

“Reconfiguring American Studies from the Middle East”

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In recent years, scholars of American Studies Association have stressed the value of understanding America from outside its borders. Transnationalism has been seen as the key to decentering a bellicose nationalism and questioning a foreign policy that has often been marked by Manichean oversimplification. This paper asks how questions central to American studies might be reconfigured by doing American Studies from “outside” the U.S. through a center such as CASAR. I argue that looking at American studies from the Middle East helps us see 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.

The question of Palestine has been the lynchpin through which Manichean political and cultural categories in the U.S. Imaginary have been mobilized. Palestinian terror shores up a coherent, Western, national Imaginary which serves the Symbolic function of the imperial Nation-State. Although being positioned as anti-nationalistic or as providing counternarratives to hegemonic nationalism has not bothered the current generation of scholars in American Studies—witness the flurry of collections questioning U.S. imperialism—there is virtually no sustained attention to the implication of American nationalist discourses with those of Israeli occupation or the contradictory relationship between American 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.

Thus although 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 U.S. 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, 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.

The idea of “America,” with clear borders between who is/not within the nation is being used to discipline fields such as Middle East Studies where questions of immigration, diaspora, homeland, hyphenated identities, divided loyalties and national allegiance are being played out. Yet although American exceptionalism is being rigorously critiqued and studies of post 9/11 militarism and imperialism are becoming a culture industry in American studies, the absence of interchange between scholars of Middle East studies and American studies reflects the larger disconnect between the concerns of American studies scholars in the U.S. and those of their counterparts in the Middle East.