Orientalism, by the recently and too early deceased Edward Said, has provoked debate ever since its publication twenty-five years ago. Considered a crucial turning point in the study of the Orient, the book has managed to attract ever new audiences in the course of time; audiences, perhaps, not imagined as such when the book was conceived. The present volume assesses what the aftermath of Orientalism might be, emphasizing the book’s relevance as an intellectual and political venture that branches out to and underscores urgent present-day concerns, and that enables new intersecting fields of inquiry.

Said’s book has alerted us to the “imaginative geography” in which Occident and Orient are separated; a separation, however, that is “less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production” (Said 2001: 199). Orientalism regulates cross-cultural encounters by means of three intertwined meanings. Firstly, Said identifies “anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient […] either in its specific or its general aspects, [as] an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (1979: 2). Secondly, and in a more general sense, Said defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). The third meaning focuses on Orientalism as a discourse dealing with the Orient, “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). It is precisely this third meaning, the idea of Orientalism as a discourse, that Young identifies as paramount to Orientalism’s stunning success (2001: 384).1

Unwittingly, the Western world responded to the attacks on New York and Washington of September 11, 2001 in a vein that corresponded to the different meanings of Orientalism. In the flurry of publications explaining, vilifying, and identifying the issues underlying the attacks, the imaginative geography separating
East and West became very visible. “The” Islam was condemned for its violent nature, considered to be an inherent quality of this religion, and Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* became the new explanatory manual for how essentially different the Judeo-Christian world was, and is, from the Islamic one. “Rescue” provided the framework within which the Western public was made to understand the war of retaliation fought in Afghanistan: “we” were there to “liberate” the Afghani’s from the Taliban regime with the added advantage of “liberating” the Afghani women, oppressed and miserable in their burqas as they were. This is not to say that the women of Afghanistan may not have been miserable, but to clarify the dichotomizing trend implemented by Western politicians to motivate and justify acts of violence.

In the case of the war in Afghanistan such violence was not limited to the Middle East and Afghanistan, but also surfaced in many forms in the US and Europe. The capture of civilians assumed to be terrorists, the limitations imposed on civil liberties, and the procedures in the camps in Guantanamo Bay all show how easily terrorists and Arab or Arab-looking persons can be equated. In a different, but no less prejudicial way, the American organization Campus Watch started its web site in September 2002, and holds *Orientalism* responsible “as a watershed polemic that equated modern Middle Eastern scholarship to racism, imperialism and ethnocentricity” (www.campus-watch.org). The web site also calls for the submission of “reports on Middle East-related scholarship, lectures, classes, demonstrations and other activities,” effectively asking students to turn in their professors (Levin). Fortunately, many academics have protested to the site and have asked to be added to their listing as an honorary member.

The war against Iraq of March 2003, as the next step in the retaliation against terrorism, is explained by many criticasters of US foreign policy as a means to control the second-largest oil reserves in the Middle East under the pretense of bringing democracy to Iraq and the region. Replacing Saddam Hussein by a ruling figure more to the liking of the US and Europe can be considered, in terms of Orientalism as defined by Said, in a similar cynical light: it belongs to a long history of intervention in the Middle East. What these examples of present-day politics show, is a continuous involvement, maintenance and repetition of the phenomenon of Orientalism in the policies and thought-patterns of the US and Europe.

 Apparently, even in a world in which geographical boundaries are continuously being crossed by migration, transnational financial traffic, electronic mail systems, and the Internet, the imaginative geography informing intercultural contacts remains a formidable obstacle. I consider an evaluation of the contemporary relevance of *Orientalism* necessary not because of its ability to do away with the effects of Orientalism in East-West relations. Rather, this volume asks what critical aftermath *Orientalism* has engendered, and where it may lead us, both politically and intellectually.