

AFTERWORD: CRITICAL COMPANIONSHIPS, URGENT AFFILIATIONS

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be a scholar of ‘the postcolonial Middle East’? As this volume has demonstrated, it means, in part, to belong to a resilient but often unrecognised community of scholars who have long been operating – sometimes in dialogue, sometimes discreetly – across disciplines, languages, historical periods, cultural contexts, modes of expression and critical paradigms. Collectively, these scholars have moved according to the broadly shared goal of offering critical insight into the richly varied social, cultural and political articulations that circulate around the complex legacies and recurrences of colonial and imperial power within a region whose nations and cultures have found themselves, for better or worse, placed in implicit dialogue. That much of this scholarly work has taken place on the disciplinary margins, without the explicit validation of the predominantly Anglophone postcolonial academy and sometimes facing tangible opposition, is testament to the resolution of those who choose to work within the field. By giving name to this discourse, then, this volume – the first to present ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ as an interdisciplinary sub-field in its own right – has sought to produce an empowering critical position that simultaneously nurtures heterogeneity, incites debate and offers scholarly solidarity.

When thinking about the distinctive scholarly formation that emerges from this understanding of ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ not as a geographically defined region but as a site of scholarly debate, it is perhaps no accident that we find an earlier echo of this model in the work of Edward Said: a figure whose own interdisciplinary and critical resistance to ‘membership’ within the field of the canonical ‘postcolonial’ in many ways presents him as an exemplar of the more nuanced and heterogeneous range of positionalities encompassed by ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ as a discursive formation.¹ For Said, the concept of ‘affiliation’ described the plethora of cultural, social and political connections assumed by texts and individuals alike: fluidly and flexibly produced bonds that tie us to real-world realities. Similarly, it is possible to characterise ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ as a discursive field produced through the alterable and ever-proliferating networks of cultural, social and political affiliations shared by scholars operating within/across it. Yet these scholarly affiliations are marked by more than simply critical companionship. Rather, they bear the deeply politicised and material hallmarks of Said’s understanding of affiliation, which, as he reminds us, presents ‘the world of ideas and scholarship on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force on the other’² as inextricably bound to one another, and thus marks their shared scholarly endeavours as a matter

of responsibility, and of urgency. Indeed, the ‘worldly’ context that frames the production of this essay collection itself presents a stark indication of its inherent timeliness. As we write (in December 2017), the ‘ghosts of empire’³ identified by Rashid Khalidi continue to haunt a number of nations within the region, notably Syria and Iraq as sites of ongoing conflict and violence, but have made a fresh appearance in the context of US-Israeli/Palestinian relations. In a quite spectacular manifestation of imperialist repetition, current US President Donald Trump has this month declared his intention to relocate the US Embassy to Jerusalem, in a move that not only sparks renewed antagonism between Israel and Palestine, but also seems intent on derailing diplomatic relations between the US and key Arab regional players.⁴ In a telling triangulation of history, this event falls in the same year as both the one-hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the seventieth anniversary of the 1948 *Nakba*. With this sense of colonial connectedness in mind, the Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi has responded not simply with condemnation, but with a direct appeal for what might be termed ‘postcolonial’ solidarity in the face of such careless use of power:

Former European powers, including Britain, now claim they are aware of their colonial legacy, and condemn centuries of enslavement and the savage exploitation of Africa and Asia. So European leaders should first name the relentless process they installed in our country, and stand with us so we can unite to defeat it.⁵

Here, Nabulsi calls for discursive recognition of coloniality within the context of the Middle East – not simply by those within the region, who have long recognised it as such, but by all those implicated in what this volume identifies as the complex ‘post/colonial’ geographies of former colonial and imperial powers. Nabulsi’s call for post/colonial self-recognition is rightfully urgent, and reminds us of the real-world consequences of our identification and commitment as postcolonial scholars – particularly those operating from varied positions within the global ‘North’. Within this volume – notably within the editors’ Introduction, and in chapters by Karim Mattar, Salah Hassan, Anna Bernard and Anastasia Valassopoulos – we have also enacted Nabulsi’s call for self-recognition by ‘naming’ Palestine, in the words of Anna Bernard, as ‘the quintessential site of contemporary colonialism’.⁶ Yet the act of tracing colonialism’s complex legacies throughout the region also constitutes a radical act of recognition and solidarity in itself, and thus extends beyond the essays focused specifically on Palestine. In this, it is possible to suggest that present-day Palestine alerts us to the wider construction of what Barbara Harlow termed the ‘new geographies of struggle’ in operation across ‘the postcolonial Middle East’. These geographies are, for Harlow, defined by ‘struggle . . . for popular liberation and truth in the telling [which] engages new political commitments . . . and new territories of critical enquiry’.⁷ It is wholly appropriate that this trope should find its afterlife within this volume – for Harlow was herself slated to contribute an essay to this collection, entitled ‘UNSC 242 (1967) and the Colonial Present: Negotiating the “Right of Return” in Palestinian Fiction’ – but was prevented from doing so by her tragic death in January 2017. That a spirit of resistive urgency and a commitment to ‘truth in the telling’ therefore emerges out of the volume’s collective work is fitting testimony to Harlow’s own inspiring legacy within the field.

What, then, are the core insights that we might glean from this investigation of ‘the postcolonial Middle East’, as both imagined geography and discursive field?

A key observation is the simultaneously tenuous and resilient nature of 'the Middle East' as construct. In regional terms, 'the Middle East' undoubtedly emerges as a fiction bearing colonial authorship, and its limiting, binarised and exclusionary nature as an imagined geography is both brought into focus and subjected to extensive critique within a number of chapters – notably those by Juan Cole and Stephen Morton in Part I. While far from exhaustive, the varied historical and geographical contexts covered within the volume – which range from nineteenth-century Euro-Orientalist discourses of 'the Arab' and 'the Jew' (Ella Shohat), to the twenty-first-century Iranian 'blogosphere' (Laetitia Nanquette) – also expose a plethora of diverse cultural identities and expressive modes that radically contest any notion of a bounded regionality. Indeed, as Anna Ball's essay suggests, refugee and migrant population flows, and their accompanying ethical challenges to Orientalist imaginaries, are increasingly challenging the very possibility of exclusionary 'Western' self-differentiation from an identifiable 'Middle East'.

And yet – it remains clear that the construct of 'the Middle East' continues to hold political, journalistic, scholarly and cultural currency, and this, along with its recurring identification as a (shifting and subjective) site of Western colonial and imperial intervention, means it becomes a resistive mode of identification, as well as a vehicle for vital dialogue and critique. We see this in the way that a broadly and fluidly defined working mode of 'the postcolonial' reveals multiple forms of intersection, interaction and parallelism in cross-regional contexts – in practices of resistance and protest, as they reverberate across nations in chapters by Bernard, Caroline Rooney and miriam cooke; in manifestations of state and non-state-sponsored terrorism, as evidenced in chapters by S. Hassan, Sadia Abbas and Ikram Masmoudi; and, as the author Ahdaf Soueif indicates in her interview, in many of the underpinning incentives that drive creative production within contexts of political urgency and struggle. It is also clear that many of these dialogues are not simply cross-cultural or cross-regional, but also historical. As Morton's analysis of colonial violence as both specific to British rule in Egypt and as an enduring after-effect within the 'postcolonial' era suggests,⁸ the 'postcolonial' – or, indeed, 'post/colonial' – 'Middle East' is perhaps characterised above all by deep-rooted, connected and non-chronological temporalities of the colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial in simultaneous operation, spanning geographical locales. These dialogic temporalities are not simply characterised by recurring cycles of external military intervention, however. They also emerge through the evolving struggles over identity politics that have come to forge such a productive strand of cultural debate – whether in relation to national, cultural and ideological/theological identifications (as evident in chapters by Shohat, Erdağ Göknaç, Réda Bensmaïa, Abbas and Tahia Abdel Nasser); modes of gendered and sexual identification (as explored in chapters by Marilyn Booth, Valassopoulos and Lindsey Moore); or, most recently, around the politics of life itself, as represented in discourses of the biopolitical (explored in chapters by Masmoudi and Ball). Here, then, we see that 'the Middle East' also comes to assume a meaningful postcolonial existence as a self-generated, self-aware discursive construct that emerges from its former colonial origins.

Given the volume's exploration of a field notorious for its own self-scrutiny, it is hardly surprising that a major strand of discussion within this volume has demonstrated a preoccupation with the nature of 'the postcolonial' itself. Here, Said's own notoriously ambivalent identification with postcolonial discourse (explored in Mattar's chapter within this

volume) predicts some of the anxieties and complexities that underpin cross-disciplinary working between postcolonial and Middle Eastern studies. Indeed, in chapters by Cole and Shohat, it becomes apparent that despite the ready applicability of familiar ‘postcolonial’ tropes such as the ‘subaltern’ and ‘Orientalism’ to Middle Eastern cultural contexts, these also require significant reworking and refining in order to operate in meaningful ways. Rather than succumbing to what Wail Hassan identifies as the apocalyptic ‘mortality rhetoric’ typical of self-reflexive postcolonial critique,⁹ however, these disciplinary encounters instead emerge as an enabling condition with radically decolonising possibilities for the scholarly institution itself. As Hassan puts it, considered postcolonial engagement with the ‘Middle East’

requires Middle East studies, [and] also Comparative Literature and postcolonial studies, to be re-centered and re-configured. It requires overcoming inertia, unlearning persistent habits of mind that divide the world between the West and the Rest, and restructuring programs and curricula. As for Arabic literary studies, it is no longer a question of ‘importing’ concepts, ‘applying’ new theories, or ‘inserting’ Arabic literature into pre-existing norms, but of critical rethinking that results from the confrontation of Arabic studies with those formations.¹⁰

It is possible to add to Hassan’s observations here that a further act of ‘unlearning’ must also take place within the analysis of cultural modes that are not simply textual but also filmic, artistic, graphic, digital, and indeed lived – for as this volume has demonstrated, these too articulate modes of post/coloniality, while asking challenging questions about how we read and communicate across languages and forms. In scholarly and discursive terms, then, the implications of ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ are profound, and invite us not simply to turn to an expanded range of cultural contexts and outputs from across the disciplines, but to scrutinise the very positionalities of those inquiries with a view, ultimately, to contesting the modes of epistemic violence endemic to the academic institution itself.

With this spirit of interrogative positivity in mind, it is important to acknowledge some of the hurdles and untapped potentialities that we encountered during the compilation of this volume. Perhaps due to the very nature of the ‘postcolonial’ as a critical approach dedicated to addressing forms of injustice, it is possible to discern a tendency among scholars working at the forefront of the field to focus on contexts in ‘crisis’ or fighting against highly visible articulations of colonial and/or imperial activity. This volume has not sought an exhaustive survey of geographical contexts – but it is interesting to reflect that there remains the potential for further investigation of less readily visible sites of postcolonial complexity, with a view to establishing a more comprehensive picture of colonial and imperial legacies across the region. Here, for instance, Hamid Dabashi’s recent reflections on the ‘Imperial Threads’ exhibition in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar gesture towards some of the richly complex artistic and cultural interactions between Muslim, Ottoman and Mughal empires that have complex postcolonial stories to tell – as, indeed, does their curation within the context of a Gulf nation.¹¹ In conceptual terms, too, there is a wider post/colonial narrative to be forged around religious discourse. This volume goes some way towards initiating such discussions: Abbas’s finely observed chapter for this volume articulates many of the ways in which misappropriations of Islam come to be articulated through the mechanisms of a spectacular, image-obsessed global

capitalism, while Shohat's exceptional chapter explores and challenges the problematically binarised construction of Jewish and Muslim figures, in Christian and other discourses.¹² There are also, however, alternative versions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism within the region that remain to be articulated. While a number of edited collections have sought to instigate conversations on the subject of Islam and the postcolonial, it is notable that few of these investigations locate their analyses within the specific contexts of 'Middle Eastern' nations.¹³ It would be of particular interest to encounter analyses of this intersection emerging from within institutions located in such nations themselves – which, while sought for this volume, we were unable to identify – perhaps as a result of our own positionalities as scholars based in the UK and the US, bearing our own assumptions about the disciplinary locations in which such work might be sought, and indeed what is recognisable as 'postcolonial' discourse. These same institutional positionalities – along with the publication of this volume in an Anglophone book series – have also resulted in an inevitable leaning towards the discussion of multilingual work in English translation, though one which also reflects a much wider postcolonial trend – as analysed (and countered) by Moore in her own vital intervention on this subject, *Narrating Post-colonial Arab Nations*.¹⁴ While we have also actively sought to source contributions from scholars working within the region, it must also be recognised that our own institutional locations and indeed scholarly commitments within the UK and US have also encouraged us to represent the range of essential scholarship that has emerged from within the global 'North'. It would be interesting, however, to see how alternative versions of this volume might emerge from different institutional and regional positionalities, and we hope that scholars working within 'the Middle East' might engage one another, and their transnational contexts, in this task of forging competing narratives of the postcolonial. A challenge that we continue to face in our work as postcolonialists, then, is how to incite multi-linguistic, cross-regional dialogue that undoes Anglophone and Western privilege, while continuing to encourage vital self-reflexive engagement among students working in these contexts. Moore presents one productive model for this in her own chapter, where she advocates collaborative translation and investigation across cultural and linguistic positionalities. This surely has the potential to be extended in international, interdisciplinary scholarly practice, though it may also involve unlearning our own scholarly authority in the process – even forsaking the traditionally individualistic working practices that have dominated the Humanities.

If these challenges result in unavoidable aporias then it must also be noted that many new horizons become visible as we look to the future of scholarship on 'the postcolonial Middle East' beyond this volume. Over the past decade or so, the ever-fluidly defined field of the postcolonial has made a decisive turn towards newly critical understandings of the global, with a particular focus on the 'Anthropocene': a conceptualisation of planetary conditions as fundamentally (and often negatively) shaped by human beings.¹⁵ Perhaps particularly relevant here is the exciting sub-field of postcolonial work that has emerged on 'petroscapes' and 'petrofictions', which, in the words of Imre Szeman, seeks to draw

much needed attention to one of the key conditions of possibility of human social activity: a raw input – energy – whose significance and value are almost always passed over, even by those who insist on the importance of modes and forms of production for thinking about culture and literature.¹⁶

The potential for this work to elucidate the post/colonial function of one of the most precious and prolific resources within the ‘Middle East’ is tremendous; indeed, recent scholarly work by Amitav Ghosh, Peter Hitchcock and Rob Nixon has tested the concept in relation to work by Abdelrahman Munif.¹⁷ There is surely much scope for post/colonial scholarship on the ‘Middle East’ to turn its sights more deeply towards cultural articulations of the Anthropocene. Here, then, it is heartening to note the forthcoming publication of Hannah Boast’s analysis of ‘hydropolitics’ and ‘hydrofiction’ within the context of Palestinian and Israeli writing,¹⁸ and it will be interesting to see what other facets of the ecocritical might also reveal powerful post/colonial narratives. It is perhaps fitting that as we begin to look beyond our familiar discursive boundaries, we should engage in processes of turning both inwards and outwards, with a (re)turn to questions of the simultaneously elemental and planetary.

As a work committed to mobilising the best potentialities of postcolonial discourse, this volume has sought to incite dialogue, exchange and debate across regions, nations, institutions, disciplines, genres and languages, and in doing so, has identified ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ as a discursive territory that stretches far beyond, and indeed contests the very construction of, a bounded geographic locale. While this discussion has been necessitated by and thus has emerged out of the most noxious of political conditions, critical engagement with ‘the postcolonial Middle East’ must today be recognised as a site of recuperative potentiality from which we, as scholars across the disciplines, can ‘speak truth to power’. As the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye reminds us in words from her poem ‘Jerusalem’ – which might also be read as a vital counter-refrain to this year’s regressive political engagements with the region, and indeed as powerful ministrations to those of us seeking to counter such sentiments through informed and creative scholarly practice: ‘it’s late, but everything comes next’.¹⁹ So it is that the very complexity and heterogeneity of our companionships as scholars of ‘the postcolonial Middle East’, as well as our shared goals, will continue to yield freshly urgent and newly meaningful affiliations between text and world.

Notes

1. See the Introduction and Chapter 2 of this volume for further discussion of Said’s contribution to and relationship with ‘the postcolonial’ and ‘Middle East’.
2. Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 119.
3. The term is Rashid Khalidi’s, who charts a highly pertinent account of enduring imperial activity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).
4. Alexandra Wilts, ‘Donald Trump set to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and relocate US embassy’, *The Independent*, 6 December 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-jerusalem-israel-embassy-us-move-palestine-abbas-president-latest-news-updates-a8093361.html> (last accessed 3 January 2018), n.p.
5. Karma Nabulsi, ‘In Jerusalem we have the latest chapter in a century of colonialism’, *The Guardian*, 12 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/12/jerusalem-chapter-century-colonialism-donald-trump-intervention-palestine> (last accessed 20 December 2017), n.p.
6. See Anna Bernard, this volume, p. 000.

7. Barbara Harlow, *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 177.
8. See Stephen Morton, this volume, pp. 000–000.
9. See Wail S. Hassan, this volume, pp. 000–000.
10. See Wail S. Hassan, this volume, p. 000.
11. Hamid Dabashi, ‘What are the Saudis afraid of?’, *Al Jazeera*, 17 December 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/saudis-afraid-171217082544270.html> (last accessed 4 January 2018), n.p.
12. See Sadia Abbas and Ella Shohat, this volume, pp. 000–000, 000–000.
13. See, for instance, Esra Mirze Santesso and James McClung (eds), *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse: Purity and Hybridity* (London: Routledge, 2017). Works such as Sadia Abbas, *At Freedom’s Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) and Jaafar Aksikakas, *Arab Modernities: Islamism, Nationalism, and Liberalism in the Post-Colonial Arab World* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009) have made important in-roads in this field.
14. Lindsey Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations: Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 4.
15. Here, the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty has been foundational. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Enquiry*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 197–222.
16. Imre Szeman, ‘Literature and Energy Futures’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 126:2 (2011), pp. 323–5.
17. See Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Peter Hitchcock, ‘Oil in an American Imaginary’, *New Formations*, 69 (2010), pp. 81–97; and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
18. Hannah Boast, *Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).
19. Naomi Shihab Nye, ‘Jerusalem’, *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54296/jerusalem-56d2347ab7a20> (last accessed 27 January 2017), n.p.