Interrogating Orientalism

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Part Two

PEDAGOGIC PRACTICES
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* have come to represent the “quintessential Turkish Tale.” “They are both a telos toward which the dozens of previous books about Turkey lead and a point of reference for the hundreds of travel books that follow. In *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, Montagu indicates a strong awareness of what earlier Western travelers had written about Turkey. Since their publication in 1763, they, too, have become one of the most significant sources on Turkey for subsequent travel writers, on par even, as Billie Melman writes, with Antoine Galland’s famous translation of *The Arabian Nights*.

John Cam Hobhouse wrote in 1813, fifty years after the publication of the *Letters*, that Montagu “is so commonly read that you will scarcely pardon me for quoting rather than referring to it” (quoted in Chung, 111). *The Turkish Embassy Letters* continue to be one of the most popular travel books about Turkey, as the abundance of critical references alone indicates. It is notable that *Letters* has never been out of print.

In calling the *Letters* a “Turkish Tale,” I am playing on the term “traveler’s tale.” A traveler’s tale is a narrative of slightly dubious authenticity, and here, I would add, written by a Westerner. Indeed, “traveler’s tale” is an apt synonym of what Edward Said would later call “Orientalism,” or the European invention of the East (*Orientalism*, 1). With their descriptions of life at court, in the baths, and in the harems, Montagu’s *Letters* certainly fit within the tradition of a European’s representation of the East. It is no wonder, then, that *The Turkish Embassy Letters* have become canonical in classes about Orientalism.

*The Turkish Embassy Letters* are ideal to teach for other reasons as well, particularly for the attractive picture they paint of Montagu herself. Readers, particularly students, are drawn to her; as they travel along with Montagu
in her eastward journey, they come to like their travel companion, and they readily identify with her perspectives and her insights. They are, as Louis Althusser writes (170–77), interpellated into the world of the *Letters*. As teachers of literature, especially autobiographical texts such as Montagu’s *Letters*, we want to encourage the delight and appreciation that accompany the pleasures of identification. We are happy that students can connect to writers who have written in other worlds, other times. It is hard to argue against the power of empathy. Biographies—and certainly travel writing is a form of biography—are one of the best routes into history; the lives of individuals make the eras during which they lived come alive, especially for students. As teachers, we want students to imaginatively immerse themselves into other places, other eras.

At the same time, however, we want students to resist easy and immediate identification, particularly when they are reading travel writing, which risks, as Jeanne Moskal states, “confirm[ing] rather than challeng[ing] students’ expectations, stereotypes, and prejudices.” For students to adopt Montagu’s vision is for them to accept the beliefs and prejudices that underlie Orientalism. In the world of Orientalism, the Westerner, generally unconsciously, constructs herself at the expense of the Eastern Other. This self-construction “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (Said, *Orientalism*, 12). In a class on Orientalism, instructors seek to have their students recognize and critique this process of construction in an effort to resist interpellation.

How then do we encourage our students to challenge the assumptions underlying Orientalism? By having them examine the world that Montagu creates, and the pictures she paints of herself in this world, as a discursive construction, a representation, rather than a truth (Said, *Orientalism*, 21). Those teaching the *Letters* can point to how these representations and self-representations are not fixed, but ever shifting, involving “the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (Said, “Afterword,” 332). There are three stages, then, in teaching the *Letters* as an Orientalist construction, and “Teaching the Quintessential Turkish Tale” outlines each of these stages.4

First, a discussion of the epistolary genre of the *Letters* allows us to understand how Montagu, especially in her position as an aristocratic woman writer, enacts her varying identities. Second, “Teaching the Quintessential Turkish Tale” primarily addresses how instructors and students can examine the multiple selves that Montagu creates as a result of these interactions: feminist, aristocrat, colonialist/imperialist, aesthetician, and ethnographer. As we examine these different selves, we regard them as constructed and
not natural, and we come to see the role we ourselves play in constructing Montagu. After all, the only identity Montagu would have applied to herself was aristocratic.\textsuperscript{5} In connection with Montagu’s role as an ethnographer, one needs to examine the different ways she interacts with the other in an ongoing process of “interpretation and re-interpretation,” and how her interactions are represented as variable, fluid, and multiple.

When students first read \textit{The Turkish Embassy Letters}, they easily identify with Montagu’s persona in her manifold interactions. Certainly, the epistolary form encourages identification, and allows readers to feel as if they are in immediate contact with the writer. As Ian Watt writes, “letters are the most direct material evidence for the inner life of their writers that exist” (191). Even when it is fictionalized, “the letter form in general creates a more personal and private appearance” (Secor, 4). However, like the epistolary novel \textit{Clarissa}, the Letters were also written for a wide audience, and as such are a public form of writing as well as private. Apart from its translation into novel writing, letter writing in the eighteenth century became a public endeavor and to that end “a carefully crafted art, refined not only for the particular audience of one but attuned to a potential public readership as well. . . . Lady Mary’s familiar letters, then, are poised rather precariously between the private and public realms of personal talk and literary art” (Gardner, 2).

The epistolary form, furthermore, was one appropriate to her social class and gender.\textsuperscript{6} In my teaching of the Letters, I reminded students that their writing history indicates that Montagu very much had publication in mind, though, as Robert Halsband notes, not in her lifetime (Lowe, 35). Knowing that her daughter Lady Bute would not want to see her letters in print, Montagu left a copy with the Reverend Benjamin Sowden in Rotterdam for safekeeping (Epstein, 8). From 1718–1763, the Letters were “revised throughout her life” (Kietzman, 1), “from actual letters to a limited readership, to pseudo-letters to fictive addressees, being aimed at a wider, more varied audience” (Melman, 79). Over the course of this revision, the narrative voice “developed into a fictional narrator, assuming diverse voices and different masks to convey to her audience different points of view, in accordance with the person (or character) she addressed. And the recipients of the letters were no longer merely ‘real’ readers, but ‘implied’ ones as well as . . . characterised and fictionalised” (Melman, 79). Other features that point toward Montagu’s having publication in mind include the conversational quality (Gardner, 2); the “idealized descriptions of meetings with beautiful people, . . . fairly typical of eighteenth-century letters written with an eye to posthumous publication” (Aravamudan, 81); and “the style and page layout of the collected book of familiar letters” (Chung, 123).
I asked students to think about Montagu in terms of her multiple self-constructions, to consider the kinds of personae she assumes before her different audience members. How does she constitute herself before her various addressees? We compared the letters written to her sister Lady Mar to those written to Alexander Pope. With Lady Mar, Montagu is more intimate and gossipy. She describes her encounters with individual women, such as Fatima, and reports on the events in her private life such as, for example, the birth of her daughter (113). With Alexander Pope, she is more deliberately erudite and witty. She fills her letters to him with classical allusions, and points out how accomplished she is in her Turkish: “[I am] studying the Turkish language (in which, by the way, I am already very learned)” (103). To the Abbe Conti she writes about religious matters (62–63). “[A]ssuming diverse voices and different masks to convey to her audience different points of view, in accordance with the person (or character) she addressed” (Melman, 79), Montagu knew what would please her audience. As students and instructors deconstruct her rhetorical skill, it would almost seem as if she knew what would please even audiences today. Within the range of these letters we can see how Montagu emerges, to contemporary readers, as feminist, aristocrat, colonialist/imperialist, aesthete, and ethnographer, and how these identities cut across addressees, and intersect, overlap, and sometimes contradict each other. As we discuss each of these identities, I ask students to define them, and to complicate their definitions.

We started with feminist, because that was the most attractive (though, unfortunately, the word itself is not: most students will acknowledge, “I am not a feminist, but . . .”), the most identifiable, and the most complicated. What makes Montagu seem to be a feminist, I asked? First of all, they noted, because she went to Turkey at all in an age when few Western men traveled the width of Europe and far fewer women. Next, while there, she had access to places where “no man has gone before,” as she proudly proclaims about her visit to the baths: “tis no less than death for a man to be found in one of these places” (60). We discussed her tone of “oneupwomanship” here in her report on what no man was able to see: the private lives of women. She was permitted access by virtue of her gender. Students and I kept in mind as well that the Letters are truly remarkable because they are indeed the first secular book about the Middle East written by a Western woman (Melman, 78). Coming from a society that values firsts, North American students, like Western critics before them, applauded Montagu for her adventurousness, her pioneering spirit.

I asked students to consider other reasons for why the Letters are a work of feminism. They are from a woman’s point of view, and they are about women’s experiences. As Anna Secor notes, we do not have a masculine
conquering voice, but rather a “gendered discourse of emotional response” (10). The emotional response, one born of personal experience and “not external authorities, make[s] a report accurate” (Melman, 84). Throughout the Letters, Montagu “takes pains to dim national and religious attributes” and instead “consciously emphasises gender” (Melman, 84). Moreover, in her focus on women’s manners and customs, Montagu, as Emily Cooley writes, is defining culture as feminine (8). Her comments on seemingly frivolous topics such as fashion and grooming; social events, such as operas; on the Turkish language of social interaction, or, to cite Woolf, “a little language such as lovers use” (295); and festivals, such as carnivals, explore “several cross-cultural constructions of femininity” (Aravamudan, 75). Montagu’s attention to the details of her trip make the Letters an important social document, if not an exceptional example of eighteenth-century feminism. If, as Naomi Schor has written, the detail, in the eighteenth century, is the feminine, then the Letters are a kind of feminist history.

Students and I studied two of the most famous passages in the Letters in an effort to understand how Montagu’s vision is a feminist one: the Sophia bath and the harem scenes. We looked at these two scenes as celebrations of women’s spaces. Montagu announces at the beginning of the bath scene, “I am now got into a new world, where everything I see appears to me a change of scene” (57). Born into this new world, like Shakespeare’s Miranda, or Milton’s Eve, Montagu approaches this scene, and the following harem scene, with awe and wonder: “[I] could not help fancying I had been some time in Mohammed’s paradise, so much was I charmed with what I had seen” (91). Ruth Bernard Yeazell applies Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “feminotopia” to these women’s spaces; “feminotopias” are episodes “that present idealized worlds of female autonomy, empowerment, and pleasure” (122). Montagu’s feminotopia is a “female heaven” void of men (Cooley, 14), and is at the very least suggestive of “the possibility of an erotic universe in which there are no men, a site of social and sexual practices that are not organized around the phallus or a central male authority” (Lowe, 48). Aravamudan remarks on its inclusivity (82), and Cooley on its atmosphere of equality (12).

In idealizing Turkish women’s space, I asked students, is Montagu avoiding Orientalist tropes, or is she instead evoking them? We discussed “the Orientalist topos of the female harem, and the specter of what Malek Alloul calls ‘oriental sapphism’” (Lowe, 47–48). Like other travelers before and after her, Montagu “tended to glorify the terrestrial sensual paradise of noble savages” (Melman, 97). Yet, as Melman also points out, “[t]he haremlik is not a microcosmic state but rather the reverse of the state. . . . Montagu’s harem is neither a merely exotic place, nor a philosopher’s Utopia. It is in fact not dissimilar to the aristocratic household in Britain, at that time. In other
words: the harem is neither different nor foreign” (97). Chung insists that Montagu supplants an Orientalist universe with Milton’s paradise, and in merging East with West, “Turk with Christian, the Arabian Nights with the Fountain of Domestic Sweets, prose with poetry, and Other with self” (116), Montagu’s relationship with the “Turkish women around her changes to alterity from identity, to threat from salvation, to paradise lost from paradise, to tempting Other from loving Mother” (116).

I culled quotations from the critics whose articles and books are cited here. Students addressed the following questions: In writing about the bath as a “new world,” is Montagu’s perspective a colonialist one? Or, in reference to Pratt’s “feminotopia,” is she writing about a nonplace—literally, a utopia? Could one regard the bath as more mundane, a female version of a man’s sphere, such as the coffeehouse, a place where ordinary conversations took place, “where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented etc.” (Montagu, 59)? Just as Turkish women are sober conversationalists, Turkish men, writes Montagu, are as ordinary as their English brothers. Or is the bath, where the dressing of hair takes place, an eighteenth-century version of a women’s space, the beauty salon? Is Montagu reproducing Orientalist stereotypes by recreating a female version of the harem? Is the bath a micro-cosmic state, or is it a reverse of the state? Does Montagu construct the bath as an aristocratic household? Are the baths all of this and more, a symbol of plentitude and totality? Certainly, students could see, in the question of women’s space alone, a wide range of critical opinions.

We moved on to the way Montagu does not just describe the meaning of this space to her, but imagines what she must mean to the women who occupy it. We considered how Montagu does not just position herself as the subject, but as the object. She imagines that she must have “certainly appeared very extraordinary” (58) to the women in her riding dress. She perceives that it is the Turkish women who tolerate her: “not one of them that showed the least surprise or impertinent curiosity, but received me with all the obliging civility possible. I know no European court where the ladies would have behaved themselves in so polite a manner to a stranger” (58). In contrast to the two hundred naked women, who implore her to undress, she keeps her clothes on, but eventually relents to some degree by opening her shirt and showing them her stays. To the Turkish women, Montagu’s stays are a chastity belt to which only her husband has the key: “I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband” (Montagu, 59–60). In addition to showing herself as the object of the gaze, and to representing the Turkish women as adopting the subject position, Montagu shows herself to be imprisoned by her culture, in contrast to the freely moving Turkish women.
Students noted that Montagu regards naked Turkish women as freer than their clothed Western counterparts. They saw, a few pages later, that Montagu also considers Turkish women to be freer when they are clothed, and more particularly, when they are veiled. For Montagu, the stays are a clear symbol of imprisonment; on the other hand, the veil, regarded by the West as a symbol of subjugation even to this day, in fact enables women's liberty: “This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery” (Montagu, 71). The veiled woman can indulge in her own sexual proclivities without being identified. As Aravamudan writes, “[t]he interplay between nudity and masking will fascinate [Montagu], especially because it will be seen as providing aristocratic Turkish women—and ought, she thinks, to provide all women—with an escape from social ties by means of negativity and anonymity” (79). In escaping these restrictive social ties, ties that turn women into objects for others’ uses, aristocratic Turkish women have greater subjectivity than Englishwomen do.

In her defense of the veil, Montagu is attempting to offset the worst of the stereotypes about Turkish women: that they are imprisoned by despotic Turkish men, and that the veil is a symbol of their imprisonment. She expresses her exasperation with such stereotypes: “I cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of them” (Montagu, 71). Montagu admires the way the veil obscured class differences, so that the mistress and her slave could not be distinguished from one another, and the way it also allowed women to have extramarital affairs. Students and I debated whether or not Montagu was demonstrating proto-Marxist, liberal feminism here, or whether, in her comparison of the veil to a masquerade, she was perpetuating classic Orientalism. I brought in an excerpt from Lisa Lowe, who critiqued Montagu’s application of the westernized notion of the masquerade to the veil, and in doing so, projected onto Turkish women her desire for sexual freedom:

The characterization of Turkish women’s comportment as a “Masquerade” also assimilates Turkish culture to English terms and modes of cultural expression. . . . For Montagu to call the Turkish woman’s veil a masquerade is to transfer these specifically English associations to Turkish women’s society, to interpret the Turkish context by means of an ideologically charged English classification, and to attribute to Turkish women a powerful ability to subvert the traditional cultural systems of sexuality and class relations. . . . Implying that Turkish women are the site of a variety of subversive actions, that veiled they are protected by an anonymity that allows them sexual and social license, Montagu makes of Turkish women a sign of liberty and freedom in
a manner not unlike Dumont’s earlier rendering of Turkish women as a sign of enslavement and barbarism. (45)

We contrasted Lowe to Aravamudan, who more positively reads Montagu’s use of masquerade in performative terms: “Masquerade will come to be the ‘perpetual practise’ that suggests a model of female subjectivity for Montagu, one that will come to be structurally related to a kind of freedom that suspends truth” (78).

Students concluded that Montagu challenged eighteenth-century restrictions placed on women. Did she also question the privileges she enjoyed as an aristocrat, I asked students? No; on the contrary, Montagu sought to preserve class boundaries. We looked at the following passage in which she boasts that her class position makes her account more accurate than those of previous travel writers, who were “only” merchants: “‘Tis certain we have but very imperfect relations of the manners and religion of these people, this part of the world being seldom visited but by merchants, who mind little but their own affairs” (60). She can speak of what she knows because she, as an aristocrat, was admitted to the houses of people of quality, unlike the “common voyage writers,” who were denied access:

You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don’t know. It must be under a very particular character, or on some extraordinary occasion when a Christian is admitted into the house of a man of quality, and their harems are always forbidden ground. (85) Students furthermore noticed that Montagu praises Turks who hold the same class position that she does; like her, they will not speak with someone whom they perceive to be from a lower class: “The Turks are very proud and will not converse with a stranger they are not assured is considerable in his own country. I speak of the men of distinction, for as to the ordinary fellows, you may imagine what ideas their conversation can give of the general genius of the people” (104). Montagu, however, holds the same class prejudices against “common” Turks that she holds against commoners in general. She applauds Achmed Bey, a Turkish effendi (gentleman and scholar), for his interpretation of the Koran that allows for “those that knew how to use it with moderation” (e.g., gentlemen such as himself) and prohibits it “for the common people” (Montagu, 62–63). Montagu believes that generosity “is very often found amongst Turks of rank” (Montagu, 137). Montagu belonged to the most powerful class in one of the most power-
ful countries in the world. I wanted students to understand the context for her travels to the East in 1717. In addition to being a great sea power, Britain emerged, following the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, as a major imperial power. Having been one of the superpowers in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, was on the way toward losing its ascendancy. It had recently lost significant territory, marked by the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699. Furthermore, the capitulations—trade treaties that allowed the West “free and unrestricted trade in the [Ottoman] Empire” (Secor, 5)—enacted in the sixteenth century became even more entrenched, leading to an increasing imbalance of trade relations between Turkey and the West (Secor, 6). Into this climate Montagu’s husband, Edward, was sent, as Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople and also as a representative for the Levant Company, which held the charter for trade in the Near East (Desai, xv). Thus, Edward Montagu was serving England both in a diplomatic and in a commercial capacity (Lowe, 37), and Mary was along for the ride. And ride she did, literally, on “a little white favourite” that, she writes, “I would not part with on any terms” (83). Students and I examined the scene in which she appears on horseback. In her letter to her friend Anne Thistlethwayte, she boasts, “My side saddle is the first was ever seen in this part of the world and is gazed at with as much wonder as the ship of Columbus was in America” (83). Here, we noted, she is not only aligning herself with a famous explorer, she is emphasizing her whiteness. As Donna Landry notes, “This scene is a festival of whiteness put on for darker foreign faces to gape at” (471). Even if Lady Montagu “may be only an accessory to the British mercantile and political interests represented by her husband’s embassy, . . . she exhibits the confluence of imperial ambitions and personal imperiousness characteristic of English people abroad during this period” (Landry, 471). Though, as we have seen above in her role as a champion for aristocratic Turkish women, and as we shall see even more below in her role as ethnographer, Montagu urges against conventional colonialist attitudes, she does slip into them in scenes such as this one, and even more when she is outside aristocratic circles. In a later moment more redolent of obvious racism, students and I examined Montagu’s comparison of Tunisians to baboons in which she concludes, “tis hard to fancy them a distinct race” (151). Few students would want to identify with Montagu in such instances. On the other hand, as Jennifer Thorn writes, “[i]t is fatally easy for students to criticize earlier eras for their benighted attitudes and limited knowledge. Even as I want students to grapple with the material force of bias, I want not to reinforce inadvertently a bias that is arguably as pernicious, a smug complacency that simply by recognizing others’ shortcomings, we escape them in ourselves” (3).
We have seen how the *Letters* allow us to regard Montagu as a feminist, aristocrat, and colonialist/imperialist. The epistolary genre also allows her to represent herself as an “aesthetic subject” (vs. as an aesthetic object). As Elizabeth Bohls writes, in the eighteenth century, the gaze belonged to the male, and the discourse of the gaze—more particularly, the discourse of aesthetics—was “written by men from a perspective textually marked as masculine” (Bohls, 3). Notably, “the painters of Montagu’s days were [also] almost all men” (Bohls, 36)—the aesthetic subjects—, and the nudes they painted—the aesthetic objects—, almost all women (Bohls, 36). Women writers like Montagu had to struggle “to appropriate the powerful language of aesthetics” (Bohls, 3), and as such, “also challenged its most basic assumptions” (Bohls, 3). It was not Montagu’s gender, but rather her aristocratic class that entitled her to the authority of an aesthetician (Bohls, 19).

I asked students to consider the interplay between Montagu as an aesthetic subject, and the objects of her art, most notably, the women in the baths and the harem. Did Montagu regard the women with an aesthetic eye, a desiring eye, or both? Is it possible to separate the two? Students and I looked closely at the following passage:

> I perceived that the ladies with finest skins and most delicate shapes had the greatest share of my admiration, though their faces were sometimes less beautiful than those of their companions. To tell you the truth, I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr Gervase [a contemporary painter] could have been there invisible. (Montagu, 59)

How could we read this first sentence? It expresses a genuinely aesthetic appreciation of beauty. This appreciation is confirmed when Montagu also writes that the women in the bath are “as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian” (59), and Fatima, the Sultana whom Montagu later meets in the harem, more beautiful than what the great ancient Greek court painter “Apelles is said to have essayed, by a collection of the most exact features, to form a perfect face” (89). How does the second sentence, however, in the passage set off above, alter our perception of Montagu’s aesthetic intentions? One might argue that it tips the balance into the erotic. I brought in a handout of excerpts of critical analyses of this scene, many of which are cited in this discussion. Students and I debated whether, in displacing her desire onto a male painter, Montagu is admitting to a wicked desire—a homoerotic desire—within herself. “Could the imagined male gazers be surrogates onto whom Montagu displaces her homoerotic attraction to the beautiful bathers?” Bohls asks (36). For Landry, Montagu’s homoeroticism is not even a question; Landry directly translates
the “wickedness” here into a “homoeroticism that requires switching to a masculine point of view to manifest itself” (478). Yĕgenoğlu interprets this scene as a clear-cut instance of Orientalism: “in her relation with the Orient, she attaches a phallus to herself so that she can enter into the domain of the other, to the origin of all civilizations, to the ‘mother-nature-Orient,’ and thereby be” (93). When several of my male students read this scene, they openly admitted their own heterosexual desires through their identification with Montagu’s homosexual ones, and, indeed, were quicker than the women in the class were to call Montagu a “lesbian.” It is no wonder, additionally, that this scene should have been used by painters such as Ingres in his celebrated Le Bain Turc (Turkish bath); it is telling to see the way some men will appropriate Montagu’s homoerotic gaze, a gaze she herself attempts to appropriate from male painters herself.

Indeed, in her attempt to appropriate the gaze of male painters—and not just that of the contemporary Charles Jervas, but those of the Early Modern artists Guido Reni and Titian—Montagu is attempting to aestheticize what is ordinarily eroticized. Montagu “substitutes for the crass power differential of Orientalism the subtler inequalities of aesthetic discourse” (Bohls, 42). Bohls argues that “[t]he language of aesthetics does not just mute the baths’ erotic appeal, but, more important, raises its tone to a refinement commensurate with the status of these Turkish aristocrats” (33). Where Bohls emphasizes the aesthetics of the bath scene, Secor focuses on the way Montagu attempts to desexualize this scene: Montagu’s “description of the women’s baths challenges discourses of Oriental sensuality by desexualizing this supposedly voluptuous space” (Secor, 11). The reference to the imagined “wickedness” of the painter Charles Jervas does not negate, Secor insists, “the simultaneous rejection of typical Orientalist themes regarding the all-female space of the bath” (Secor, 12). Secor sees further desexualization in Montagu’s refusal to color the skin of the women she sees—in her whitewashing, her “claims to racial similarity in reference to the ‘shineingly white’ skins of the naked women” (Secor, 12). Yet, however Montagu may see the Turkish women with an aesthetic eye, her comparison of Turkish women to works of art nevertheless “casts them as objects, rather than subjects” (34–35). Bohls continues, Montagu’s “apparent concern to present ‘Oriental’ women as peers of Europeans is partially undercut by her aesthetic strategy. Blocking their portrayal as erotic objects, she renders them instead as another kind of object—aesthetic objects to her own aesthetic subject” (39–40).

As an aesthetic subject, was Montagu a voyeur? I asked students to consider whether her form of engagement stopped in the act of looking. Did she just stand back and look appreciatively and longingly? Or was her engagement a more active one? Students noted her role as a participant. I brought
in Mary Jo Kietzman, who redefines aesthetic appreciation to include participation. Kietzman’s argument is that, as a participant, Montagu offers us a new way of seeing, a new epistemology. In her role of a participant, Montagu does not foreground her own powers of creation, but rather the scene itself. Indeed, Kietzman writes, one of the most basic assumptions that Montagu challenged was the very epistemology of aesthetics. Montagu was empowered to make this challenge by entering women’s spaces, such as the bath or harem, where she feels more like a participant than a voyeur. She “stands back to allow the ‘objects’ of her gaze, as well as the atmosphere and subtle action within the spaces she describes, to occupy the readers’ attention” (Kietzman, 3–4).

One could also describe this kind of activity as that befitting an ethnographer. Apart from the one anthropology major, most students were not familiar with ethnography; we briefly clarified how ethnography is similar to what we would now call cultural anthropology, and enumerated how Montagu performed as an ethnographer. Rather than emphasizing her own responses and reactions, Montagu foregrounds the scenes that she witnesses, as we have seen above. When she can, she attempts to let the people she meets speak for themselves. When she is not aiming toward straight empirical reporting, she is often engaging in cultural relativism. Finally, in the spirit of contemporary anthropology, Montagu, to some extent, undergoes a transformation herself as a result of her intercultural contact. This question of self-transformation, however, takes us back to the central critique of Orientalism: the construction of the Western self in relation to the other. The class ended with a consideration of the question, what does it mean to engage with the other?

Montagu’s desire to give voice to the other is particularly evident in her several references to hair braiding in her visit to the Sophia baths; in the following passages, Montagu writes, the women were “only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or ribbon” (59). This braiding is performed by slaves, who, writes Montagu, “were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty manners” (59). Inge Boer describes in detail the way “[t]he braiding of hair can be analyzed as a means of communication, as something that women perform on each other in their own spaces” (61). Though, as Teresa Heffernan writes, the shifting balance of power meant that the “West assert[ed] its dominance by speaking for and producing a silenced Orient” (204), in the instance of this hair-braiding scene, as Boer insists, Montagu is attempting to let Turkish women speak for themselves.

Montagu strives to avoid judging another’s culture by her own standards. Instead, she “replaces the existing bias of a simple ethnocentrism in favor of
the observer’s culture with an eclectic relativism” (Aravamudan, 70–71). As an ethnographer, Montagu strives to adhere to a central tenet of cultural relativism, examining “the culture only from within the culture itself” (Cooley, 9). For example, Montagu writes to Lady Bristol,

I know you’ll expect I should say something particular of that of the slaves, and you will imagine me half a Turk when I don’t speak of it with the same horror other Christians have done before me, but I cannot forbear applauding the humanity of the Turks to those creatures. They are never ill used and their slavery is in my opinion no worse than servitude all over the world. (130)

Even at the risk of becoming “half a Turk,” Montagu will not condemn the Turkish practice of keeping slaves, but, indeed, will rather defend it. Her willingness to assimilate is in keeping with her role as an ethnographer, which, as part of its methodology, can require some cultural immersion, and at the very least, an engagement with another culture. Montagu is delighted to submerge herself in Turkish culture; she is proud of wearing Turkish clothing—of “turning Turk.” Montagu’s adoption of Turkish dress symbolizes an internal alteration as well; she undergoes “the transformation of identity that occurs when an individual from one culture is psychically and physiologically absorbed into another” (Aravamudan, 71). If she could have, Montagu would have literally inoculated herself with Turkish culture—with a Turkish culture, namely a small dose of smallpox. Indeed, Montagu is famous for introducing the idea of a smallpox vaccine to England; she would not limit transformation to herself, but would become “patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England” (Montagu, 81).

For Montagu, Turkey is, at the very least, on a par with England: after she tells her sister that Turkish men are no more rakish than Englishmen, Montagu declares, “the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe” (72). Ultimately, we are all alike, and, additionally, as Montagu writes in the next citation, difference does not mean wrongness: “As to their morality or good conduct, I can say, like Harlequin, that ’tis just as ’tis with you, and the Turkish ladies don’t commit one sin the less for not being Christians” (71). Indeed, in the following example and elsewhere, Montagu praises Turkey over England, for its greater sense of justice; in this case, for its punishment of convicted liars. In England, liars are “triumphant criminals”; in Turkey, they “are burnt in the forehead with a hot iron.” Montagu writes, “I am also charmed with many points of the Turkish law, to our shame be it spoken, better designed and better executed than ours, particularly the punishment of convicted liars” (108).
However, as students pointed out, even as Montagu attempts to be a fair-minded, if not celebratory, ethnographer, she cannot altogether avoid the tropes of Orientalism. In the example cited immediately above, she is expressing her charm over a law that other travel writers would likely have regarded as brutal. In her preference for the justice of this law, she is countering her predecessors. However, her sheer reportage of the law certainly gives the reader pause. In another instance, Montagu declares,

these people are not so unpolished as we represent them. 'Tis true their magnificence is of a different taste from ours, and perhaps of a better. I am almost of opinion they have a right notion of life; while they consume it in music, gardens, wine and delicate eating, while we are tormenting our brains with some scheme of politics or studying some science to which we can never attain. . . . I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration that I had rather be a rich effendi with all his ignorance than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge. (142)

As vigorously as Montagu may assert her preference to be a “rich effendi,” she asserts, as Secor writes,

the veracity of another Orientalist trope: Orientals have an ignorant, sensual, hedonistic “notion of life,” while Europeans are represented by Sir Isaac Newton.

. . . Furthermore, her professed willingness to switch places is couched in terms of class, in that she sees the life of the “rich Effendi” (a title of respect) as the embodiment of this Oriental life of pleasure of which she dreams (8).

Critics, such as Meyda Yeğenoğlu, would insist that with the return to the focus on Western identity construction, we are returning to classic Orientalism. For Yeğenoğlu, the East remains a place in which a Westerner forges her or his identity. Yeğenoğlu writes, “[T]he ‘inner’ space of the Orient, . . . its women, . . . its harem, . . . is the very ground upon which [a Western woman’s] identity is anchored and founded” (93). Students noted that there seemed to be no way, according to Yeğenoğlu, for a Westerner to be in the East, or even to talk about the East, without being an “Orientalist.” Were all of us also Orientalists because we made the East the subject of our class? According to Yeğenoğlu, yes. Following Said, Yeğenoğlu defines Orientalism by its citationary quality. She argues that it is through the “citationary process” that Orientalism “anchors its hegemony” (91). For Yeğenoğlu,
the symbolic universe of Orientalism is not without any contradictions, displacements, or contestations. Orientalism establishes its unity despite the polymorphous nature of the texts that constitute it. The Orientalist universe, in its unity, is a multifarious or voluminous textuality, but these characteristics [. . . ] do not in any simple way constitute a subversive challenge to its power and unity. On the contrary, they enrich the Orientalist discourse. (81; original emphasis)

The students and I considered Yeğenoğlu’s insistence that Orientalism establishes its unity through its ubiquity. In her many references to earlier writers on Turkey,\textsuperscript{40} is Montagu offering a “subversive challenge to [Orientalism’s] power and unity,” or is she increasing the “multifarious or voluminous textuality” of the world of Orientalist discourse? Whether Montagu echoes the Orientalism of her forebears by, for example, exoticizing the other,\textsuperscript{41} or whether she tries to set the record straight by claiming, for example, that “these people are not so unpolished as we represent them” (142),\textsuperscript{42} is she being Orientalist either way? Is Montagu’s positive portrayal of Islam anti-Orientalist, or is she using Islam as a way to register her anti-Catholicism?\textsuperscript{43}

Other critics, however, define Orientalism less broadly. How is it possible to engage in intercultural contact without orientalizing? Engaging with the other—as one does in travel—and changing as a result of that engagement does not automatically turn one into an Orientalist, as several critics note,\textsuperscript{44} including Mary Jo Kietzman, who, along with Secor and Aravamudan, define Orientalism more narrowly than Yeğenoğlu. For Kietzman, Orientalism specifically involves fixing the other. Kietzman argues for another metaphor of exchange besides one based on fixity; hers is based on equality and mutuality. As she writes that the “paradigm of colonizing subject and objectified Other” (Kietzman, 1) is an Orientalist one, she implies that another paradigm, such as hers, which emphasizes fluidity, is not. For Kietzman, the dislocation effected by travel produces a “contingent and circumscribed” (1) set of responses that in turn constitute identity. When identity is cross-culturally constituted it is inherently unstable and hybrid (5–6). Secor describes “intercultural contact” as a negotiating one, ultimately serving to “create the ‘domestic subject’” (2; the phrase “domestic self” is from Mary Louise Pratt). For Aravamudan, the subject is performatively dispersed “into several identificatory positions. The subject inhabits the position of both desiring subject and object, thereby reconfiguring itself” (69). Thus, we see how Kietzman, with her emphasis on fluidity and hybridity; Secor, with hers on negotiation; and Aravamudan, with his on multiple identification, including identification with the desired object—all characterize Montagu’s cultural confrontation as flexible to some degree. These critics read reciprocity in
Montagu’s cultural encounters. For them, her Letters represent “moments of cultural confrontation in which self and Other do not remain fixed in polarized positions but are rewritten through discursive and social interaction” (Kietzman, 2).

When students initially read The Turkish Embassy Letters, they like them for their protagonist and hero Lady Montagu herself. They, like many readers of travel writing, particularly epistolary travel writing, become swept up in her point of view, and are drawn to her sympathetic representation of the Turks whom she meets. Certainly, as instructors, we want to encourage students to enter into others’ perspectives. At the same time, in a class on Orientalism, we want students to challenge those perspectives as well. In critiquing Montagu’s worldview, they will become more aware of their own. In understanding her identity as a shifting, variable, and complex construct, they will come to realize that identity itself is fluid and overdetermined. If we, as instructors, can show our students how The Turkish Embassy Letters are a “Turkish Tale” of a Westerner who constitutes herself in relation to the East, we can help them both to appreciate Montagu’s artistry and her insights, and to understand the ideological underpinnings of Orientalism.

NOTES

1. “Those readers who documented their reactions were, themselves, travel-writers, who in their own turn, described the harem. And in the alternative system of information about and interpretation of the Middle East, the ‘Embassy Letters’ acquired a status and authority comparable with those of Galland’s Nights, in the more traditional discourse” (Melman, 82).

2. In addition to the sources cited in this essay, other important works on The Turkish Embassy Letters include Cynthia Lowenthal, “The Veil of Romance: Lady Mary’s Embassy Letters,” 66–82; Felicity Nussbaum, Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives; Robert Halsband, ed., The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; and Isobel Grundy, “‘Trash, Trumpery, and Idle Time’: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Fiction,” 293–310.

3. “The Turkish Embassy Letters has remained continuously in print since its publication, and Lady Mary’s letter to her sister in which she extols the liberty of Turkish women has become a staple in anthologies of women’s travel writing” (Secor, 4–5).

4. I taught The Turkish Embassy Letters in an upper-division English Department Special Topics course, The Middle East and West in Literature.

5. The other terms did not come into use until the following century.

6. Writes Kevin Gardner, “Lady Mary, rarely stooping, as it were, to the business of producing literature in the standard genres, and likewise unfettered by the rigorous
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demands of writing ‘true’ history, found the letter to be the perfect medium for expressing [her] creativity” (2). See also Chung, who writes that the Letters “need to be read accurately as the consequence of aristocratic birth and education, yet Montagu used her semiotic inheritances resourcefully for the purposes of anti-patriarchal feminist critique” (Chung, 119).

7. See Kevin Gardner’s “The Aesthetics of Intimacy: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Her Readers” for a discussion of epistolary quality of The Turkish Embassy Letters and the effect of this genre of Montagu’s contemporary readers and on her twenty-first-century readers.

8. See also Lowe, 49.

9. See Aravamudan, who writes, “The incompetence of previous writers on Turkey—all of them male—is a result of their lack of access to the information they pretend to have garnered, and their naïve repetition of second-hand fantastical accounts received from unreliable informants. Montagu’s criticisms are obviously intended to demonstrate her superior erudition, contemporaneity, and novelty. Along with the emphasis laid on this being a first-hand female account, it is not difficult to discern a healthy tone of one-upwomanship” (74). Bohls would add that for Montagu, men “are the truly superficial travelers” (25).

10. Melman dates “the female literature on the harem from 1763, the year of the posthumous publication of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s famous Turkish Embassy Letters” (78). She argues that “Lady Montagu’s letters, in short, may be appropriately designated a key text, the corner-stone in the new, alternative discourse that developed in the West on the Middle East” (Melman, 78).

11. Such as Anna Secor, who writes that “Montagu’s life and letters are a testimony to her own tenacious quest for a personal sort of liberty, both intellectual and sensual in nature, which was difficult for her to achieve within the constraints of her society” (2).

12. See Wheatcroft, who, while praising Montagu for her “unequalled” testimony, also accuses her of, among other things, turning a blind eye to “manifest cruelties and injustice”: “The Ottomans whom Lady Mary met represented a society already changing, and one about to undergo even greater transformations. She largely ignored the manifest cruelties and injustice implicit in the system, but, as a corrective to the highly coloured or ill-willed imaginings of most male commentators, her testimony is unequalled. She wrote as the narrow opening-up to the Western world was beginning under Ahmet II” (219–20).

13. Melman writes, “The reliable representation of the private, becomes the litmus-test to the travellers’ credibility and his or her tolerance towards the more public areas of life: the government, the administration, economy and public (as against private) religion” (84).

14. And a discourse on feminist aesthetics, as will be explained further below. For now, it is worth noting that, as Bohls writes, “The patriotic traveler (presumptively male) was expected to collect useful information for country and sovereign, to note geography and fortifications. But Montagu leaves such pursuits to ‘learned’ men and turns instead to pretty walks and fine prospects, the beauty of visible surfaces—in short, to aesthetics. She steps mock-apologetically into the position of the aesthetic subject” (25). Montagu judges the customs that she sees, such as sumptuary laws, “from an aesthetic perspective” (25).

15. “Montagu visualizes an inclusive women’s sphere at the bath, a gynaecium of unsselfconscious but interactive female nudity that she may be contrasting implicitly with
the exclusionary masculine preserve of the Greek gymnasium, whose masculine participants were also naked while demonstrating their athletic prowess” (82).

16. “[S]tripping the women of clothes levels by stripping them of rank” (Cooley, 12).

17. Yeazell also calls this fantasy a “dream of cosmopolitanism.” She elaborates: “[P]erhaps the most exhilarating aspect of travel was the prospect of belonging wholly to no country—of wandering at liberty through the world, free to pick and choose one’s ‘customs’ at will” (123). See Kietzman, who finds this reading belittling (6).

18. According to Jurgen Habermas, in 1710, there were three thousand coffeehouses in London alone (32). They became a fad in Turkey as well, until they were shut down “as notorious centres of unrest” (Goodwin, 247). Other critics, including Aravamudan, note that “the bathhouse is the Turkish woman’s riposte to the Englishman’s coffee house. . . . This Turkish bagnio perhaps simulates the Habermasian sphere of the development of communicative freedom” (81–82).

19. Or skirt; see Chung.

20. Teresa Heffernan writes that Montagu’s refusal to open her stays “interrupts the binary of veiled and unveiled, the slave and the free woman, religion and reason, which structures the travel accounts of her predecessors. Lady Mary’s undressing or unveiling does not naively assume an unfettered freedom but rather displays a gendered social order that underlies the very rhetoric of Western freedom” (211). Aravamudan considers another interrupted binary; he notes that Montagu, in full dress, is caught between the “dignified and ridiculous” (83).

21. Sanjukta Ghosh recently delivered a harsh denunciation of white liberal feminists for associating the veil with oppression.

22. As Bohls points out, Montagu objects to women turning themselves into aesthetic objects; “the mincing Saxon beauties [whom Montagu had met earlier, and whom she characterizes as dolled-up objects] seem to warn Montagu that her position as an aesthetic subject is a compromised prerogative” (27).

23. Anna Secor connects this class-bound rhetoric to Montagu’s refutation of earlier writers on Turkey, whom Secor refers to here as Orientalists: “both the Orientalists themselves and the people of whom they write are of the lower classes, and therefore not able to authentically represent or be representative of Oriental culture” (11).

24. “Montagu’s identification with the wives and mistress of Turkish dignitaries also makes use of the existing discourse of class distinction, and an established identity of aristocratic privilege across cultures” (Lowe, 32).

25. Landry addresses the significance of Lady Montagu on horseback. Her article, “Horsy and Persistently Queer: Imperialism, Feminism, Bestiality,” considers the way Montagu, among other British travelers to Turkey, “becomes, by dint of being mounted on a horse, the embodiment of an imperial race, a warrior class, a nation destined for global superiority and far-flung rule. The horse represents an extension of the self, but nobler” (475). See also Lowe, who writes, “Just as Montagu’s Letters occasionally resonate with the dominant British orientalist discourse, so the social context that produces The Turkish Embassy Letters—the diplomatic presence of Montagu’s husband, Ambassador Wortley Montagu, in early-eighteenth-century Turkey—locates her text as part of England’s colonial discourse about Great Britain’s foreign commercial interests and colonies” (50–51). Critics of Orientalism focus, as students noted, on the way the West makes use of the knowledge derived from all these activities to construct its own identity. As Lisa Lowe writes, “[B]y figuring travelers in foreign lands encountering strange and disorient-
ing customs and practices, the trope of travel allegorized the problems of maintaining
cultural institutions amidst challenging othernesses, of establishing cultural standards
and norms in the context of heterogeneity and difference. . . . [T]he utopian geographic
expansion implied by travel literature addressed national anxieties about maintaining
hegemony in an age of rapidly changing boundaries and territories” (31).

26. Hunt’s “Racism, Imperialism, and the Traveler’s Gaze in Eighteenth-Century Eng-
land” explores the way the gaze was becoming, by the middle of the eighteenth century, a
middle-class one.

27. See also Secor, who writes, “[T]he scene is sexualized by the invisible male painter
because his mention reiterates the ‘forbidden’ nature of the space, and this prohibition is
itself linked through the discursive chains of Orientalism to the supposed sensual hedo-
nism of the women” (12).

28. According to Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Ingres took notes on the bath scene, not the
harem scene. However, that Ingres’s “first biographer could refer to Lady Mary’s letters
as themselves describing ‘les mœurs intérieures du harem’ [the best harem interior] sug-
gests just how easily such a fantasy may override the evidence” (116).

29. Additionally, as Lisa Lowe notes, “it appears that Montagu is able to articulate her
affection for Fatima only by means of the established literary tradition that exists for the
praise and regard of female beauty, a male tradition of courtly love poetry exemplified by
the sonnets of Shakespeare, Sidney, and Spenser” (48).

30. Certainly, elsewhere, we can see how Montagu desexualizes Turkish women by,
for example, declaiming against their constant state of pregnancy. For Montagu, bearing
a child every year of one’s life is not a sign of sexual proclivity, or even desirable fertility,
but rather, vanity (107). Kietzman regards this disagreement as a sign of respect: “While
the impulse to identify suggests a desire to find the common ground necessary for any
dialogue, disagreement is just as important—evidence that the participants take the sub-
ject of inquiry seriously?” (5).

31. See also Madeleine Dobie, who writes that the voyeurism of the Letters, “generated
by the absolute seclusion of women and reflecting male control, is in fact the locus of a
destabilization of the series of oppositions and power structures which initially seem to
govern the western depiction of oriental women” (“Embodying, “ 51).

32. The online journal Ethnography describes itself as “[b]ridging the chasm between
sociology and anthropology” (Ethnography).

33. Montagu makes other references; see also 70.

34. Boer goes on to explain the way that hair braiding does not just function as a
means of communication, but as a form of business (63), and “a part of a process of
production of knowledge, information, and pleasure” (64).

35. Students and I compared Montagu’s second visit with Fatima, wife of the vizier’s
second-in-command, with the first visit. In the first visit, Montagu spends a great deal
of time on physical description; in the second, however, she lets Fatima speak for herself.
See Kietzman, 4–5, for a good discussion on the way Montagu represents Fatima’s com-
plex subjectivity. See also Heffernan, who discusses the way Montagu avoids the trap of
Western feminism of speaking for the other, but rather learns how to speak to the other
(210).

36. She expressly announces to her sister, “I will try to awaken your gratitude by giv-
ing you a full and true relation of the novelties of this place, none of which would surprise
you more than a sight of my person, as I am now in my Turkish habit, though I believe
you would be of my opinion that ‘tis admirably becoming” (69).
37. She didn’t because she had already contracted smallpox, and been disfigured by it. However, she did have her son “engrafted” (81) when she was in Turkey.

38. But Montagu does arrive, of course, at greater degrees of success elsewhere in offsetting stereotypes about Turkish ferocity. She writes about a murder that had recently taken place: “One would imagine this defect in their government [in not typically investigating murders] should make such tragedies very frequent, yet they are extremely rare, which is enough to prove the people not naturally cruel, neither do I think in many other particulars they deserve the barbarous character we give them” (Letters, 136).

39. Writes Said, “Orientalism is after all a system for citing works and authors” (Orientalism, 23).

40. Including Paul Rycaut (62, 133, 138, 140), Jean Dumont (104), Richard Knolles (133), Aaron Hill (134), and George Sandys (145, 146).

41. See Secor, 7–8. Yeazell also notes the way Montagu shares “the common belief of the period that in traveling east she had traveled back in time as well” (114).

42. See Aravamudan, who writes that Montagu’s “travels appear as a tentative ideological step that levies ‘positive’ orientalist empiricism against the romantic and gothic extravagances more typical of eighteenth-century English orientalisms” (91).

43. Montagu makes her anti-Catholicism clear in passages such as the following where she refers to the “farce of relics”; in one instance, she writes, the Roman Catholics “have dressed up an image of our Saviour over the altar, in a fair full-bottomed wig, very well powdered” (9–10; see also Melman, 94).

44. See also Heffernan and Chung. Even Said noted, years after the publication of Orientalism, that his “book had the unfortunate effect of making it almost impossible to use the term ‘Orientalism’ in a neutral sense, so much had it become a term of abuse” (Afterword, 340).