It is the writers, poets and filmmakers who articulate the emergent forms, the special skills of ear and pen and eye of the expositors and translators, too often undervalued, are vital to understanding and creative analysis.

I seek the filaments of alternative, more cosmopolitan, and more historically accurate visions of the mosaic that have entered into and will continue to shape the construction of the idea of America. How resonant “Rain Song,” Badr Shakir al-Sayyab’s 1953 exile song in Kuwait, has become:

I roar at the Gulf: ’Gulf,
Giver of pearls, shells and death!’
And the echo rings back
In sobs:
‘Gulf,
Giver of shells and death...’

I can almost hear Iraq collecting and storing
Thunders and lightens on plains and mountains,
And when the men snap their seal
The winds leave no trace
Of Thamud in the wadi*

**Orientalizing America: Beginnings and Middle**

**Preludes**

As the great Duke Ellington observed, “We are all becoming a little Oriental.” The Duke would have smiled at the Five Percent Nation of Islam remapping Mecca in Harlem, Brooklyn as Medina, and New Jersey as the New Jerusalem. It is certainly no more odd than Shriners parading as pashas and mamluks on their little petroleum-driven go-carts. And there is the fused image of Malcolm X and Bilal, the first muezzin—a postage stamp of the Islamic Republic of Iran, not the wild imagining of Salman Rushdie.

I want to explore through a kind of ethnographic listening. For guidance I am indebted to translators across linguistic and cultural strata, people who tunnel inside monolingual or monoperspectival assumptions, revealing and amplifying hidden multicultural traces, and who take the time to explain, to show connections, to tell stories, to borrow images and reinvent them with other cultural content, to root around in history rather than arresting or sentencing it, to search for the immemorials that keep both memory and hope vibrant, to write out and perform the sonic and visual codes of the present tense. These include bilingual poets and writers, but especially such expository writers as Abdullah al-Udhari, Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), Fatima Mernissi, Bouthaina Shabaan, Miryam Layoun, Miriam Cooke, Abdullah Laroui, Ross Brann, Dan Pagis, and the Edward Said of the images of body builders in After the Last Sky. While

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*The Thamudia, Abdullah al-Udhari reminds us, are the worshipers of 70 gods in North Arabia. The Thamudia mocked the prophet Salih. Salih prayed to God. God shook the mountain, giving birth to a red, pregnant she-camel. The Thamudia killed the she-camel, and as Salih warned, the people’s faces turned yellow, red, then black before they died; Gabriel screamed, ripping their hearts, bursting their ears, killing them, and a fire came down from heaven and burned them.

Michael M.J. Fischer teaches anthropology at Rice University in Houston, Texas.
The Maghrib as Mediator

Three primary registers make North Africa a particularly resonant interlocutor for the construction of (post)modern America: historical registers from the Middle Ages and Renaissance that helped shape modern consciousness; contemporary historical grounds, especially via Algeria, for the theories of postmodernity; and projective screens for the translations of the psyche as the Middle East and North Africa become continuous with Europe and America, by immigration to the latter and by sociocultural change in the former, as well as by the passage back and forth by artists, from impressionist painters to contemporary filmmakers.

First there are the historical registers of the literary and scientific matrix of Islamic Andalusia, a land of cosmopolitan multiculturalism including at least six major ethnic-religious communities (Arabs, Berbers, Jews, muwalladun [native Iberian converts to Islam], musta‘ribun [Arabized Christians] and saqaliba [European slave soldiers]). Andalusia was the center of European high culture in the 11th to 15th centuries, to which Europe looked for rational philosophy that challenged faith (Aristotle via Ibn Rushd [Averroes]), for science and math (our numeral system, algebra, geometry, astronomy, the medicine of Ibn Sina [Avicenna]), for the arts (the *sic et non* dialectical disputation method, epistolary forms of fiction, dialogic forms of philosophy that became popular in the Renaissance, and vernacular poetry). This historical horizon is particularly important today, as various parts of the world reconsider the 500th anniversary of the expedition of Columbus, an expedition relying on the Hebrew navigational astronomy and geodesy developed at the Portuguese royal courts, developments in turn continuous with the worlds of Arabic astronomy and navigation. This key symbolic event cannot pass as a hagiographic celebration of the Christian imperium, not even for Spain itself, which is using the event to rejoin construc-

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ries about a drug-running outfit on an island in the Gulf of Mexico, places her narrator among

Aztecs, Toltecs, mestizos...and a lot of Texans. I'll learn the ropes...My first American wife said, in the dog-eat-dog world, Alfred, you're a beagle. My name is Alfie Judah, of the once illustrious Smyrna, Aleppo, Baghdad—and now Flushing, Queens—Juda...We spoke a form of Spanish in my old Baghdad home...I, an Arab to some, an Indian to others...From His perch, Jesus stares at me out of his huge, sad, Levantine eyes. In this alien jungle, we're fellow Arabs. You should see what's happened to the old stomping grounds, compadre. (The Middle Man and Other Stories, 1988).

Something Called Postmodernity

There is the second, more recent, historical register: the debate about America as the center of something called postmodernity stems from theories largely generated in Paris by either North Africans or Frenchmen deeply affected by the Algerian war of independence. If the rise of German fascism was the central generational experience shaping the thought of German-derived social theory in Europe around World War II, Algeria was the generational experience of the postwar period for French-derived cultural theory. Bureaucracy, rationalizing processes of the market, and the defense of civil society were the obsessive concerns of German social theory. French cultural theory has constructed alternatives to totalizing ideologies, alternatives that can accommodate multiple cultural perspectives and not insist that everyone see history or progress the same way.

There have been two waves of powerful initiatives in social and cultural theory construction emerging via Paris. The first wave, spurred by the Algerian War of Indepen-
dence and Vietnam, included Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, O. Manoni, Kateb Yacin, and others, with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in support roles. Ali Shariati was a powerful next-generation follower. Bourdieu, Derrida, Lyotard, Cixous and the so-called postmodernists or poststructuralists are the second wave.

If the first wave focused on the psychology of colonial domination, the second wave focuses on the erasure of local meanings in a global economy. If the first wave still focused on individual psychology and face-to-face relations between, say (in Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth), torturers and the tortured, the second wave focuses on the effects of the electronic media (movies, music, television, computers, electronic bank transfers, F-16s, satellite broadcast systems) which allow a subtler, more diffuse regime of power, working as much through desire (for commodities) as external domination, and which require new means of resistance. Lyotard suggests resistance takes the form of differends (cultural differences at the level of basic assumptions that make translation difficult) and immemorials (ways of keeping the narratives of past trauma from being erased, forgotten, or turned into simple inert memorials), preserving these to generate perspectives that ensure alternative points of view are always kept in play. What is at issue in the theories of postmodernity is an opening for alternative perspectives that value and empower multiple visions as being what gives the idea of America vitality.

Visual Displacements

There is the third, most immediate, register: the visual register in such films as Ferid Boughedir's Halfaoutine, Child of the Terrace (a Tunisian-French production), Farida Ben Lyazid's A Door to the Sky (a Moroccan-French production), Omar Allouache's Omar Gatlato, Whose Machismo Killed Him, Michel Khleifi's The Fertile Memory and Canticle of Stones. These films—and their Iranian counterparts—displace the archaicizing categories of so much writing in area studies paradigms. They too work with stereotypes, formulas, romanticizations. One can critique aspects of all of these films, but the immediacy of dress, gesture, language, street scenes, sound, references in popular music both to the past and to the transnational, of dilemmas of love, economic struggle and political repression—all these things focus attention on the present and its dilemmas in a way that the written word often allows to slip away.

The film medium is a powerful yet very much underutilized ethnographic tool—ethnographic in my sense of a vehicle for translation, for allowing multiple voices to speak, for presenting the present. The techniques of filmmaking, like those of other visual media—painting, photography, graphic arts in advertising, wall posters, cartoons and graffiti—have developed with strong interactions between the Orient and the West: one thinks of the ways in which the Mediterranean light of Morocco
set up dramatic exercises and learning laboratories for the Impressionists, the ways in which arabesque, lattice-work, tiling and architecture provided exercises in the play of light and shadow, the ways in which Japanese printmaking influenced ideas of perspective and depth.

Above all, films like Michel Khleifi’s, and Shimon Dotan’s *Smile of the Lamb*, present dilemmas of psychological blockage and conflict laced with historical allusions and grounded in ethnographic portraiture. Films like *Omar Gatlato* present the sexual repressions and their denials in ways that show how warm worlds of human interaction are created and broken; films like *A Door to the Sky* portray the West-returned and the tradition-eroded. There is a kind of cine-writing portraiture of time and place, a performance of psychological mind sets, that no other medium is achieving with any great success.

**Borderlands Phenomena**

One of the most creative ferments of cultural creation at the moment seems to be in the Borderlands—the mythic space of the Mexican-American southwest from Texas to California—in bilingual writing, in art, in customizing industrial commodities from low-rider cars to blue-painted furniture to mesquite-grilled *fajitas* in fast-food franchizing. Borderlands is a term that has conceptual as well as geographic uses.

If one looks to what is happening in creative writing in English, in what has been called the decolonization of English—the expansion of the tonalities, diction, vocabularies and cultural resources of English to include contributions from other languages—then surely the explosion of writing and filmmaking from Iran, Pakistan and India must rank among the most important of the Borderlands reinventing the imaginations and languages we inhabit. Nor is only English being decolonized. French through Beur, North African, and francophone African writing is undergoing a parallel process. Music, too, is an arena of both fusion and contestation.

The arena of film has spread Urdu-Hindi as a vibrant cultural mixer, turning Urdu from the language of poetry into a powerful sign of nostalgia, a powerful medium of political slogans, and a vehicle of cultural critique. Many Urdu writers and poets were associated with the People’s Theater Association, the Progressive Writers’ Association, and the Bombay film industry, the largest in the world and one with audiences in many places. Commercial film plays with notions of modernity, new behavioral styles, material aspirations, violence, stratification, and even with genre forms. The film *Teja*, for instance, is a wonderful spoof on the Western, replaying essentially the same story in three different genre formats: a Western with an Indian family and Indian outlaws set in a log cabin with horses in a Western landscape; then as an urban gangster film set in Bombay; and then as a science fiction plot set in the Himalayas in a ski lodge. There is an active play here with the idea of young grieving widow carries out her dead husband’s desire to return to America, planning to perform sati on his college campus in Tampa. Instead Yama, the god of Death, cheats her effort at rebirth, afflicting her with rape and murder. *Jasmine* appears as an avenging Kali with blood dripping from her tongue; clutching her Ganpati, she slays her tormentor and walks away unencumbered by any material possessions and a mind plagued by many pasts.

Negotiating is the long drawn out process that any immigrant goes through. Perhaps the strongest is Hualing Nieh. Anton Shammas’s arrival in the same writing program at Iowa that Hualing Nieh helped found is a pre-migration negotiation of a more middle class variety. Hualing Nieh begins her novel of a split personality, *Mulberry and Peach*, with a hilarious scene of an immigration agent and Peach, who denies she is Mulberry:

> “Peach laughs. ‘Mr. Dark, you have a real good imagination. What you see isn’t real. What I see is real. You know what I see when I look at you? A tiger with nine human heads.’

> “Peach laughs. ‘Mr. Dark, don’t try to be so smart! You think I’m going to tell you that I was born in Nanking on 26 October 1929 so you can prove I’m Mulberry? Well, you’re
When heaven split from the earth is not a bad description of the cataclysmic events of the Chinese revolution, when families were torn apart and individuals fled across vast lands trying to keep body and soul alive; not a bad description for the cataclysmic events that have shaken almost every society in the 20th century, the US being one of the few exceptions.

In the Iranian-American film by Ghassam Ebrahimian, *The Suitors*, an immigration officer asks Haji’s wife to show her face to see if it matches the photo on her passport. “Show the face all the way to the ear,” he commands, deliberately insisting that she acknowledge that this is America where veils are out of place. Later, a building supervisor notices blood dripping from the apartment of the Iranians, who are slaughtering a sheep in the bathtub. Fantasizing it is an Iranian terrorist cell, he calls in the SWAT team; meanwhile, he is listening to a Christian fundamentalist preacher on the radio spouting wild paranoia.

Dealing with the body and the unconscious is a component without which the other strategies of narration remain weak. As a strategy for focussing on its dilemmas, none perhaps is stronger or funnier than Rohinton Mistry’s neurotic constipated character who cannot defecate in his new country.

**Middle Passages, New Spaces**

Middle Passages refers to the ships that carried Africans to America in the slave trade, passages that transformed people from bearers of one culture into dominated workers in another, much more complex, system of stratification. My own family went through a Middle Passage on a boat called the Zamzam, a European journey bound up with Nazi debasements of slavery, annihilation and genocide, a journey inextricably bound up with the Middle East, not only through the name of the ship. On a table on the deck, a young professor, released from a future of being a plumber’s assistant in Palestine, wrote his first book in English, a book called *The Passing of the European Age*.

I am fascinated by Middle Passages, by hybridizations, by adjustments and refusals of adjustments, refusals that refuse to stand still but change their bearers.

Among the challenges to describing the new worlds we inhabit are the new places that old identities must negotiate. In a city like Houston, one of the more remarkable of new spaces is the car auction. The auctioneer sounds like a traditional cattle auctioneer, a rapid-fire male voice operating between articulations of price and information and a drone of nonsense filler that allows the ear to distinguish one auctioneer from another. The visual accompaniment is his cowboy dress, weathered face, Stetson hat, tapered jeans, pointed boots and silver buckle. He burbles rapid-fire words into a handheld wrapped microphone, while his youthful male aide on the floor holds up fingers and points in visual pantomime of the bids agreed to by the flick of an eyebrow, the flash of finger, the nod of a head. The Anglo auctioneer and aide have Black and white female bookkeepers. On the floor stand a few Texan farmers, vastly outnumbered by Iranians, Lebanese, Saudis, Pakistanis, a few Indians; and Vietnamese. The Vietnamese are known as the sharpest dealers; if a Vietnamese bidder looks serious, others will drop out. The Saudis dress in the flashiest clothes, go for the big fancy cars and have little competition except for the occasional Anglo-Texan dealer. Most of the others dress down in American casual: shorts and t-shirts, jeans and open shirts, as if, in venerable bazaar style, to mask themselves in a air of indeterminate poverty.

Multiculturalism takes on a new form in these spaces, both like and unlike the older urban immigrant entrepots of New York and Chicago. What fascinates me in these spaces, places and passages are the cultural translations. We need a new map of America that begins to envision the pilgrimage sites that Indians are establishing among the Hindu temples of North America, the establishment of a little Tehran in Los Angeles. We need the resources of the immigrant imagination. Above all, we need attention to the discourses immigrants use in making sense of their own lives, in comparing their own value systems with their new settings, or in forging philosophically resonant frames that draw on the genres, tropes, metaphors and imagery of both old and new cultural settings. Are there *afsaneh*—moral parables, folktales like those that power the *Thousand and One Nights*, *Kalileh and Dimne* the *Shahnameh*—that provide wombs of imaginative growth
Towards a Stable Civil Society

The introduction of alternative perspectives is the strong, poetic way of combating monolingual, monocular intolerance, a much stronger way than the industry of Orientalist-bashing that serves only to solidify the very Orientalist categories that the critics claim to want to destroy. By paying attention to strong poetic multicultural voices, we can provide the kind of expansion of the educational curriculum and political discourse that will respond to the demographic changes occurring both within the US and in the world at large.

Whether or not postmodernisms as writing and reading strategies are passing fads, postmodernity is an established sociological reality. This article is not a manifesto. It merely suggests approaches to mapping of emergent realities. If we are to create pluralist, civil societies, we will have to pay attention to the perspectives that are registered in multicultural media; these media are the places that show how different perspectives can survive in the same social space.

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Books and Films Discussed in this Essay

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