, for that matter, against any number of countries throughout the history of various recent empires, only proves that this dance of deception has become in and of itself a desired objective, a

produced entity and goal; a willful non-meaning, a crafted deceit.

It follows then that to sustain this vacuum of meaning requires of those working as communicators of any kind within the framework of the dominant discourse a tacit acceptance of various myths concerning the industries that support this framework, which over time have distilled themselves into accepted truths. For example, the history of the United States press is built on principles of objective journalism, a getting to the “truth,” as well as a belief in the notion of the “alternative” press as its antithesis. Entire academic departments, non-governmental organizations, and specialized magazines have come into existence to protect these fundamental (and fundamentally false) concepts. In fact, the American government can be seen to have taken the revolutionary fervor and actual freedom of the press prior to the American coup d'état of 1776 and circumvented it post-coup to suit its needs. Since then, along with its media wing, it has never allowed for a full spectrum of equal political voice, as can be found in many other countries, with the American press's supposed non-political stances if not its grandstanding ever hidden behind political motivations that undeniably support American oligarchy.

In his *Black Liberation and Socialism*,^x Ahmad Shawki states:

The Constitution was made more palatable when the first Congress, responding to pressure and criticism, passed a set of amendments known as the Bill of Rights. These amendments give the appearance that the new government was not in fact run in the interests of the rich, but rather was an institution that rose above class interests and was the guardian of everyone's freedom to speak, to publish, to assemble, and to be tried fairly...The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, passed in 1791 in Congress, provides that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Yet, only seven years after the First Amendment became part of the Constitution, Congress passed a law doing just that – the

Sedition Act of 1798, passed under John Adams' administration...The law made it a crime to say or write anything “false, scandalous and malicious against the government, Congress, or the United States or either house of the Congress of the United States or the United States President, with intent to defame said government, or either house of the said Congress, or the said President, or bring them...into contempt or disrepute, or to excite against them...the hatred of the good people of the United States.”

Today, the patronizing designation of a segment of the journalism industry as “alternative” is simply a way to disparage and thus disable any true dissent while at the same time co-opting any rebellious style resulting thereof, such as zines, street art, punk music, etc. Howard Zinn, in his book *Artists in Times of War*^{xi} gets it half right when he lauds praise on the historical role of the pamphleteers, as well as when he clamors for the re-telling of history unmediated through a dominant discourse. Unfortunately, he ignores the gradual convergence of media and their technologies such that fabrication, printing, distribution, mailing, and even creation itself are reliant on technological, economic, and legal systems that require production on a scale outside of the financial or productive means of the former pamphleteer or small publisher; that the majority of underground, dissonant, and resistant publications in the United States have long since disappeared due to a destruction of community difficult if not impossible to counter. Most importantly, he ignores the fact that the very concept of “alternative” is not expandable to other parts of the world, which afford its populations a more complete press in terms of an expansive and inclusive political spectrum. For as soon as the picture is truly globalized, then the concentrated effort to extinguish such *voice* in the United States and beyond becomes evident, especially in terms of the various intermingling technological, economical, political, and legal structures that support such strictures on resistance.

This support requires that the antithetical discourse be sold in contradiction to its non-existent power to invoke change. So, for example, the *Columbia Journal of American Studies* in the early 1990s (among many others) described the explosion of zines and their online counterparts as nothing short of revolutionary, officiating their study as an academic discipline, the single most obvious marker of disempowerment. In retrospect, the fact that the then still-existing radical press often organized on a community basis around a local printer was completely ignored, had more to do with the fact that the computer and so-called “desktop publishing” were simultaneously exclaimed as enablers of this revolution, when in fact they were simply responsible for the atomization of the populace along self-centered consumerist lines. The tool was exalted over the user; empowerment was handed over to a thing, and not a person. For it can be stated readily that there is no revolution to come from thousands of detached and completely separated individual voices, Twitter being only the most recent incarnation of this trope. Once decoupled from its community sources, and collectivized within a technological control zone of price and commodification, it was an easy enough next step to alter such costs, and concentrate ownership in the hands of the few, marking the death of this supposedly resistant *voice*.

Going back to our *New Yorker* cover, it can be stated that the convenient ignorance of its re-iteration of reductive, if not anti-Islamic, sentiment in the supposedly dissenting artwork reveals its acceptance as common wisdom, barely veiled by the straw man of candidate Obama's Islamic leanings. The cover projects these truths as valid sentiment, and thereby re-inforces the unrivaled nature of the corporate-controlled media's discourse, while attempting to paint the magazine that carried it as anti-Establishment. Given the perceived non-existence of a Black American radical past in terms of accepted American history, and in the successful deflection by

the candidate of those who might taint him thusly by attempting to link him to radicals within the Black Power movement, a radical history had to be “invented” for him, literally out of whole cloth, as depicted in the illustration. Telling, then, is the fact that the art editor of this magazine, Françoise Mouly, was also the designer and editor of the book *X* by Sue Coe and Judith Moore in 1986,^{xii} which matches Coe’s powerful visual statement with equally strong words:

Television, radio, tapes, CDs

Satellites beam across the seas

A chorus of vultures

croon the songs of our culture.

Sexism and Racism....the lyrics that pay

Oh, to hum the tunes of today.

Behind the newsman’s smile gleams the shark’s tooth.

Gas foams from his lips and passes for truth.

The screech of Freedom is on the air,

broadcasting abroad with intent to snare.

When the master cracks his whip

the Networks dare not make a slip.

The sad truth is that, in terms of Capital’s power to eliminate true dissent, it can be painfully pointed out that the ability barely exists anymore to publish small-run comics like this example from only two decades ago; that the cover of the *New Yorker* is often illustrated by former collaborators on the 1980s magazine *Raw* (which originally published Coe’s work in a “one-off”), which goes a long way to explain the schizophrenic nature of much of the magazine’s cover art. This cover now exemplifies a limited and elitist space for expression, like the caged-in

“dissent” zones that are far removed from the super-mediated political conventions in the United States, yet which are nonetheless touted as proof that there is such a thing as freedom of speech in the country. In this regard, the form stands at odds with content, either as compared to what is going on inside a convention hall, or in this case, inside a magazine.

The print industry in the United States, globalized out of existence, has been passed over in favor of the online realm, currently being blamed for the slow death of the newspaper, as well as the book and magazine industries. In this can be seen a kind of Wal-Mart mode or an internal “shock doctrine” (to borrow Naomi Klein’s words) that again has led to the ever-concentrated so-called Web, heralding the future demise of those scrambling to be heard in this supposedly new medium, many of whom closed up shop in the print world for similar reasons. In terms of its very nature, the Internet was always intended for a minority while marketed to a majority, and sells itself based on this supposed democratization of media, despite the technical inability of its infrastructure to live up to such promise, and ignoring its long line of predecessors, such as Minitel, Teletex, etc. The movement to the Web, in this light, can be seen as the slow but incremental and steady corralling, and eventual assassination, of resistant voices, in an obvious appropriation of media *from* and not *to* the masses, a continuation that has seen broadcast media (one-time cost: the functional receiver; expanse: local) transformed into cabled and digital media (constant cost: the transmission, storage, and reception; expanse: regional/global).

Just as with the small press, the pressures of competition, expansion, technological advance, and cost act as persistent pressures away from the truly local, yet maintaining the charade of such localization becomes the selling point of the whole apparatus. In this light, blogs and their so-called “voice of the people” and “democracy of the street” are simply the latest fodder for the ongoing technological devolution and theft of *voice*, ever more constricted by fees

and necessitating higher-end technological bases of reception. We've moved from a starting point of the local printing press, a community opinion distilled into one *voice*, to one 180 degrees away in which every individual within the given elite competes to say something, but no one is listening. The online realm has swallowed up most in the way of truly protestant activism,^{xiii} effectively silencing them within certain segments of the population which probably needs them most, while still promising this heralded era of participatory democracy, which is only open to those with the technological means to express themselves in an abnormal, computer-mediated way that requires a certain elevated educational, if not social or economic, background.

The further implication that *this group* is now the normative one, reduces much of the world's population to useless appendage (as Agamben rightly posits), yet results in their objectification as much-heralded examples of revolution via this medium, as can be seen in advertisements from credit card companies that portray Africans in tribal dress as the new enlightened users of their services. More recent examples, such as the so-called Twitter revolution in Iran, reveal instead a minority comprador class in cahoots with foreign intervening powers, using the marketing language of the Internet to sell "freedom" as a self-aggrandizing trope to the very West that engendered it, yet which in no way embodies it to begin with. Contradictory examples do exist, such as African farmers using cell phone technologies to communicate, or the organizing currently taking place among factory workers in Egypt, but these can be shown to be manifestations of an extant on-the-ground capacity for social networking, a vibrant social contract that pre-exists the technology. Meaning, if the Web were to disappear, Egypt would still be able to organize and strike; the compradors, on the other hand, would have a much more difficult time of things.

Such social networking and expression at one time existed in the West, primarily in the

form of the community printshop and the collective, former centers/ateliers of political dissent and communal activism, which today have been replaced by the corporate-run photocopy place and hierarchically run design studio, with completely different allegiances. In the past, the personage of the printer (the craft predecessor of the designer and small publisher) acted as a distilling “rebel yell” for a given community or group, but has since been silenced technically, economically, politically, but also *theoretically*, in the sense that the new era of over-mediation requires levels of education and economic access that are exclusionary by nature. Removed from this past and this history, the vestigial shadow of these purveyors of *voice* have been replaced by individual mediators who, instead of looking to their literal grassroots for inspiration, strive for some Greater Meaning, and consequently have set themselves apart as arbiters of style, organizers of society, deciders of symbolic reference, and dismissive of unmediated populist expression and aesthetics, among various other impositions from above. Politically speaking, this makes for exceedingly dubious if not infamous company.

It also explains the fate of previous presidential candidates who likewise dabbled in manifesting a cultural Other. Howard Dean, an outsider campaigning in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, quickly found himself in the popular spotlight, which immediately set him up for a downfall. The media launched attacks on his image, as when he was photographed in front of a mural of graffiti,^{xiv} painted especially for the candidate’s rally by some of the more famous (or infamous) graffiti artists of New York City, and which bore phrases such as “Take Back America,” Dean’s campaign slogan. The image of Dean with his shirtsleeves rolled up, speaking to the crowd was immediately broadcast and super-mediated as signifying someone who supported, if not reveled in, inner-city strife and decay, meaning the Black ghetto; meanwhile, his words went completely unheard. As Staten Island Republican Councilman James

Oddo scolded him: “Maybe in your world, graffiti vandals are artists. In New York City – and in the real world – they are criminals who destroy our quality of life.”^{xv} Putting words into disproportionate action, the New York Police Department arrested one of the artists engaged to paint the mural, Blake Lethem, for a felony charge of criminal mischief that had been committed four years earlier.^{xvi}

Never mind that graffiti as symbol had long since lost its connection to the original taggers of the New York City subway system whose work was later shown in bourgeois art galleries, or that one of the prime tenets of the Giuliani administration was the wholesale “cleaning up” of New York City, or at least the parts where rents were higher or where tourists might venture. The presence in SoHo of such precious commodities obviously did not result in policemen staking out their creators’ homes, but it did successfully invert form in its signified meaning over any political content the graffiti might have once held. Previously, the appearance of such tags became the stuff of folk-song legend, lamenting bards long since missing from the culture, such as when David Bowie in his *Song For Bob Dylan* states: “Tell him we've lost his poems/ So they're writing on the walls/ Give us back our unity/ Give us back our family..,”^{xvii} or when Simon and Garfunkel pronounce in *The Sound of Silence*: “The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” The significance of the disappeared poet and his replacement by urban graffiti that is itself then physically removed reveals a true “poetry lost,” as the cleaning of those walls replaces the popular *voice* with true *silence*.

This dueling claim to space, in which one side marks territory and one side erases (both mark and marker), brings up a prominent point within the work of Giorgio Agamben, who toward the end of his book *Homo Sacer – Sacred Man* – states that within the languages of Europe there is a built-in double meaning to the word “people,” such that it equally represents

the disinherited as well as those enfranchised within a given state. He claims that this sets up a “dialectical oscillation” in Western thought between poles that cannot find synthesis; that the People will ever need the lesser people to define themselves, and that these same people in their desire to raise their status to People will ever only continue the cycle, with the only egress being “classless society or the messianic kingdom,” which he seems to believe are both equally improbable^{xviii}. The problem might be that it is impossible to argue, theoretically or otherwise, about “place” and “space” if one fundamentally believes in, say, private property, or something other than the public domain of all space outside of an argument that springs from a neutral place of non-ownership. These are the *true binary* poles, then, on the framework level, which might not be inherent to the People or the people, nor to East or West, but to those who own and those who don’t.

This lost connection, as well as the evidence of overlapping spaces, social, real, and virtual, were nowhere more apparent than at the rallies for Howard Dean, whose campaign's defining element was the first-time use of the online realm in specific ways attempting to rouse grassroots support. Although attracting huge throngs – such as the one in Bryant Park in August of 2003 – it could be seen to be of only a particular slice of society, one with access to the Internet, and jobs that allowed for such usage at work; a white-collar class that due to eases of use of technologies but also to limited common spaces with those outside of their mediated realm, preferred communication via networks than networking among actual people, or outside their social status. Agamben's *People* were assembled, yes; but the *people* were missing (though represented by Dean’s graffiti backdrop).

When Dean won the Iowa caucuses,^{xix} he let loose with a primal scream on stage that was perhaps the most honest moment that American politics has seen in a long time, but which was

also a faux pas in the realm of American behavior which does not allow the non-mediated or primitive. The media and political elite, sensing something literally untamable, planned for and instigated Dean's demise from this moment on. The sea of white faces from Dean's rally proved to be a fickle and disloyal audience, eventually swayed by the rhetoric launched against the doctor, who happens to hail from the only state in the union to have socialist representation in the U.S. Congress, as well as the only one with an equalized property tax system to pay for education. Dean, it can be seen in retrospect, was condemned the very minute he stated that the time had come for healing the great rift of race, as well as for his anti-war stance; but the target, as noted, was his form. Whereas Dean posited that there was work to do in order to heal the nation's racist past, thus alienating those who would prefer not to have to deal with the Other in their midst, Obama stated quite the opposite: the status quo was fine, as witnessed by the very fact that he was a candidate for the highest office in the land. Convincing the voting population at large that he was not a threat to their property, he handily won the election.

Thus literal *dis-place-ment* is a fundamental divider that various other identity markers along with social, cultural, and political claims such as "East" and "West" are *mapped onto*. It thus behooves those discussing ethnicity, or race, or places "Oriental" and "Occidental" to always bring the topic literally back down to earth. Pierre Bourdieu, in an essay entitled "Classes and Classifications," from his book *Distinctions*, states:

Position in the classification struggle depends on position in the class structure; and social subjects – including intellectuals, who are not those best placed to grasp that which defines the limits of their thought of the social world, that is, the illusion of the absence of limits – are perhaps never less likely to transcend "the limits of their minds" than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits.^{xx}

Speaking more broadly, Susan Sontag, in an essay written in the 1960s, stated:

I do not think white America is committed to granting equality to the American Negro. So committed are only a minority of white Americans, mostly educated and affluent, few of whom have had any prolonged social contact with Negroes. This is a passionately racist country; it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future...The vast majority of [American intellectuals] are not revolutionaries, wouldn't know how to be if they tried. Mostly a salaried professoriat, they're as much at home in the system when it functions a little better than it does right now as anyone else.^{xxi}

This change in the system that is just “a little better” thus becomes a limited if not limiting yet attainable goal, as witnessed by most presidential elections of late in the United States, with the most current one a manifested rebuke to any remaining Dean-like revolutionary or populist derivatives which are replaced with the overly simplistic but seemingly popular premise that the nation can simply *move on*, if only just a little bit.

The now remapped and overlapping space of this Other – Arabs, Muslims – with that of former and current Others – immigrants, Blacks, etc. – is best illustrated by the cover of an issue of *Mizna* magazine, a publication of Arab-Americans from the University of Minnesota.^{xxii} The image shows an illustration of an upside-down woman in a full-length black chador and is emblazoned with the words: “Arab Is the New Black.” This echoes the comedic acts of many Black commentators after the attacks of September 11, 2001 who joked that finally the “pressure was off.” Like every previous immigrant group, forced to give up its culture, language, and claim to place elsewhere, their “arrival” within the hallowed halls of American power were always based on the definition of self through the abnegation of an Other. Emmanuel Todd, in his book *After the Empire*,^{xxiii} writes:

The relationship of Anglo-Saxons to the world is a shifting one. They have in their heads an anthropological border that distances them from universalists and brings them closer to categorizers, but this border moves, in the sense of its extending or its shrinking. There's us and there are others; among the others are some like us and others who are different. Among those who are different, some may be classified as similar. Among the similar, certain may be classified as different. But there is always a limit separating the complete human being from the Other: there is someplace where you must draw the line.

This difference today can be seen in the treatment of minority groups, especially newer immigrants who refuse to give up their culture – in what basically amounts to a *not letting go of their land* – in the sense of where they come from. For in the welcoming of immigrants and forcing them to renege on their pasts, two mutually beneficial tasks were accomplished. First, the labor workforce within the United States could shift to a cheaper internal source. Second, the disarray within the land of origin allowed for American capital's expansion there, continuing the vicious circle, and demonstrating our collapse of internal and external Othered space.

This is readily apparent if we replace our *New Yorker* cover with a satire of another politician, Joe Lieberman, exploring, say, the blood libel historically used to defame Jews. The reaction to the image would have been completely different, since the protest which would have quickly roused itself is bound to the very structure of manipulated media and hegemonic discourse themselves. It is this same structure that prevents a true discussion of the race problem in America, as witnessed by the fate of those who attempt to protest in any way, and who are quickly attacked not for what they say, but for who they are. To borrow Colin Powell's formula, the correct response to America's race problem is not to point out one Black as president, or one supreme court justice, or one secretary of state, or one senator, or one professor, or one

“entrepreneur,” but instead is to ask why there are not more given the statistical fact of proportion to the population, and the amount of time that has passed since desegregation. In that regard, why aren’t there *fewer* Black prisoners? And fewer Black soldiers? Why is there only one month that is referred to as Black History Month? The correct response is not to point to the law that desegregates, but to the statistics that show in education, work, health, housing, and life, the disparity between the races that still exists, and which cannot be attributed cynically to the victims of endemic American racism. A racism, it should be pointed out, that has muted dissent on the home front and now wishes to do the same on a global level.

The time has come to disavow mediated wallowing in vernacular trappings or stylings, or seeking street credibility in explaining the internal or external Other through her superficial signs, symbols, and manifestations. For unnoticed is that these signifieds have their own proper modes, complex contexts and means, usually in a local language outside of the supra-language of academic dissertation, global media, and Internet hegemony, and which always stand on their own without the need of extraneous clarification – “the phenomenon in its own terms,” going back to our Dabashi quotation. This process of explaining (and explaining away) bends the original meaning to suit the needs of those interpreting, and requires an *ever-defensive* stance from the one thus explained, who is nonetheless expected to be grateful for this bestowal unto him from above of existence-via-recognition, returning us to our Orientalist position.

This brings us full circle to the greater point, the uselessness of focusing on sub-categories of ethnic or other so-called identity markers, or to continue the straw man discussion of East versus West, or to divinate greater abstract meanings via superficial semiotic trappings. Instead, focus need be brought upon what makes for true dominant and resistant discourse, the fact that these discourses are hugely complex and found within and without Eastern and Western

societies in their inclusive entirety, and that the primary goal of current dominant discourses is to destroy their social networks and non-mediated expression by the enforcement of dystopic tools that contradictorily proclaim utopia even in their destruction of non-mediated *voice*. That this branding and mediation applies equally and indiscriminately to soap detergent, taco restaurants, and action figures but also to countries, politicians, our current spate of ersatz revolutions, and ever-perpetual wars should give us great pause. Those truly in favor of a radical break with the current status quo will need to examine cultural manifestations for their meaning in a way that questions creator, audience, and medium; and in such a way that these symbolic events' complexity is expanded on and not reduced, in order that the manipulative tango so far described becomes evident and therefore avoidable if not defeatable.

On January 4, 2009, a demonstration on the streets of London saw protestors of the war on Gaza hurling thousands of shoes at the doors of 10 Downing Street.^{xxiv} In this sub-mediation of a non-mediated event, there is hope, but there is also danger. Hope in the sense that a proactive and not just defensive stance is being taken; a finding of common cause and similarity of frameworks that bridges our East/West divide. Danger, in terms of a quick reduction of this event to just another super-mediated spectacle, a temporary gathering of individuals who have the luxury of retreating to their own space once the demonstration is over and done with. For in the long term, it might very well be the displaced, the disenfranchised, the marginalized whose non-mediated reclaiming of place will finally set things to right.

DEFINED TERMS:

Mediation: is a neutral term defining expression as a function of the distance from direct sensorial witnessing, on a spectrum that ranges from non-mediated to mediated. As such, it comes with various levels of trust inherent to it, based on the communicator and the receiver, as well as various problematics, in terms of cultural filters, levels of seriousness, types of communication, etc. We allow for certain variances within mediation and call this literary license, or poetic description, rhetorical flourish, etc. We disallow a crossover in terms of trustworthiness, and thus use terms such as bias, propaganda, deception, lies, etc. The hegemonic discourse relies on an imposed model that allows for this crossover unnoticed. The role of resistance discourse is to reveal this crossover, and to reshape the discourse, without falling into the trap of creating a secondary crossover. To thus examine mediation of expression, to reveal derivations and manifestations, to make connections to bigger pictures and frameworks, events and episodes, a further breakdown of the categories of *non-mediated* and *mediated* is thus required.

Non-Mediated: A spontaneous expression that is not designed, pre-selected, edited, planned; the voicer of the unsaid. Accepted as a basic premise is that there is great potential power and meaning to be derived from this domain. The concept of non-mediated does not deny the idea of derivations; it simply allows for their more natural expression. *The Matrix* glitch that denies the Baudrillardian spectacle. (For example, the spontaneous verbal utterance or physical actualization in reaction to a car accident.)

As such, “mediated” as a term can now be broken down into the following two categories:

Super-Mediated: *super* in the sense of “over and above;” “to an excessive degree.” Expression that is designed, pre-selected, edited, or planned, possibly within the constraints of a given

group, its ideology, its manifesto or tenets, that may or may not stand in opposition to hegemonic discourse, but whose use of tools, languages, systems, and technologies in fact are meant to enable, sustain, and promote such dominant discourse. (The television show *Cops* with an episode concerning drunk driving; drivers' education movies.)

Sub-Mediated: *sub* in the sense of "on the inside" (subatomic); or "in secret" (subvert); but also in taking back the sense of "below par" (subliterature) as well as "disintegrative context" (subculture).

Expression that is designed, pre-selected, edited, or planned within the constraints of a given group, its ideology, its manifesto, or tenets, that stands in opposition to hegemonic discourse often in its uniqueness and its non-derivation from current customs or tropes, and which avoids tools, languages, systems, and technologies of super-mediation. (The white-painted ghost bikes of various cities that represent both the individual killed in an accident and their collective whole.)

Once thus defined, the chameleon-like nature inherent in the contradictory usage of these types of mediation becomes apparent, such that the super-mediated can take on the stylings, modes, and meanings of anti-hegemonic discourse (viral marketing; corporate graffiti; staged History), provide a false sense of community (Facebook; online discussions), as well as place a neo-liberal emphasis on the beneficial nature of the individual, or the ever-new and modern (Dubai as urban renewal; *Wired* as rebellious magazine; Twitter as a tool for revolution). Sub-mediation that reflects the tools of super-mediation will often end up reinforcing a super-mediation. For example, highway memorializations, in their striving to de-anonymize a crash victim, might be seen as examples of failed super-mediation in their attempt to exalt an otherwise anonymous individual.

In this light, the creator(s) or manifestor(s) may be viewed in terms of various levels of controlling, corralling, ordering (to greater and lesser degrees), or simply revealing. The artist can channel, or allow for a natural manifestation; she can also impose another layer of meaning designed to confuse, obfuscate, detour, or even deter. The emphasis on reduction of witnessing distance also results in various tools and techniques as well as manifestos, such as the Dogma group, or documentary film styles, that attempt to *visually* reduce mediation while allowing for the crossover we describe in terms of trust. None of this is inherently right or wrong, good or bad; but it can all be described and used for comparative purposes in terms of intent of the teller.

- i <<http://www.daylife.com/photo/09m04DM5dA4Nk>>
- ii As'ad AbuKhalil, at <<http://angryarab.blogspot.com/>>, for just one.
- iii <<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/celebrity/la-et-rachael-ray-dunkin-28may29,0,20903.story>>
- iv <<http://www.thekufiyehproject.org/palestine.html>>
- v Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- vi <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/obamacover_07-14.html>
- vii <http://www.al-akhbar.com/files/pdfs/20080724/p01_20080724.pdf.jpg>
- viii <http://www.newyorker.com/online/2008/09/29/slideshow_080929_platon?slide=16#showHeader>
- ix <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/US/07/22/islam.ads/index.html>>
- x Ahmad Shawki, *Black Liberation and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006). Chicago.
- xi Howard Zinn, *Artists in Times of War* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).
- xii <http://www.newyorker.com/online/2008/09/29/slideshow_080929_platon?slide=16#showHeader>
- xiii <http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=cc70b6fe0a7f130abc17be46f2119b9>
- xiv <<http://www.ny1.com/Default.aspx?SecID=1000&ArID=32799>>
- xv <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/29/politics/campaigns/29GRAF.html>>
- xvi Tina Kelley, "Graffiti Artist Who Created Dean Mural Is Held", the *New York Times*, October 8, 2003.
- xvii Now hear this Robert Zimmerman
Though I don't suppose we'll meet
Ask your good friend Dylan
If he'd gaze a while down the old street
Tell him we've lost his poems
So they're writing on the walls
Give us back our unity
Give us back our family
You're every nation's refugee
- xviii Agamben, Giorgio. *Sacred Man: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1998. pp. 176–179.
- xix <<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1176>>
- xx Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press) pp. 466–484.
- xxi Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002).
- xxii <<http://www.mizna.org/vol7issue1/index.html>>
- xxiii Après l'empire.
Le rapport au monde des Anglo-Saxons est mouvant. Ils ont dans la tête une frontière anthropologique, qui fait défaut aux peuples universalistes et les rapproche des peuples différentialistes, mais cette frontière peut se

déplacer. Dans le sens de l'extension ou du rétrécissement. Il y a nous et les autres, mais parmi les autres certains sont comme nous et d'autres différents. Parmi les différents, certains peuvent être reclassés comme semblables. Parmi les semblables, certains peuvent être reclassés comme différents. Mais, toujours, il y a une limite séparant l'humain complet de l'autre, "there is some place where you must draw the line."

xxiv

<<http://www.daylife.com/photo/0gXe6HR0Hb54g>>