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Deleuze and Race and Middle East Studies

MAI AL-NAKIB

Deleuze and Race, the fine collection of essays edited by Arun Saldanha and Jason Michael Adams, opens with an insightful ‘Pre-face’ by Nick Nesbitt. Nesbitt begins by stating that

[t]he philosophy of Gilles Deleuze continues to hold untold resources for those interested in the critique of racism, colonialism and neocolonial late capitalism. Deleuze allows us to think more fully, more richly, more powerfully about a series of related problems including race, emancipation and decolonisation.¹

The essays in the collection utilise many of these rich resources, bringing a number of Deleuzian concepts to bear on the problematics of race. The collection represents a wide range of applications—from colour-blind colonialism in Hawai‘i (pp 113–123) to Michael Jackson, King of Pop, as a condition of possibility for Obama, King of State (pp 168–189)—and provides exciting examples of what Deleuze and Guattari’s work can continue to do to challenge orthodoxies of identity. Nesbitt concludes his short piece by reminding readers what is at stake in all this:

To think with Deleuze the destruction of racial identity, of law, of subjection, and to trace and follow through the immanent lines of flight from those various regimes is in this sense to unfold the extraordinary potentiality of any pure difference/tiation and becoming beyond the actual state of our human, all-too-human, racialized being (p 5).

Each of the essays in the collection unfolds this potentiality to great effect.

The collection is introduced by Saldanha’s lucid essay, ‘Bastard and Mixed-Blood are the True Names of Race’. Saldanha convincingly argues that Deleuze and Guattari offer ‘an affirmative kind of antiracism quite different from the liberal-democratic kinds prevalent today’ (p 9). Instead of an opposition to racism in the name of cosmopolitanism or universalism or whatever else—the familiar dialectical sublation—Saldanha’s version of antiracism involves supplementing Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of bastardization and crossbreeding with Sylvain Lazarus’s ‘anthropology of the name’ (pp 9, 23, 25). Deleuze and Guattari state that ‘[b]astard and mixed-blood are the true names of race’—which is to say, the difference-in-itself of race is always in excess of the racist efforts to order, stratify, and purify it (p 17).² Such excesses or ‘probe-heads’ of race are potentially disruptive to the status quo; but in order to make these disruptions politically viable, they must be named (p 19). Nomination, in this instance, does not have to equate inevitably with molarization, as Deleuze and Guattari feared. According

to Lazarus, naming is the start of political thinking. As Saldanha explains, the words used to name such disruptions or ruptures ‘exist outside what is acceptable and cannot represent identities, but literally bring to being that which *will have been* unified’ (p 24). ‘Bastard’, for example, is a non-identic, antiracist, minoritarian name that can upset the patriarchal codes of ‘possession, heteronormativity and paternalism’, along with the various forms of colonial, racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies such codes maintain (pp 26–27). Similarly, ‘Mixed-Blood’ describes the ‘unclassifiability of a human body, a life’, despite the often violent and racist attempts to proclaim otherwise. Bastardization (the process of becoming-bastard) and cross breeding (the process of becoming-mixed-blood) are always and everywhere underway, though, as Saldanha ominously concludes, they express ‘a revolutionary universality that biopolitical capitalism does not want you to know’ (p 29).

As a scholar whose focus is on Middle East cultural politics, my attention was immediately drawn to three compelling points Saldanha makes in passing. In the first instance, Saldanha mentions the revolutionary events that occurred in Egypt’s Tahrir Square in early 2011 (at this point, commonly named and recognised as part of the ‘Arab Spring’). For Deleuze and Guattari, in contrast to Lazarus and Badiou, naming this moment of ‘infinitezation’ (of becoming-other to the status quo) would ‘sabotage its multiplicitous desires for change’ (p 25). To name the molecularization of desires and proliferation of affects that composed the events that occurred in Tahrir Square ‘Arab Spring’ or ‘communist’ or ‘Islamist’ or ‘secular’, or whatever else, homogenises the infinitezation of which these desires and affects were (and still are) capable. That the current political, social, and economic situation in Egypt is not necessarily the outcome that many of those demonstrating against dictatorship and corruption in 2011 might have anticipated is a sobering caution against naming too soon. Saldanha states that ‘[w]here Lazarus and Badiou trust the thought that political subjects deliver to the philosopher, Deleuze and Guattari are supremely attuned to the microfascism lurking in every subjectivity’ (p 25). Given the turn of events in Egypt since 2011, Deleuze and Guattari’s concerns would seem highly apposite.

The second and third references to the Middle East in Saldanha’s introduction have to do with Deleuze’s stance against the exceptionalization of racism toward any one identic group (in the name of antiracism). Jews are not exceptional despite the Holocaust. Palestinians are not exceptional despite Israel. Native Americans are not exceptional despite the United States. The United States is not exceptional despite 9/11. In short, the struggle against racism is unexceptional and must be considered as such. The minute racism is given exceptional status—as has been the case with Israel since at least 1948 and the US at least since 9/11 (in both cases, exceptionalism can be traced much further back)—it sanctions the most obscene forms of violence against others. Saldanha quotes Deleuze on the Palestinians: ‘[Palestinians] want to become what they are, that is, a people with an “unexceptional” status’ (p 26).³ It is only as such that Palestinians can become other than what they have been forced into being by the establishment of the state of Israel and the proclaimed exceptionalism of anti-Semitism—that is, for the moment, Palestinians can only be ‘invisible’, ‘enemies’, ‘terrorists’, ‘victims’, ‘oppressed’, ‘fida’iyyin’, ‘martyrs’, etc.). Only by becoming-unexceptional can the current

status of Palestinians (or Jews or Americans, for that matter) become something other than it is—perhaps something unexpectedly good (in Spinoza’s ethical sense). Never has this insight regarding racism and antiracism been more relevant in terms of the Middle East than at present—with sectarianism, neocolonialism, and settler colonialism, each in their specific ways, utilizing exceptionalism to their own advantage, regardless of the violent outcome to those who happen to fall beyond the identic line.

Saldanha’s brief links between Deleuze and Guattari’s insights regarding antiracism, on the one hand, and key issues in the Middle East, on the other, suggests that he is acutely aware of the relevance of rethinking race to what is arguably the early twenty-first century’s most racially fraught region. Unfortunately, however, the collection itself does not develop this intriguing conjunction much further. Apart from a fine essay by Laura Marks on the early Islamic sources of some of Deleuze’s concepts, and a few mentions of the region in an essay by Brianne Gallagher on the construction of the ‘US soldier-body’, the collection does not include any essays on race/racism in relation to Arabs, Persians, Muslims, the Middle East, Arabs and/or Muslims in diaspora, etc. This is a rather conspicuous omission given 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Guantanamo, Abu-Ghraib, the Arab Spring, the rhetoric of terror and terrorism that continues to dominate US foreign policy and Israeli colonial policies, among other familiars. What accounts for this gap?

Given the progressive political impetus behind this collection—clearly a project that aims to unfold the complexities of race/racism in unexplored ways toward more ethical, antiracist outcomes—this gap has nothing whatsoever to do with the editors of the collection or the series as a whole. It has to do, instead, with the fact that scholars focused on the Middle East (regardless of discipline) rarely utilise Deleuze and Guattari in their research and analysis. This is the case both within the field of American Middle East studies as well as within the Arabic-speaking academy.⁴ The rest of this essay proposes some reasons for this current tendency within Middle East studies and how *Deleuze and Race* could help change this.⁵

In a short paragraph in Edward Said’s 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*, he remarks upon the ‘mysteriously suggestive’ quality of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁶ He mentions the nomadic aspect of the war machine and its metallurgical powers.⁷ It seems unusual that within the field of American Middle East studies—where Said’s work has had such transvaluative effects—his hunch about Deleuze and Guattari’s relevance has not been followed up. Based on recent presentations at the annual US-based Middle East Studies Association (MESA) conference, as well as articles published in the Association’s *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, it’s fair to say that Deleuze and Guattari have not had the kind of impact on the field that they have had on almost all others in the last three decades.

While the genealogy and ideology of American Middle East studies can be traced to traditional European Orientalism, the two cannot be conflated. As Said suggests, the rise of American Middle East studies ‘can be dated roughly from the period immediately following World War II, when the United States found itself in the position recently vacated by Britain and France’.⁸ MESA was

founded in 1967 as a professional association of scholars from different disciplines focused on the region. In *Orientalism*, Said highlights the confluence between government and corporate interests and the scholarly ‘expertise’ of MESA members.⁹ In its early manifestation, MESA was ‘aligned with and often staffed by mainline academics, oil company executives, governmental consultants and employees’.¹⁰ Today, MESA is not the politically conservative organization it once was, nor is the field of Middle East studies itself. Said’s groundbreaking critique of Orientalism was, in large part, responsible for this shift. Said accurately links the sea change within MESA to the broader shift in worldwide ‘cultural opposition to Western domination’.¹¹ But the coincidence of dates—that is, the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978 and the transformation of MESA’s practices in the 1980s—underscores Said’s own indispensable role.

If pre-Saidian American Middle East studies was characterised by Orientalist ideology, Saidian Middle East studies prominently featured, and continues to feature, Foucault. This is no surprise given Said’s key role in introducing Foucault to the American academy. But I would suggest that temporally, the lines of transformation of American literary, cultural, ethnic, minority, and postcolonial studies, on the one hand, and American Middle East studies, on the other, do not run parallel. The disjuncture between the two lines can help explain in part why American Middle East studies today remains Foucauldian, while other fields influenced by Said have moved in different directions.

In the early 1980s through the 1990s, American literary and cultural studies followed Said’s lead in turning to Foucault’s theories as a means to engage cultural politics.¹² The emergence of postcolonial studies as an academic specialization in the early 1980s in the US also coincided with the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*, and the text can be identified as key to the field’s poststructuralist and initially Foucauldian bent. But before Said’s Foucauldian influence in the early 1980s, American universities were already undergoing transformation as a result of the liberationist aspirations of minority movements and activism of the 1960s. The first department of Black studies was founded in 1969 as a result. In contrast, the rise of Middle East studies programs in the US began earlier, soon after World War II, in parallel with the shift in imperial power. In the 1960s and 1970s, while minority studies departments were developing in opposition to the status quo, Middle East studies departments remained aligned with it. The progressive shift within Middle East studies did not occur until the early 1980s, *after and not during* the liberationist, grassroots efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. So Middle East studies was affected later than most other area studies. If through the 1960s and 1970s Middle East studies remained Orientalist while comparable fields were becoming oppositional, antiracist, and more historicist, the 1980s and 1990s were the liberationist, oppositional, progressive decades for Middle East studies, during which time comparable fields turned toward Foucault.

Why this lag, despite the fact that the last third of Said’s 1978 book was aimed directly at practices within American Middle East studies departments? In fact, Said himself provides a possible clue. He states:

One of the striking aspects of the new American social-science attention to the Orient is its singular avoidance of literature. [...] What seem to matter far more to the regional expert are ‘facts’, of

which a literary text is perhaps a disturber. The net effect of this remarkable omission in modern American awareness of the Arab or Islamic Orient is to keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated, reduced to ‘attitudes’, ‘trends’, statistics: in short, dehumanized.¹³

In contrast to other minority studies departments and English and comparative literature departments, for which the inclusion of previously excluded literary and cultural production was a fundamental component of the transformative process, American Middle East studies departments tended to sideline literature. This is one of the reasons why changes affecting other fields within the humanities (more Foucauldian, more poststructuralist, more cultural materialist) came later to a more social sciences-oriented Middle East studies. Foucault does not become influential within certain areas of American Middle East studies until the 2000s, and Foucault remains the go-to theorist in Middle East studies today. In contrast, within the humanities and beyond, research methods and conceptual references have undergone many changes since Foucault’s heyday in the 1980s and 1990s; a turn toward Deleuze and Guattari marks one such prominent shift.

Furthermore, while most area and minority studies and literary and cultural studies departments have tended toward interdisciplinarity, the disciplinary lines within Middle East studies remain rigid (despite the fact that it is a multi-disciplinary field). This rigidity precludes, or at least delays, the kind of spill overs that would open up Middle East studies to the Deleuzian work occurring across so many other fields, within literary and cultural studies not least of all. And since even today—over three decades after Said commented on the paucity of literature within American Middle East studies—literary and cultural studies remain tangential to Middle East studies as a field, a Deleuzian turn may be far off.

Unfortunately, for the reasons outlined above, it seems unlikely that scholars within the field of American Middle East studies will pick up *Deleuze and Race*. However, if they were to do so, they would find a series of case studies of race, racism, and antiracism analyzed from an unconsidered Deleuzian perspective that could prove indispensable to many of the problematics of theorizing racialised divisions both within the Middle East and in relation to it. Laura Mark’s essay, ‘A Deleuzian *Ijtihad*: Unfolding Deleuze’s Islamic Sources Occulted in the Ethnic Cleansing of Spain’—as mentioned, the only essay in the collection that deals entirely with the Middle East—traces the eighth-century Muslim roots of Deleuze’s conceptions of the univocity of being, the virtual, and becoming (p 52). Marks’s essay provides a model for scholars interested in exploring the unconsidered links between Deleuze and Islamic philosophy and culture, demonstrating that the relevance of Deleuze to Middle East studies is not as far-fetched as it might at first appear. Brianne Gallagher analyses ‘the US *soldier-body* as a productive site of knowledge and power in contemporary state apparatuses, war machines and faciality machines’ (pp 144–145). She mentions the explicit link between this masculinist and racializing formation of the body in contrast to the Iraqi, Afghani, and Palestinian bodies racialised by it, though it is not the main focus of her essay (pp 154–155, 160, 163). This convincing conceptualization of the US soldier-body could be compared to the related production of other soldier-bodies in the Middle East—including the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldier-body and the Da‘esh soldier-body, among others.

While the other essays in the collection do not deal explicitly with the Middle East, each provides some concept or example that could be considered in a myriad of effective ways in relation to the Middle East. For example, Simone Bignall utilises Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'faciality' to argue that 'the politics of becoming associated with dismantling the face describes a strategy for combating racist power relations and transforming racist structures of signification' (p 73). The insights derived from Bignall's compelling analysis of the 2004 Palm Island riot in Australia could be used to unpack any number of recent oppressions in the Middle East—from the derailing of the event of Tahrir Square to Israel's decimation of Gaza in the summer of 2014. Suzana Milevska and Arun Saldanha's essay on East European racism—considered through the lens of a Nietzschean–Deleuzian conception of difference and repetition—provides numerous insights that could be used to illuminate the rise of sectarianism in the region (and attendant reactionary claims to purity and authenticity). John Drabinski's moving reading of the great Édouard Glissant as Deleuzian *par excellence* provides compelling points of entry for any scholar involved in the study of the Middle East. He writes,

After disaster, and even in the midst of disaster, there is life. In that life, fragments grow roots, and yet never depend on fantasies of a single source of vitality, whether that be the spiritual *something* of an ancestral land or the raciological foundations of the nation-state. (p 288)

Both Deleuze and Glissant take seriously the productive potentiality of such fragments, such rhizomes, and Glissant has eloquently theorised these and other Deleuzian concepts in relation to the Caribbean and towards a Caribbean 'poetics of relation' (p 298). How these concepts might figure in the context of a Middle East embroiled in one disaster after another and in relation to Arabic poetics, we have yet to consider.

Deleuze and Race is an impeccable and enriching collection of essays, articulating questions of race, racism, and antiracism from a uniquely Deleuzian perspective. It puts to work a wide range of previously unconsidered concepts in order to rethink familiar questions and concerns, to offer new methods of analysis, and to provide alternative ways out of entrenched problems. The case studies included are informative and varied and, for scholars working in areas not included in the collection, it provides an excellent starting point upon which to build. Scholars within the field of Middle East studies in particular would stand to gain a great deal by turning to this collection for theoretical and practical insights. It stands as a persuasive example of what Deleuze and Guattari can still do within area studies.

Notes

- ¹ Arun Saldanha and Jason Michael Adams (eds), *Deleuze and Race*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, p 1. Until otherwise indicated, all references are to this work, and are given as page numbers in parentheses in the text.
- ² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi (trans), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p 379.
- ³ Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, David Lapoujade (ed), Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (trans), New York: Semiotext(e), 2006, pp 199–200.

- ⁴ Due to the restrictions of space, a thorough analysis of the reasons for this lack of engagement with Deleuze within the Arabic-speaking academy must be left out. In brief, it may have to do with a lack of availability of both primary and, especially, secondary texts in translation; a lack of tolerance for politicised criticism within public universities in the region; a lack of interdisciplinarity at public universities; among other factors. Despite these obstacles, there has been a small increase in Arabic writing on Deleuze in recent years, both on reputable websites and in well-respected Arabic-language academic journals. Most of these articles are short summaries of Deleuze's philosophical thought—the majority focus on philosophy, a few address politics, even fewer engage literature and culture. While such contributions are by no means seismic, they are intriguing and encouraging. At the very least, they signal some kind of virtual Deleuze-becoming in the Middle East; a leaning that may or may not actualise into something more definitive.
- ⁵ Again in the interest of brevity, I focus here on American Middle East studies (although, because the Middle East Studies Association and its journal, published by Cambridge University Press, are international in membership and scope, what I suggest here with regards to Deleuze and American Middle East studies may apply beyond the US).
- ⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage, 1994, p 331.
- ⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p 332.
- ⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1978, p 290.
- ⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p 291.
- ¹⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, pp 260–261.
- ¹¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p 261.
- ¹² Paul Trembath, 'Orbiting Planet Foucault', in Jeffrey Williams (ed), *The Institution of Literature*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp 43–59, p 45. See also, Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, pp 102–103.
- ¹³ Said, *Orientalism*, p 291.