

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

October 22, 2015

## *Of Shadows and Solidarity*

Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 314 pp., \$24.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780816694501.

In July 2014, at the height of the most recent Israeli military assault upon Gaza, a major rally was held in New York City—in defense of Israel. “United We Stand with Israel” attracted major figures in city, state, and national politics, the large majority of them progressive Democrats, who offered fiery speeches affirming Israel’s right to self-defense and recommitting to the sacredness of the “special relationship” between the United States and Israel. One of the most resounding rhetorical turns came from Brooklyn Congressman Hakeem Jeffries. “We know that Israel lives in a very tough neighborhood,” Jeffries told the crowd, adding: “There are certain realities to that...because the only thing that neighbors respect in a tough neighborhood is strength.” In bringing his speech to a conclusion, Jeffries declared: “Israel is here to stay and it will remain...Israel today, Israel tomorrow, Israel forever.”<sup>1</sup>

The last sentence of Jeffries’ speech uncannily echoes the famous exhortation of Alabama Governor George Wallace in the summer of 1963, thrown into the teeth of the U.S. civil rights movement’s struggle to end legal segregation: “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Thanks in part to this bizarre echo, Jeffries’ speech provides a revealing snapshot of the vexed relationship between U.S. racial politics and the representation of Israel-Palestine in the U.S. context. What are the forces and contexts underwriting a situation in which a progressive African-American politician echoes the rhetoric of one of the most overtly racist figures of twentieth-century American history in order to support a military assault on an occupied and imprisoned population? More broadly, what are the circumstances by which

---

<sup>1</sup> See Philip Weiss, “‘Israel Today, Israel Tomorrow, Israel Forever,’ Rep. Hakeem Jeffries Says at New York Rally,” *Mondoweiss*, July 30, 2014, <<http://mondoweiss.net/2014/07/comptroller-stringer-belligerent>> (accessed on August 14, 2015).

the general public in the United States has come to view issues related to Israel-Palestine as “local, not foreign policy, matters,” as Edward Said put it in 2000?<sup>2</sup>

Amidst this strange set of interconnections, Keith P. Feldman’s brilliant new book, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*, provides a timely intervention. It is a book that deserves to be read by anyone wishing to better understand what Feldman calls “the present entanglement of the United States, Israel, and Palestine.” His efforts “to tell a better story” about this set of entanglements derives from a desire to revisit the recent history underlying this “special relationship,” “not only to recall the texture of its legitimation and the alibis for how things have become as they are but also to listen closely and remember those modes of critique, imagination, and relation envisioning how things might have become otherwise” (22). *A Shadow over Palestine* thus marks itself as different from other analyses of our cultural and political present, in that it not only tells the story of how things came to be, but also succeeds at the much more difficult task of recalling possibilities from the past and bringing them into the present, in order to imagine alternatives that could help create a different future. An important part of this work involves undoing the dominant narrative that “reduces a heterogeneous historical field of affiliations to Israel and Palestine to expressions of Black anti-Semitism or Jewish racism, which then become the linchpin in a narrative of the tragedy of Black radicalism’s dissolution of the civil rights promise” (11).

Feldman sets off on his investigation by identifying “a conjuncture (roughly 1960 to 1985) when struggles over hegemony in the United States became entangled with transformed relations of rule in Israel and Palestine.” This is a period, as he notes, when “desegregation and state violence went hand in hand” (2). In his persuasive account, during this period the United States increasingly “drew on material linkages to Israel as a military, economic, and geopolitical partner”; meanwhile, U.S. imperial culture more broadly turned to Zionism “as a symbolic storehouse for the hegemonic articulation of liberal freedom and colonial violence” (2). Many of the tropes drawn from this symbolic storehouse, which continue to resonate today, can be traced to this period—for example, the identification of the state of Israel as “‘an outpost of the free world’ in a ‘particularly dangerous neighborhood’” (9), as invoked by Jeffries.

But Feldman makes the important point that during this period, U.S. imperial culture was also forced to contend “with transnational narratives of Palestinian liberation that figured resistance movements both real and imagined” (2). One of the book’s most significant contributions involves revisiting and recalling these narratives. This happens most notably in the second chapter, “Black Power’s Palestine: Permanent War and the Global Freedom Struggle”; for example, the chapter opens with an article on Palestine written by members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in August 1967, which draws closely upon a pamphlet produced by the Palestine Research Center in Beirut. This article, Feldman suggests, “was part of a broad swath of post-civil rights cultural production, one that animated the Black freedom struggle’s international horizon through a complex and sustained engagement with Palestine” (60). Such culture work on the part of

---

<sup>2</sup> See Edward Said, “Palestinians under Siege,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 22, No. 24 (14 December 2000), <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n24/edward-said/palestinians-under-siege>> (accessed on August 14, 2014). Feldman quotes Said in an interview discussing *A Shadow over Palestine*: see “New Texts Out Now: Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*,” *Jadaliyya*, June 3, 2015, <[http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21775/new-texts-out-now\\_keith-p.-feldman-a-shadow-over-p](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21775/new-texts-out-now_keith-p.-feldman-a-shadow-over-p)> (accessed on August 14, 2015).

the Black Power movement “diverged from the tradition of Afro-diasporic Zionism that informed liberal and radical Black politics alike” (18). It also involved an explicitly transnational set of commitments. Feldman cites the work of David Graham Du Bois, the son of Shirley Graham Du Bois and stepson of W. E. B. Du Bois, as an embodiment of this set of possibilities within the Black Power movement; he focuses both on Du Bois’s work as editor of the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* and on his largely neglected novel, *...And Bid Him Sing*, set in Cairo, where Du Bois lived and worked for many years.

Thus, “Israel and Palestine entered and became sedimented in debates about purportedly ‘domestic’ U.S. concerns” (2) both through material and imaginative links to Israel and Zionism that strengthened U.S. hegemony, but also through transnational connections to Palestine by the Black Power movement and others that challenged this hegemony. This second point is especially crucial, since from our current vantage point it is all too easy to see the effects of the first set of connections today without seeking to trace the possibilities afforded by the latter. One result of these conflicting sets of commitments is that the discourse around Israel-Palestine in the U.S. continues to be driven by struggles between incommensurable comparisons:

Zionism is akin to movements for national liberation, or like diasporic political movements like Pan-Africanism, or an extension of Western civilization, or a special kind of colonialism, or a form of racism. The Israeli state is the last righteous response to Nazism, or Nazism’s tragic doppelgänger, or part of the third world, or an extension of the first.... American ghettos are like Warsaw’s, or like Palestinian refugee camps, or like prisons, or like occupied territory. The topological landscape of Israel and Palestine is like California’s, or vice versa, and cities like Los Angeles are like Tel Aviv, or like the battle-scarred West Bank or West Beirut. Israeli “sabras” are like Western Europeans or American pioneers, while Palestinians are like African Americans, or Native Americans, or Jews; Jews are like white people or African Americans; and African Americans are like Jews. (13)

As Feldman notes, the “stark discrepancies and contradictions” between these various sets of comparisons suggest that they cannot all be “true.” But this doesn’t mean giving up on the act of comparison itself—although, he insists, such comparisons always constitute political acts. Indeed, he sees each of these comparisons as “provid[ing] a *translational bridge* from one context to another” (13-14).

The book’s prologue, for example, opens with James Baldwin in the midst of a trip to Israel-Palestine in 1961, and subsequently follows Baldwin’s shifting perspective over the next decade. In 1961, the Israeli settler colonial-state building project had the effect of confirming Baldwin’s own commitment to exile. “If this was what home meant for modernity’s others,” Feldman writes, “Baldwin will have none of it” (x). A decade later, in a “rap on race” with Margaret Mead, Baldwin’s comparative framework has shifted: “You have got to remember,” he tells Mead, “...that I have been, in America, an Arab at the hands of the Jews.” Mead summarily dismisses Baldwin’s “imperfectly realized analogies,” accusing him of racism in the process. It is a silencing that Feldman sees as “foretell[ing] precisely the attenuated scope of the dawning U.S. commonsense interpretations about Israel and Palestine” (xi). As he notes, part of the work of U.S. imperial culture is precisely to “regulate what counts as proper knowledge, casting some forms of knowledge as truth and others as aberrational, subjective, or fictitious” (8). In the current discourse on Israel-Palestine, it is clear which sets of comparisons have been afforded the status of truth and

which have been dismissed as aberrational. In this context, Feldman insists that struggles around formulations like those expressed by Baldwin in his “‘imperfectly realized analogies’—as if there could be any other kind” have in fact been central to the formation of this discourse; accordingly, “Remembering them, and listening to their affective complexity, is at the core of this book” (xi).

*A Shadow over Palestine* pursues its conjunctural analysis in part by focusing closely on a number of individual figures such as Baldwin and David Graham Du Bois. These figures provide Feldman with the opportunity to concretize certain aspects of the conjuncture that he investigates. For example, in the book’s first chapter, “Specters of Genocide: Cold War Exceptions and the Contradictions of Liberalism,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan presents a useful figure for telling the story of how Cold War liberalism combined anti-Communism and liberal racism (best embodied by Moynihan’s “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” [1965], popularly known as the Moynihan Report) into support for the state of Israel. This support culminated in Moynihan’s efforts, as UN Ambassador, to repeal the resolution declaring Zionism a form of racism, a resolution that according to Moynihan “reeked of the totalitarian mind, stank of the totalitarian state” (49). In the third chapter, “Jewish Conversions: Color Blindness, Anti-Imperialism, and Jewish National Liberation,” Norman Podhoretz provides another such useful figure, embodying the process by which “the suturing of political Zionism and American Jewishness” was effected “in the crucible of late-1960s and early-1970s racial justice struggles” (104). Podhoretz’s 1963 essay “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” a direct response to Baldwin’s “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” is a key text here.

The most important of the book’s figures is Edward Said, whose work is at the center of the fourth chapter, “Arab American Awakening: Edward Said, Area Studies, and Palestine’s Contrapuntal Futures.” Picking up on Said’s concept of contrapuntalism, Feldman addresses his body of work in general, and *Orientalism* in particular, as emerging from within “a social and intellectual history of a nascent Arab American studies”; this contextual reading suggests that *Orientalism* “should be read contrapuntally, locating the text within the ‘overlapping experiences and intertwined histories’ of U.S. imperial culture” (158). Feldman convincingly traces the beginnings of *Orientalism* to “The Arab Portrayed,” an essay that Said published in 1968, marking both the start of Said’s public engagement with the question of Palestine (following what he described as the “thunderbolt” of 1967) and also the beginning of his connection to the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG). Feldman’s “symptomatic” reading thus provides a historical grounding for the production of *Orientalism*, a text often read without much of a context, “as part of a growing transnational analysis of race and empire by scholars of Arab descent in the United States” (149). This allows for a fresh look at Said’s work, alongside and in conversation with the work of other pioneering scholars and activists within the AAUG. At the same time, Feldman shows a keen understanding of the power of Said’s radical humanist vision, and the place of Palestine within this larger vision: “In Said’s hands, the idea of Palestine served as a catalyst for a contrapuntal mode of being in the world” (184). The chapter ends by crediting Said’s work with a double move that also, I think, marks *A Shadow over Palestine* itself: “It refused the positivist pretense that, if one simply mobilized enough *facts* about Palestine that the enduring myths of Eurocentrism would be shattered, even as it refused, from another angle, a hegemonic post-structuralism.... This double move was all the more pressing in a conjuncture whose contradictions were mediated by the intensified absenting of the Palestinian from ‘history and actuality’” (184, quoting Said).

The momentum of this double move carries Feldman into his final chapter, “Moving toward Home: Women of Color Feminisms and the Lebanon Conjuncture,” and towards the final key figure in his book, June Jordan. The title of the chapter comes from Jordan’s 1982 poem “Moving towards Home,” in which she declares: “I was born a Black woman / And now / I am become a Palestinian / against the relentless laughter of evil” (185). The poem is one of a series of texts that Jordan wrote in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, texts that Feldman sees as speaking to “the shifting relationship between the post-civil rights United States and postoccupation Israel and Palestine” (187). As with Said’s *Orientalism*, he places Jordan’s work within a larger cultural and historical context, that of debates within second-wave feminism and the emergence of “a different kind of feminist antiracism,” embodied by Jordan’s writings on “life after Lebanon” (the title of an essay she published in 1983).

Said had once declared that “America’s Last Taboo,” the “narrative that has no permission to appear,” was the narrative of the oppression of the Palestinians by Israel (229). This taboo, as Feldman points out, exercised (and, in many ways, continues to exercise) its power over progressive political movements: he discerns its power in the absence of Arab, Arab American, and Palestinian voices from feminist anthologies and from organizations such as the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as in the “quasi-mandated silence” imposed during a major nuclear disarmament rally in New York City in June 1982, in which speakers agreed not to mention the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (207). In Jordan’s post-Lebanon writings, that taboo begins to give way, and the possibility of a specifically feminist anti-racism with a new and different notion of solidarity was thereby opened. In the book’s epilogue, Feldman finds in the work of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement a final breaching of America’s Last Taboo. Given the history he has set out, it is no coincidence that many of those who have initiated and supported BDS are the intellectual and political descendants of the scholar-activists of the previous generation that constituted groups like the AAUG and the NSWA.<sup>3</sup> In this way, *A Shadow over Palestine* offers an exhilarating reconstruction of “this breach’s notable, if often obscured, historical prefigurations” (229).

If the book has weaknesses—and no project as ambitious as Feldman’s could be without its weak points—these say more about some of the intellectual problems of our time than they do about particular shortcomings on the part of Feldman’s thinking. Indeed, one could credit *A Shadow over Palestine* with making visible a number of theoretical and political dilemmas that mark our own particular conjuncture. The first has to do with this very notion of “conjuncture” itself—more specifically, the tension between thinking the interconnections between U.S. imperial culture and Israel-Palestine conjuncturally, as compared to the more standard chronological process of cultural history. Feldman’s book explicitly declares itself to be involved with this sort of conjunctural analysis, and he does some brilliant work in this direction. But there is a tension between these parts of the book, when Feldman’s writing attempts to capture the spirit of moments as they arise—moments

---

<sup>3</sup> Fred Moten, in an address to the American Studies Association in support of a BDS resolution subsequently endorsed by the ASA, nicely encapsulates this overlapping history: “I am speaking for the boycott, in solidarity with the Palestinians, because I am committed to the insurgent alternative, whose refreshment is (in) the anti-national international. The terms of that commitment are nothing more than another way of saying that I am committed to the black radical tradition.” See Moten, “The New International of Insurgent Feeling,” *PACBI* (7 November 2009) <<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1130>> (accessed on August 14, 2015). See also the “Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine” released in August 2015 <<http://www.blackforpalestine.com/>> (accessed on August 19, 2015).

related, for example, to the 1967 war and to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon—and the somewhat more plodding work required by conventional cultural history. This is not to say that the archival moments of Feldman’s book—for example, the painstaking documentation of discussions at the national conventions of the AAUG, or of the ins and outs of debates in feminist academic journals and anthologies during the 1970s and 1980s—are without value. But such fine-grained work sometimes seems to prevent Feldman from working out some of his potentially more interesting conclusions. For example, Feldman ends his reading of June Jordan’s work with one of his most poetic passages:

The horizon of heterogeneity uncontained, the refusal to submit to the deadening enclosures of a new militarism, the willingness to forge links of relation through longtime commitments to solidarity and transformations: these are the capacious possibilities animated by life after Lebanon.

They are possibilities that endure. (219)

With that sentence, chapter five comes, somewhat frustratingly, to a close, though one yearns to hear more about these possibilities. Indeed, one might willingly exchange some of the more detailed passages documenting debates at the NWSA conventions for a more extended reading out of these possibilities from both the content, but also the form, of Jordan’s poetry and essays.

A related problem—which, again, is more our problem than Feldman’s—has to do with the question of the relationship between politics and culture in our moment. “Culture work,” the term favored by Feldman to describe the larger web of texts that he addresses, already marks an important advance, suggesting as it does not only that cultural texts do certain kinds of political “work,” but also that, like other forms of labor, they have a materiality that needs to be reckoned with. *A Shadow over Palestine* does a brilliant job of analyzing the role played by cultural work in the second half of the twentieth century in creating and upholding U.S. empire, including support for Israel’s settler colonial project in Palestine. In this, as in other ways, it is a resolutely Saidian book. One reason why Said’s *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* have been so influential is that the brilliance of his readings and the rigor of his arguments have the power to convince even the most skeptical readers of the crucial role played by culture in the development, implementation, and upholding of imperialism. (I remember hearing a literature professor at Columbia, a long-time critic of Said, declare, a few years after *Culture and Imperialism* was published, “Well, he’s right about *Mansfield Park*, of course.”)

The problem arises, however, when one attempts to reverse the formulation. If it is, at least in part thanks to Said’s work, now impossible to imagine imperialism without taking into account its cultural component, it is equally true that simply attacking imperial culture—or, indeed, creating and supporting anti-imperial culture—will not necessary make a dent in the actual practice of imperialism.<sup>4</sup> The particular brilliance of Said’s work involved the unraveling of the larger system that he named Orientalism as it worked itself out in texts of individual genius (a term that he never abjured). The perpetual criticism is that his work does not offer anything like an equal amount of attention to texts from “the other side,” those written by the victims of imperial culture as part of the struggle for decolonization. This is

---

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of precisely this point, see Bruce Robbins, Mary Louise Pratt, Jonathan Arac, R. Radhakrishnan, and Edward Said, “Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*: A Symposium,” *Social Text* 40 (Autumn 1994): 1-24.

not really a fair criticism, but it is certainly true that readers drawn to Said's resolutely anti-imperial politics often have a hard time reconciling his political stance with his not-unambivalent but very real admiration for figures such as Conrad, Kipling, and Flaubert.

In this sense, it is interesting that Feldman's most Saidian textual analysis in *A Shadow over Palestine* comes in his encounter with Saul Bellow's novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. He approaches the novel amidst a discussion of the writings of Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer, and Meir Kahane, noting that *Sammler* is often seen as "a watershed text in [Bellow's] own political trajectory toward neoconservatism"; its particular importance, for his argument, is the fact that the novel "thematizes the anxious nexus of racial, national, and sexual conversions that defined the early years of the post-civil rights era" (121). But in his fine close reading, Feldman also brings out the novel's ambiguities, not just at the level of plot but at the level of form: for example, the narrator's deeply ambivalent reaction when his Israeli son-in-law beats an African-American thief, despite the fact that Sammler himself had called for this violent intervention (122-123). This is not to say that Bellow's novel is *not* a watershed text in the development of a particular post-civil-rights strand of neoconservatism; it is simply to repeat the old saw of Marxist literary criticism, that one can often draw deep historical lessons from the most reactionary of novels (as Marx himself noted in praising the work of Balzac, the royalist, over that of Zola, the socialist, despite his political sympathies with the latter and political contempt for the former).

When Feldman turns to literary texts that offer more liberating visions, his readings are somewhat less rich, tending more towards plot summary and a discussion of their reception rather than close readings at the level of form. Of course, the mere fact that Feldman calls for renewed attention to a largely forgotten novel such as David Graham Du Bois's *...And Bid Him Sing* is laudable. But one would love to see a reading of Du Bois's work precisely as a novel, rather than as an artifact of a particular moment in the development of an internationalist tendency in the Black Power movement. Similarly, Jordan's powerful poetry calls out for a deeper reading, the sort of reading that could address a poem such as "Apologies to All the People in Lebanon" as both a rigorous exercise in dramatic irony and also a reflection back upon the long poetic tradition of *apologia*. One particularly longs for a richer engagement with the work of James Baldwin, who appears both at the beginning and the end of the book. Feldman notes that during his sojourn in Israel-Palestine in 1961, Baldwin was carrying two unfinished manuscripts with him: one would become "Letter from a Region in My Mind" (and subsequently, *The Fire Next Time*); the other became the novel *Another Country*. Could one read the traces of the entanglement of the United States, Israel, and Palestine out of Baldwin's novel, even if they might not be immediately visible in its content? Feldman has given us both the occasion and the methodology to do so.

In the end, even these criticisms resound to Feldman's credit. *A Shadow over Palestine* makes the reader hungry for more work in this direction; one can only hope that the efforts begun here will be carried forward, by Feldman and by others.<sup>5</sup> "Preoccupations of Palestine and Israel in the United States have produced a vexing history of shadows," Feldman writes in the book's final pages (221). A shadow is what remains after something has seemingly

---

<sup>5</sup> Feldman's work joins other important recent texts by scholars and activists moving in the same direction. For three of many possible examples, see: Black Feminist Think Tank, "Black Feminism Is: Reflections on the Black Feminist Think Tank Symposium," *Jadaliyya*, April 19, 2015, <[http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21428/black-feminism-is\\_reflections-on-the-black-feminis](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21428/black-feminism-is_reflections-on-the-black-feminis)> (accessed on August 14, 2015); Robin D. G. Kelley, "Another Freedom Summer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 44 (2014/15) <<http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/186746>> (accessed on August 14, 2015); and Vijay Prashad, ed., *Letter to Palestine: Writers Respond to War and Occupation* (New York: Verso, 2015).

passed from the scene, like the grotesque shadow of George Wallace falling very palpably upon the “United We Stand with Israel” rally last summer. But a shadow can also be a prefiguration of that which has not yet entered the scene, that which is about to arrive. The story told by *A Shadow over Palestine* has the potential to help us to bring into existence the less vexing, and more just, history yet to come.

Anthony C. Alessandrini  
Professor of English / Middle East Studies  
Kingsborough Community College / CUNY Graduate Center

© 2015: Anthony C. Alessandrini

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Alessandrini, Anthony C., Review of *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*, *SCTIW Review*, October 22, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/773>.

ISSN: 2374-9288