

Book Review

Review of *Decolonial Psychoanalysis: Towards Critical Islamophobia Studies*. By Robert K. Beshara. New York, NY: Routledge, 2019, 161 pages, ISBN: 978-0367174132.

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Robert K. Beshara's book could not have arrived at a more opportune time, when the atmosphere and leadership of certain individuals within certain countries have reinstigated harmful discourse against populations undeserving of it, and are left as targeted subjects in the end, backed into a corner with no way out. It is the subtitle that perhaps draws the reader more concretely to the direct material of the book: *Towards Critical Islamophobia Studies*.

The chapters of *Decolonial Psychoanalysis* are laid out according to the discourses Lacan developed in his Seminar XVII “The Other Side of Psychoanalysis”. Lacan conjures up four different modes: the Master's Discourse; the University Discourse; the Hysteric's Discourse; and the Analyst's Discourse. These structures were later taken up by scholars such as Ian Parker who expanded and applied their associated principles within the wider framework of critical psychology and discourse studies. One of Parker's articles “Lacanian Discourse Analysis in Psychology: Seven Theoretical Elements” is even directly referenced as a source in the bibliography. It is partially through Parker's discursive influence that Beshara uses “Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA)” as the primary structural tool to organize the material of the book. To be sure, the author does make it known that “other theorists informing my work include, but are not limited to, Jacques Lacan, Edward W. Said, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, Slavoj Žižek, and Ian Parker...Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, Deepa Kumar, Angela Davis, and Sara Ahmed” (Beshara, 2019, p. 4). And rest assured, the entire arsenal of scholars are sprinkled liberally throughout the chapters of the book as the author states, clarifies, reiterates, and recontextualizes his points in order that the reader can attain the clearest grasp of the matters at hand. One tangential approach the author also uses is “bricolage”, which “can be described as the process of getting down to the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary [or transdisciplinary] research” (Beshara, 2019, p. 16).

In the first chapter “Theorizing and Researching Islamophobia/Islamophilia in the Age of Trump”, Beshara makes several statements that clarify the aim and focus of his purpose for constructing this book. Regarding the nature of the title he states: “The theoretical backbone of this project is what I call *decolonial psychoanalysis*, wherein I radicalize Lacanian social theory by giving it a decolonial edge ‘from the borders’ (Mignolo, 2007, p.8)”. (Beshara, 2019, p. 4). Immediately before this he also links his research approach to include “critical border thinking”, where he says, “Following Mignolo (2007), I engage in ‘critical border thinking’ as part of an effort to ‘delink’ the rhetoric of (post)colonial violence from the logic of (post)modern oppression”

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(Beshara, 2019, p. 4). The author is making it fairly clear that there has been a previous problem in approaching the discourse of Islam and Muslim subjects that has been complicated by the approach of psychology/psychoanalysis, the definition and rhetoric of postcolonial studies, and the reality of the contemporary world as the subjects of this study actively deal with it.

Ian Parker in the Series Editor Forward of the book voices several rhetorical questions one might pose in questioning psychoanalysis' role in problematizing an approach toward Islamophobic studies. He ends this inquisition by saying, "All of these accusations against psychoanalysis must be encountered and answered in the affirmative if we are to take any steps forward to a genuinely anti-colonial critical psychology" (Beshara, 2019, p. x). Parker's most significant statement referencing the implicit approach Beshara takes in *Decolonial Psychoanalysis* however, is where he posits, "The best of critical psychology goes beyond psychology as such, showing how subjectivity is embedded in forms of materially-effective strategies of power and connecting with debates in neighboring disciplines" (Beshara, 2019, p. xi). The 'critical' of Critical Psychology clarifies itself here because he is well aware that psychology itself is not immune to being subjectively infiltrated by the objective content it purports to observe and analyze.

Chapter Two, "The Master's Discourse: an Archaeology of (Counter)terrorism and a Genealogy of the Conceptual Muslim" is the longest of the chapters and establishes the War on Terror as the crux of the Master's Discourse in the position of the Master Signifier (S1). Opposed to the Master Signifier is the Knowledge (S2) represented through the ideology of terrorism. Simply between these two elements alone we have an extremely complex relationship. Beshara informs the reader "The war metaphor involves condensation: war (S1) becomes a substitute for freedom (a), the object that the interpellated (counter)terrorist (\$) very much desires" (Beshara, 2019, p. 52). This manifests into what the author clarifies several sentences later as the "interpellated" barred American (\$) contraposing themselves against the Muslim (a) in a logic that implies "if I destroy this other, I conquer terrorism altogether (as [counter]terrorist) and secure my own freedom simultaneously in a move that puts myself into a position of power". Beshara himself says "the conceptual Muslim eventually becomes the embodiment of freedom itself" (Beshara, 2019, p. 53). This critical structure between war (S1), terror (S2), and the conceptual Muslim (a) sets up the entire argumentative structure for the subsequent chapters. The (counter)terrorist narrative is the phantasy that the Islamophobic subject cannot release themselves from. It is their encounter with the "Real" that structures their reality to where their own self-deluded argumentation for their actions need not contain any ounce of truth: all that is required is perceptual investment into an object cause of desire. This is why the author notes "She can be either a Muslim or someone who is perceived to be 'Muslim-looking' (Cashin, 2010)" (Beshara, 2019, p. 55).

Chapter Three sees Beshara delve into the role of psychology with regard to Islamophobia. At the beginning however, he wishes to make a distinction between the psychologization and the politicization of the subject, of which the latter is his goal. He quotes Jan De Vos from his article "Psychologization: Psychoanalysis' (Double) Political Appointment with History--the Accoyer Amendment Revisited" where he says: "Psychoanalysis, the theory and praxis of the subject, spawned a psychological discourse that lives off swallowing *subjects* and spitting out *individuals*:

psychologized, medicalized and infantilized (De Vos, 2011, p. 316, emphasis in original)” (Beshara, 2019, p. 65). The repercussions here are clear. As soon as psychoanalysis moved beyond its discovery stage with Freud and into its institutionalized form it has now become, the danger was always reducing its core elements to stereotypical tropes and “appliques” used to label and stigmatize any subject at will. The problematic result is a discipline that factory-presses patients in an assembly-like fashion, professing to have “solved” a particular ailment, when all that was achieved was the substitution of one brandished reproach for another. Beshara avoids this in “psychosocializing” the contents and conditions of Islamophobia and by utilizing the advantages of discourse analysis. It has already been implied that discourse analysis allows for narrative structural analysis that goes *beyond* the topical surface appearances of interrelated phenomena. This was Lacan’s whole point for constructing the discourses in the first place, because ordinary subjectivized psychologizations were completely inadequate and misplaced in dealing with the psychoanalytic subject as he saw it. The author’s concordance with Lacan is resolute because his eighteen-pages of analysis through the University Discourse produces associations, links, and interpretations that one would not be able to generate or construct utilizing conventional everyday media discourse or empirical extrapolations.

The fourth and fifth chapters are independent from each other but conceptually can be considered part of a tethered unit. The Hysteric’s Discourse and the Analyst’s Discourse are closely related and fundamentally represent the basic relationship between the analyst and the patient. For general purposes, the analyst frames the Analyst’s Discourse and the patient the Hysteric’s. The hysteric is the one who is asking all of the questions, who is framing the context for the analyst to be the one who is supposed to know all of the answers. One’s first assumption would be that the analyst is in the power position within the dynamic, but upon looking closely, it is actually the hysteric. The imposition is being demanded upon the analyst *by* the hysteric, that is, the hysteric is attempting to draw up the Knowledge out of the Master Signifiers represented through their questioning. The analyst’s role is to speak *through* the hysteric with answers as “Truth”. From the analyst’s perspective, their engagement with the hysteric’s discourse (Master Signifiers) is intended to produce Knowledge as Truth for themselves. This doesn’t quite work however, because the hysteric produces questions from a battery of confused signs and meanings from which *they* want answers for. It may be easier to see now the push and pull and antagonistic relationship between the analyst and hysteric in how they feed each other, but not quite to the point of a definitive resolution.

This leads us back to Chapter Four “The Hysteric’s Discourse: Epistemic Resistance, or US Muslims as Ethical Subjects” where the author says, “The truth of the infinitely demanding subject (\$) is the Real of divine justice as *objet a*, or object-cause of desire...the infinitely demanding subject (\$) is questioning the (counter)terrorist Other of the Law...the product of this exchange is critical knowledge (S2) as surplus *jouissance*” (Beshara, 2019, p. 82). In Chapter Four, this takes place through the US Muslims in the interviews the author engages in with them, where they actively question the actions and motives of Islamophobists and Islamophobia which produces the critical knowledge the author learns from. These interviewees desire “divine justice”, to be treated just like any other citizen living out their lives, and it is through their elucidations that Beshara and the reader learn about the complications of what it

means to be misidentified and targeted in an irrational discourse designed to reduce them to nothing, literally.

In Chapter Five “The Analyst’s Discourse: Ontic Resistance, or US Muslims as Political Subjects”, Beshara notes: “The agent of the analyst’s discourse is the *real muslim* (a), whose truth is epistemic resistance (S2). The Real Muslim (a), having subjectified the cause of divine justice, *gazes* at the American analysand (\$), causing his/her desire. The product is a new master signifier (S1): not-(counter)terrorism...” (Beshara, 2019, p. 110). The purpose of the interview extracts in this chapter is to highlight what the author calls “ontic resistance”. Whereas the previous chapter highlighted “‘epistemic resistance’, or resistance through (critical) knowledge”, Chapter Five focuses on “‘ontic resistance’, or resistance through being”. Beshara even notes a petite phrasing of this idea as “‘To exist is to resist...and to exist as a *hijaabi* is to resist Islamophobia’ (Aisha)” (Beshara, 2019, p. 109). New knowledge as Truth is being produced in a positive cycle by the Real Muslim, because their questioning of the American analysand generates the signifiers the Real Muslim would prefer to be identified with. One example of this is where the author quotes one of the interviewees as saying “‘I try really hard to *be in the world* as a person and not as an identity’ (emphasis added)” (Beshara, 2019, p. 111). The response is a complex one because the statement is specific but denotes an explicit contrast: “as a person and not as an identity”. The obvious contradiction here is the synonymous conflation of both being necessarily unified, and the author addresses this and details his curiosity about it within the same paragraph.

By the time we reach the final chapter “Towards a Radical Master: From Decolonial Psychoanalysis to Liberation Praxis”, Beshara’s goal of detailing how a decolonial psychoanalysis can be instituted through the lens of critical psychology, Lacanian Discourse Analysis, and a host of other methodologies along the way, has largely been achieved. The War on Terror discourse has been thoroughly turned on its head and he quite rightly states “...I am using the logic of that hegemonic discourse against itself to develop a counter-discourse” (Beshara, 2019, p. 127). I will readily admit my limitations here as the author engages Lacan’s Graph of Sexuation, something I am still getting a handle on. Nevertheless, it is used to introduce the concepts of Mythical Jouissance and Divine Jouissance. While my limitations prevent me from explaining the concepts fully, I will borrow an equivocation from a quote the author uses from Walter Benjamin: “If *mythical violence* is *lawmaking*, *divine violence* is *law-destroying*; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them...” (emphasis added) (Beshara, 2019, p. 130). Beshara follows this up by saying “...Benjamin is identifying mythical violence with the Law and with the State, but not with justice” (Beshara, 2019, p. 131). The reader receives the hinting that socially corrective measures intended toward the rectification of restoring the rights of the oppressed and maligned are the events of Divine Violence that oppose the Mythical Violence propagated by the state in their suppression and oppression. One of the final salient points the author makes supporting justice is partitioning liberation from freedom: “Whereas freedom is a Liberal-Conservative value that concerns the individual, *liberation* is a Radical value that pertains to both the individual *and* the collective” (Beshara, 2019, p. 136). This point could not have been made any clearer as it shows precisely where the concept of freedom encounters the limits of the Real, but where liberation is capable of being symbolized.

Decolonial Psychoanalysis is a book that is long overdue to appear within the domains of [critical] psychology and psychoanalysis. It is even more astonishing that it appeared in the United States as opposed to Europe and South America where Lacan and Lacanian-oriented studies have been held more consistently in higher regard. However, it may be exactly for that reason why *Decolonial Psychoanalysis* birthed itself where it did, in an environment that made its subject matter all the more prescient in concurrence with political discourse destroying the real lives of those discussed. The contents of *Decolonial Psychoanalysis* are materials that desperately need infiltrating into *everyday* discourse along with those of Islamophobia studies. If there is any criticism to be had, it is the same of all critical and academic studies--that of finding a way to integrate it into everyday discourse at a level comprehensive and speakable by the average individual. Lacan was notable for moving in the opposite direction. Stuart Schneiderman in his book *Jacques Lacan: the Death of an Intellectual Hero* recounts a television appearance of Lacan's, noting that "...he would not alter his notoriously impenetrable style because he simply did not care to speak to idiots: my discourse, he said, is for those who are not idiots" (Schneiderman, 1983, p. 19). Contemporary terminology would qualify Lacan's disposition as elitist, even though he was being maligned by the very institutional domain he practiced in. This is antithetical to the direction *Decolonial Psychoanalysis* points in. Its contents are about empowering the subject *and* all others engaged in the discourse of and around Islamophobia to systematically deconstruct its contents and lay its illogicalities, mystifications, and demoralizations bare for all to see. Beshara undoubtedly wins this match by knockout.

References

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Autobiographical Note

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