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A Critique of Post/Colonial Nomadism

Mokhtar Ghambou

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At the 1999 MLA Convention, Stephen Greenblatt gave a talk in which he encouraged the audience to abjure its “native identity” and start thinking as “nomads.”¹ No event is more timely for reconsidering the crisis of identity, on which so much energy continues to be spent, than a prestigious academic convention taking place on the eve of the new millennium, December 1999. For Greenblatt, the transition from the old to the new order corresponds to the failure of “nativism” as a conventional mode of thinking and to the promise of a new universal paradigm called “nomadism.” But if his critique of nativism is understood as a rejection of ethnocentrism, his embrace of nomadism is not supported by any concrete analysis. Although he makes us sensitive to the self-serving ideologies of colonialism, racism, genocide, and ethnic cleansing, his call for a nomadic identity offers little or nothing to the ongoing debate on identity and difference. As Caren Kaplan suggests, nomadism is expected to rescue the postmodern West from its crisis just as the related tropes of exile and wandering were employed by Western writers and critics to counter the ills of modernism (26).

Yet the promise of nomadism is more complex than a simple substitution of one key term for another. The word “nomad” is so loose and so elastic in its range of meanings (extending from aimlessness, border crossing, and deterritorialization to transgression, anarchy, and anti-nationalism) that it resists going out of intellectual fashion. In addition to anthropology where it constitutes a sub-field, nomadism has

been deployed as a critical paradigm in literary criticism, philosophy, and cultural studies for the last twenty-five years or so. The problem is that each time the term is pronounced it gives the impression of carrying a “new” and “untested” message. No narrative forms, Ihab Hassan contends, express “the new cultural visions” characteristic of the American postmodern era of the 1960s more than “nomadic autobiographies” (xv). Inspired by “the decline of metaphysically fixed, steady identities,” the feminist critic Rosa Braidotti asserts that “nomadic consciousness is an epistemological and political imperative for critical thought at the end of the millennium” (2). Michel Foucault, Stephen Muecke, John Hollander, Brian Massumi, Paul Patton, and others explicitly or implicitly make similar claims.² Acknowledged or not, most of these claims are, however, directly influenced by *Mille Plateaux*, a text co-authored by the French poststructuralist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Written in 1980 and translated by Brian Massumi as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), this text is the first study to propose “nomadology” as a critical alternative to the despotism underlying “rooted” conceptions of identity in Western metaphysics. “What is lacking,” Deleuze and Guattari affirm, “is nomadology, the opposite of history” (23).

No matter how promising this statement sounds to its pioneers and inheritors alike, nomadology has proven incapable of going beyond the myth of the nomad, a myth which is an integral part of, not the “opposite to,” that same Western history.³ Nomadism goes back to Greek and Roman antiquity, re-emerges in the heyday of imperialism to provide a rhetorical excuse for British and French colonial acquisition of territory, and survives in contemporary Western literature and film as an exotic attraction that evokes the themes of adventure, wandering, and exile. These colonial, anthropological, historical, and literary appropriations of nomadism provide the constitutive components of what I critique elsewhere as the “nomadist discourse.”⁴ I recall them here in passing to stress that nomadism has occupied a disturbing place in the Western imagination long before it came to surprise us as a critical paradigm — nomadology — pioneered by Deleuze and Guattari and disseminated by their successors.

More disturbing, however, is postcoloniality’s appropriation of nomadism for its own critical purposes, the issue I shall be addressing in the present essay. Considering that nomadology is a poststructuralist theory that essentially models its subject on “authentic” nomads from the Sahara, Arabia, Mongolia, Aboriginal Australia, and Native America, it is intriguing, indeed, that postcolonial critics participate in such a discourse without first verifying its epistemological foundations. What is at stake in the postcolonial domestication of nomadism is not simply a rhetorical mimicry, but, as I argue, a “native” confirmation of the Western nomadist discourse, on the one hand, and a perversion of the central issues (language, identity, territory) underlying the whole postcolonial project, on the other. Turning back to the question of identity crisis, on which so much energy continues to be spent, what sort of identity politics does postcolonial criticism seek to inaugurate through nomadology?

According to a recent article by Jamil Khader, nomadology can only be an empowering concept for the postcolonial negotiation of identity, and in the case

of his essay, Native American identity. Reading *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) by Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, Khader states that since “postcolonial Nativeness” is by definition a palimpsest of “multiple, shifting, and contradictory” elements, “it carries with it some productive affinities with Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s seminal works on the rhizome and nomadism” (83). Khader recalls Braidotti’s insights to argue that “postcolonial Nativeness shares with nomadism a propensity for dislocation, for the collapsing of any fixed centre that may block the process of becoming, connection, multiplicity, and difference” (85).

It is also through Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work that the African film critic Teshome Gabriel awakens to the importance of nomadism as a critical practice to be retrieved — since it is non-Western in its origins — by emerging cultural movements in the Third World: “it is only through work of nomadic sensibility that black cinema, independent cinema, exile, and Third World cinema will capture its axis” (73). Nomadism figures in Gabriel’s nostalgic reading more as a return to indigenous mythical traditions, originating in Africa, than a critical practice to be enacted in the future: “Today,” Gabriel says, “nomads, in the book of travels, are to be found in the Americas and in the genesis of myths which reach back to the African savannah” (70).

The arguments offered by Khader and Gabriel represent clear examples of how nomadism leads postcolonial critics to forge repressive alliances between cultural experiences whose violent encounters of the past and distinct priorities of the present are normally more visible than their so-called universal affinities. Granting that nomadology is applicable outside its Western boundaries, its critical message, if it has any, cannot accommodate the critical priorities of the postcolonial project. Deleuze, Guattari, and Braidotti treat nomadism as an avant-garde concept, inspired by non-European tropes, that would free them from the fixations, dichotomies, and territorialization characteristic of Western metaphysics. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the West is essentially an arborescent system of knowledge whose foundations must be uprooted and displaced by the “nomadic” rhizome. To suggest that nomadism is able to serve similar functions in the Native American or African contexts is to “naturalize” the entire historical phenomena that the postcolonial critique has sought to subvert from the outset. By the time it reaches its self-realization, postcolonial identity is already uprooted, displaced, and heterogenized by the encroaching powers of imperialism and capitalism. Native Americans, Africans, and all the indigenous groups which have suffered from territorial dispossession do not need nomadic expressions, such as a “propensity for dislocation,” to articulate their future goals. In other words, colonial subjects are already “nomadized” by the repressive forces they have undergone historically. How can postcolonial identity invest in the metaphor of “becoming nomad” as one of its future critical objectives when it is stereotypically and literally labeled as “nomadic”?

The central issue at the heart of postcoloniality, namely the negotiation of identity between center and margin, past and future, is totally obscured by the discourse of nomadism. The “crucial question” that needs to be raised by postcolonial critics, argues Samia Mehrez, is one about the search for “territory” and “legitimate space” (27). Conversely, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s influential con-

cept of “deterritorialization,” Mehrez continues, is the product of an “elitist exoticism” that conceals the (North African) Diaspora’s “real struggle against exile and nomadism” (33). Territory, sovereignty, ownership, and all the principles that nomadology desires to vacate, represent fundamental concerns, not only for diasporic writing but also for postcolonial literature in general.

In fact, no one could imagine reading Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, or Asia Djebar’s *Fantasia*, to name only a few major postcolonial narratives, without realizing that the recuperation of territory, in both its material and symbolic value, from colonial dispossession is the main struggle underlying the postcolonial project. Describing her displacement condition caused by the French colonial occupation, a female Algerian character in Djebar’s novel says: “How was I to know that the next time I went down to the village I would find myself living in a tent, like a nomad” (149). In his analysis of *The Crown of Columbus*, Khader is himself aware of the intricate relationship between Native Americans and their land: “Natives never stop investing in their ancestral territories, because identity is conflated with land” (95). Of course, Khader does not pursue this kind of argument because that would only confirm his self-contradiction. Instead, he proposes deterritorialization as the spatial medium to be shared by both the conqueror (Columbus) and the conquered (Native American characters). Thus, Native Americans are “nomadic” just like Columbus, whom he identifies as “another genuine nomadic subject” deprived of a homeland (91).

Once the “affinities” postcolonial critics establish between nomadology and postcoloniality begin to unfold, they yield ethnographic rather than critical substance. At the center of this naively constructed relationship is the difference between the “literal” and the “figurative” meanings of nomadism. Despite its most sophisticated articulations, nomadology is never able to blur the gap between the “metaphorical” nomad, a Euro-American subject endowed with the will to global mobility and border-crossing, and the “literal” nomads who derive their (exotic) value from their confinement to strict tribal or regional boundaries. Unlike Columbus, Deleuze, Guattari, Braidotti, and other nomadologists, Tuaregs, bedouins, and Native Americans are “authentic nomads” who enter the nomadist text to concretize the pleasures of global mobility and subversive urban criticism without productively benefiting from them. Hidden in Khader’s reading is the idea that Columbus’ performance of nomadism must be illustrated by the Native Americans’ literal nomadism in order to betray its proper and tangible meanings.

Far from serving a critical purpose, the function of postcolonial nomadism is purely illustrative: it confirms the ethnographic origins of poststructuralist nomadology, which in turn borrows, albeit discreetly, its references from non-European histories and cultures. This double illustration makes it difficult to distinguish between those who are empowered and those who are perverted by nomadology. Even more complex is the fact that much of the critical terrain that nomadology has gained abroad corresponds to the very spaces that Western anthropology, literature, and film associate with pastoralism, deserts, steppes, camels, and tents. North Africa happens to be one of these favorite

spaces, where the myth of the nomad is invited back under the critical cloak of nomadology.

Whether we wish to define it as a homecoming or as an exportation, the journey of nomadology to North Africa is carried through a two-volume issue of *Yale French Studies*, which will occupy us in the rest of this essay. Published in 1993 under the title, “Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, and Nomadisms,” the volume, as its editors Françoise Lionnet and Ronnie Scharfman write, “is devoted to the questions of identity and modernity in France and in the following areas: North and West Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Vietnam, and the Indian Ocean” (1). The contributors to the journal represent some of the most distinguished scholars from North Africa, Europe, and America in the field of francophone studies.

Conflated in the journal with “nomadology” or “nomad thought,” nomadism holds the universal promise of answering some of the long-lasting questions regarding postcolonial literatures written in European languages: how are we to classify a literature that is ethnically and culturally different from its language of expression? How does it reconcile the demands of the local with those of the foreign readership? To which national tradition does it belong? How do we politically identify diasporic literatures? Nomadism is called upon to resolve these questions as a cultural bridge on which the postcolonial relationship between France and its former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean is negotiated. It becomes the safely universalizing trope through which the francophone imagination will overcome the trauma caused by the colonial legacy. Investing in its inherent elasticity, francophone critics use nomadism to “situate” the francophone text, to avoid confining its author, characters, setting, and plot to a fixed geographical, cultural, or linguistic structure.

With the exception of Samia Mehrez, all the *Yale French Studies* contributors whose topic is nomadism wind up validating its ethnographic, not to say colonial, drives. Even Winifred Woodhull, who cautions about the risks of reading North African francophony in “strict conformity” with fashionable French theories, is unable to distinguish her own use of nomadism from the exotic meanings it has in Deleuze and Guattari’s work.⁵ In her essay entitled “Exile,” which opens the first volume of *Yale French Studies*, Woodhull writes:

In their ‘nomadic’ texts, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Leila Sebbar, for example, directly address the problems of cultural hybridity, and the processes by which they are negotiated in various postcolonial situations, both in France and in North Africa. In the case of Ben Jelloun and other North African writers such as Khatibi and Rachid Boudjedra, textual nomadism stands in relation to real changes in the writers’ geographical location — their movement between France and North Africa. For theorists like Deleuze and Michel Foucault on the other hand, ‘nomadism’ is a trope for non-dialectical modes of thought and ‘wild’ modes of social affiliation that do not necessarily have anything to do with the cultural hybridity mentioned above even though they stem, in part, from North Africa’s successful challenges to French political, intellectual, and cultural hegemony in colonial regimes.

(8)

Woodhull encounters the difficult problem of how to employ nomadism as a critical means without being complicit with Deleuze (and Foucault?) who have already proposed nomadism as an alternative to the structures of power incarnated by the state and political parties. In her view, although Deleuze's nomadism is partly inspired by the North African struggle against the French colonial state, it is too "wild" and too anarchic to relate to the cultural priorities of Maghrebian francophone writers (Ben Jelloun, Khatibi, and Boudjedra) or to French writers of North African origin like Leila Sebbar. But once she believes that she has successfully purged nomadism of its French imports, she proposes it as a symbolic space in which France and its former North African colonies can rediscover one another in order to negotiate their ideological conflicts and share their linguistic affinities. She goes on to say that "exile and nomadism" suggest the need to make France the target of "deterritorializing strategies" on the one hand, and to capture the "hybrid, unstable identity" of the Maghrebian writers, intellectuals, and immigrants, on the other (8).

For all her repetitive emphasis on the term, Woodhull still leaves us pondering her own use of nomadism and whether or not she really means it as a critique of poststructuralist formulations. Her insistence on using nomadism places her in a complex situation: she does not express a desire to endorse Deleuze's nomadology nor does she demonstrate the capacity to resist some of its key terms such as "deterritorialization." Nowhere does she hint that what she refers to as poststructuralist "wild" nomadism is the product of a myth partly inspired by the North African Sahara. While she fractures nomadism into literal, metaphorical, and critical meanings, she is ambiguous about which of these levels she is dismissing as French poststructuralist concepts and which she is keeping as defining characteristics of North African emigrant writing: "Where the related question of 'nomadism' is concerned, the French context requires that we will distinguish its significance in the lives of literal nomads, such as migrants, from its meanings in the life and work of émigré writers on the one hand, and in the work of French theorists on the other" (8).

At first sight, Woodhull's reference to North African emigrants as "literal nomads" or "nomads of modernity" (12) seems to reflect a social view totally unconcerned with the "literal" nomads of anthropological texts. Yet such a view is far from being innocent. Woodhull has the opportunity to clarify the meaning of the adjective "literal" in her study *Transfigurations of the Maghreb* which appeared shortly after her article in *Yale French Studies*. The same essay, "Exile," constitutes the third chapter of her book, preceding a chapter ("Out of France") which mainly examines the image of the North African desert in French contemporary fiction. Reading the two chapters together, we realize that not only is her notion of literal nomads ethnographically informed, but it is also inspired by J. M. Le Clézio's *Désert* and Michel Tournier's *La goutte d'or*, two French novels that both feature dual settings in the North African Sahara and metropolitan France.

Woodhull criticizes *Désert* as a Eurocentric text that exoticizes the "Sahrawi nomads," their history, and their Berber ancestors.⁶ Conversely, she praises *La goutte d'or* as a hybrid text which demonstrates "the power of Maghrebian traditions . . . not only able to survive in their native context but to mix with the

elements of French modernity in such a way as to productively unsettle and reconfigure relations between sexes, genders, classes, and cultures in France” (185). But on one side or the other, she identifies the nomads in the texts she is discussing as ethnographic subjects, with Berber as their language, shepherding as their social activity, and the Sahara as their place. In other words, their “literal” nomadism precedes that of the North African immigrants in France whom she describes above as “literal” nomads” or “nomads of modernity.” The fact that the two kinds of nomads collide within a single study belies Woodhull’s distinctions and demonstrates how her entire analysis is no less complicated with the nomadist discourse than the French texts under her critical investigation.

Most importantly, the link between “literal” and “authentic” nomads that Woodhull tries to hide is quite obvious in *Désert* and *La goutte d’or*. In the first novel, the protagonist is an exotic Berber woman named Lalla whose character is shaped around a double displacement; first, her ancestors are chased out of the Western Sahara by the French colonizer in the early decades of the twentieth century; second, born as a political refugee in a Berber ghetto somewhere in the center of the post-colonial Morocco, Lalla joins the wave of Moroccans moving to Europe in the late 1960s to earn their living. As a successful performer and model in Marseilles and Paris, her photos cover various French magazines. At the same time, she maintains a double life by sharing her free time with a marginalized Gypsy who reconnects Lalla with her “nomadic” origins. Similarly, *La goutte d’or* is structured around a South-North journey. Idriss, a Berber shepherd, leaves the Algerian Sahara in search of the photograph that a French tourist has taken but never sent back. Unlike Lalla who returns to her native village, Idriss chooses instead to continue living in France as a North African immigrant. While the two postmodern sagas seem to reverse the Orientalist traditional journey from North to South, they do so with the ultimate intention of providing the French reader with a framework within which to imagine the entire phenomenon of immigration. The North African’s modern immigration to France, both Le Clézio and Tournier finally suggest, is simply a natural extension of their nomadic heritage. It is to this same conclusion that the distinctions Woodhull makes between the literal, the modern, and the critical levels of nomadism are to be traced. While these distinctions do not advance her critique in any productive sense, they are blurred and contained within an essentialist vision that defines North Africa as primarily the spatial domain of ethnographic nomadism.

Far more problematic than Woodhull are some of the other contributors to *Yale French Studies*, namely Antoine Raybaud, Lisa Lowe, and Hedi Abdel-Jaouad. In their view, what makes Maghrebian francophony exceptionally nomadic, vis-à-vis French literature as well as other francophone literatures, is that its nomadism is not solely a metaphor but the living trademark of a North African culture historically designated by its archaic and modern nomads. According to Raybaud, whose article is included in the first volume to provide historical background, North Africa and the Middle East provide the ideal setting for understanding how nomadism shifts back and forth between its literal, metaphorical, and critical dimensions:

An immense space, an immense clamor, an immense memory of words and stories: since its origins the Maghreb has been divided between the nomadic and the sedentary, overrun, since the Hegira — that is, since the founding of Islam — by multiple waves of men from Medina or Mecca, from the deserts of Arabia or Baghdad or Upper Egypt or Cairo. At times conquerors, at others fugitives, sometimes missionaries and others, plunderers in realms with cities and courts, or as rebellious and anarchistic tribes (these ‘locust nomads’ stigmatized by Ibn Khaldun), they leave home, found only to move on farther towards the Ocean or the Hesperides; they settle only to ebb again and be dispersed.

(146)

This passage offers two main points common to European and American nomadist anthropologists: first, nomadism is the dominant factor for understanding the historical relationship between North Africa and the Middle East; second, while nomadism is classified as an ancient practice belonging to the distant past, nomads (that is, Berber Tuaregs and Arab bedouins) continue to exert powerful influence in the two poles of the modern Arab world. In both cases nomadism is the fabric in which the archaic and modern characteristics of the Arab world are interwoven. Thus, the whole history of the Maghreb, from its Arab conquest through Islamization to its current role in the Arab world, is encapsulated in one word, a word which, nonetheless, always gives the impression of being open, borderless, and liberating.

If Le Clézio and Tournier structure their novels around the South-North journey to nomadize modern North African emigrations to France, Raybaud, the literary critic with North African francophony as one of his special fields, accounts for a historical journey from East to East to demonstrate how nomadism ties one pole of the Orient to another. He completes the geopoetics of movement by suggesting that North African travelogues comprise a continuous nomadic tradition before being a social, religious, political, or cultural practice. For example, the pilgrimage to Mecca has no religious significance — nomadism and religion are irreconcilable phenomena since the latter seeks to sedentarize the former — but is simply an ongoing expression of the ebb and flow in an immense desert of nomadism lying between the Atlantic Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Whether the Maghreb desires to move North or East, its gaze falls back on a self-reflecting mirror that freezes what lies ahead in order to activate what lurks behind — its nomadic roots.

Raybaud does not stop with these historical and anthropological conjectures. Rather, he applies them to francophone texts by Algerian writers including Kateb Yacine, Moloud Mammeri, Nabil Farés, and Mohamed Kheir-Eddine. Since these writers are mainly Berbers or inspired by Berber tradition, Raybaud stamps any allusions they make to origins, myths, epic poems, and folktales with the seal of nomadism to further bridge the gap between the literary and the historical, the modern and the archaic, and to connect the author and the text. In the Maghreb, he argues, “two factors favor a nomadism of words: the proximity of Berber culture, forbidden and unsubdued, and the interdiction and insubordination imposed by historical conditions that are

those of an interminable conquest” (148). Poetic nomadism hides a colonial nomadism, the one that served French imperialists as a powerful ideology justifying the dispossession of native North Africans who were deprived of their land and property. Raybaud draws on “the interminable conquest” to highlight instead the nomadist stereotype of the invincible nomad, the token of a permanent resistance that never culminates in the achievement of a political objective. He also states that nomadism is the “active safeguard of a memory and an institution: it gives rhythm to image, order to the imaginary of the tribe, but also to their memories, their values, their complicities, their gestures, their history and the meaning of their history, their identity” (148).

Paradoxically, the nomadic frontier is so vast and so encompassing that it leaves no exit through which those imprisoned beneath could come out and reclaim the meaning of their history and self-identity. But such a poetic design does not advance Raybaud’s literary claims either. Like all nomadist practices, his is imprisoned in its own conceptual flaws and contradictions. On the one hand, Raybaud imagines the entire Orient as a historically restless image sustained by waves of conquest, plunder, anarchy, and dispersion; on the other, he reterritorializes these nomadic characteristics within a stable institution based on the fixed principles of memory, order, and rhythm. Of course, there is no better way for the construction of the nomadic: the nomadist cannot afford to let his signifier run out of control to the point of losing track of its ethnic and geographic signified. One of the essential definitions of the nomadist discourse is, above all, to immobilize its subjects, to keep them under control so that their exotic value is fully secured. Mobility must be rejected as a dynamic concept because it shakes the foundation of the Self/Other dichotomy; it erases the radical difference that ought to exist between the two constructed poles, a difference necessary for salvaging exoticism in the postmodern era.

One of the main articles in *Yale French Studies* that openly applies nomadology to the postcolonial francophone narrative is “Literary Nomadics in Francophone Allegories of Postcolonialism: Pham Ky and Tahar Ben Jelloun” by the prominent postcolonial critic Lisa Lowe. Her article is less a subconscious infiltration of the nomadist stereotypes than a conscious espousal of nomadism, in its historical, anthropological, and poststructuralist constructions. The reader would expect an essay by a postcolonial scholar like Lowe to reflect some of the critical vigor characterizing her previous critique of British and French Orientalism in *Critical Terrains*. Disappointingly, nomadism saps her critical energy, leading her on a search, through nomadist sources, for secure positive models through which to articulate postcoloniality in general and postcolonial francophone literature in particular:

[N]omadism suggests to us another manner of reading and thinking postcoloniality, which explores not only the category of space, but also a movement across spaces. Nomadism alludes to a critique of colonialism which would neither reproduce, nor be bound in binary logic to, cultural domination; as an emblem for perpetual renewal, flux, nonconservation, it is certainly conditional, strategic, and temporary.

(47-48)

Like Khader, Lowe situates nomadism in between a critique of colonialism and a figuration of a postcolonial identity, both of which must be free from binary, essentialist logic. The caution against binarism is excessively stressed throughout her article. But how is she capable of writing nomadism without reducing it to the very binary logic she intends to dismantle?

By taking Deleuze's and Guattari's "subversive nomad thought" seriously (46), Lowe intends to satisfy multiple critical needs. She deploys nomad thought to complicate Foucault's "*heterotopia*," the notion designating the space of the marginalized, the outcasts, and the repressed, yet ultimately Lowe is caught up in its binary oppositions. Nomad thought allows her to redefine "postcoloniality as a heterogeneous space, non-binary terrain" and dismantle "those static, fixed antinomies by traversing them, by displacing them with other positions and locations" (47). To illustrate these supposedly innovative aspects of nomadism, she reads them in the context of two postcolonial francophone novels: one is *Des femmes assises ça et là* (1964) by the Vietnamese writer Pham Van Ky; the other is *L'enfant de sable* (1985) by the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun. Through the examination of what she dubs as "the literary nomadics" in these two novels, Lowe intends to express in "spatial terms the need to avert colonialism's binary logic, which works to project and overdetermine certain forms of identity — nativist, nationalist, or fundamentalist — as the response to colonialism" (48).

Her rejection of binarism and essence reflects her willingness to expand the scope of her previous study, *Critical Terrains*, which is more a critique of European colonialist and Orientalist narrative than an affirmation of a postcolonial alternative. Hence the dual importance of nomadism in her subsequent article. As a postcolonial practice, nomadism bestows on the colonized Vietnamese a positive identity — a nomadic identity — which allows them to continue criticizing colonialist ideology without surrendering to its counter-effects such as nativism and nationalism. On these postcolonial francophone grounds, Lowe arranges unexpected intellectual meetings so as to erase the undesirable residues of binarism on the one hand, and affirm the global and the local significance of nomad thought on the other. She first turns to *A Thousand Plateaus* to illustrate the universal, stateless space of "*the nomos*" (47), then to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* to warn against the enclosure of postcolonial identity in a racial, ethnic, or tribal essence. She drags Fanon into this originally Deleuzo-Guattarian enterprise by force to make us "suspicious of an uncritical nativism appealing to essentialized notions of precolonial identity" (43).

It is needless to point out how Lowe expends unnecessary energy on dismantling atomistic binaries while she is engulfed within the overarching yet invisible, sedentary Self/nomadic Other dichotomy. It is, rather, her excessive confidence in the notion that nomadism has nothing to do with pre-colonialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism that needs to be challenged. The basic question arising from her approach is this: what is the point of convergence between the two postcolonial novels under her investigation? Their common point, Lowe asserts, lies in the nomadic heritage of their respective traditions, long before francophony was born: "In using the term 'nomadic,' I take as point of departure the very literal sense in which nomadic practices are and were of

central importance to the histories of Cochinchina and Vietnam, and of Morocco and the Maghreb, the geographies associated with both of the texts discussed in this essay" (45). The two francophone novels strike her as nomadic not only metaphorically, but in the "literal sense," which presupposes that their spaces, characters, and perhaps even the authors, are nomads in the same way nomadists and anthropologists define the Berber Tauregs and Arab bedouins of North Africa. From this perspective, she moves away from her poststructuralist and postcolonial counterparts, declining the metaphorical advantages offered by the term: by showing no specific desire to "become nomad," she puts herself in the inevitable position of an urban subject representing the nomad.

It is unlikely that Deleuze and Guattari would be pleased by Lowe's analysis of nomad thought despite its full subscription to their project. Much less would Fanon, though for different reasons. She is so confident about the original meaning of nomadism, that unlike her mentors, she does not even need to define her nomads as abstract, non-representational, and non-referential. She draws on the most "representational" texts (as Christopher Miller would describe them) written on Vietnam and Morocco by traditional Western anthropologists and historians. Milton Osborn (*The French Presence*), she contends, "comments upon the 'migratory theme of Vietnamese history' and the presence of floating populations living outside areas under the firm control of the government in the period preceding the arrival of French colonialism in 1895" (46). In the Moroccan context, too, French colonialism is blamed for territorializing the pre-colonial natives, not for grabbing their land and dispersing their communities. Forgetting the oxymoronic resonance of her gesture, she turns to Edmund Burke to add substance to her claim: "Nomadic tribes also comprised an important portion of the population in Morocco both before and after the imposition of French rule in 1912" (46). The problem with the references Lowe adopts lies less in their foreignness to Vietnam and Morocco than in the historical period for which they are selected. Both sources deal with the same pre-colonial period (the second half of the nineteenth century), when "nomadic tribes," according to Lowe's paraphrase of the nomadist lamentations, were "floating" across the "smooth" spaces of Vietnam and Morocco. Besides presupposing that sedentarity had not existed in these regions before the arrival of the colonizer, her nomad becomes an incarnation of, not the alternative to, the pre-colonial and tribal essence against which Fanon warns us.

Lowe's argument hardly develops as a critique. Nor does it promise a positive alternative to precolonial, colonial, or neocolonial forms of thinking. Her nomad thought is inscribed within a nativist and primitivist project, which not only falls short of divorcing the postcolonial from the precolonial, but also distorts the colonial dialectics that lie in between: instead of exposing nomadism as the product of an imperial ideology, especially in the modern French context, she rewrites it as a typical native practice that predetermines the shapes of anti-colonial struggle.⁷ The precolonial, colonial, and the postcolonial axis corresponds in her analysis to three historical phases whose linearity and smooth continuity are ensured by nomadism. Lowe holds French colonialism responsible for urbanizing Moroccan nomads without at the same time recognizing the transformations endemic to any colonial encounter. Moroccan nomadism,

as she mentions above, continued despite the “imposition of the French rule in 1912.” The “triumph” of nomadism and its war machine, as the belated seekers of exoticism would pleasantly put it, is even more attested by the recent political history of modern Vietnam. “Moreover,” Lowe continues, “one may argue, as Herman Rapaport does, that a history of nomadism continued beyond the colonial period of Vietnam, into the guerrilla tactics with which Viet Cong fought the American soldiers During the Vietnam War” (46).⁸

By reducing anti-colonial resistance to an instance of ethnic ritual, Lowe unproblematically subscribes to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s idealization of the nomadic war machine and to the general French stereotype of invincible nomads.⁹ Her views hardly identify with the political goals of the liberation movements taking place in the French colonies. She reduces North Africa and Indochina to hoards of nomads whose power is, nonetheless, symmetrical to the organized army of the colonialist state. The symmetry implies that the military resistance in Algeria and Vietnam can only be understood as the expression of a primitive nomadic inhibition incidentally brought to the surface by French colonial provocation. According to this view, it is neither possible to see sovereignty, autonomy, and state formation, for example, as political aims national movements of liberation seek to achieve, nor obvious to understand anti-colonial struggle as the expression of a national consciousness shaping and shaped by the mutations of modern history.

By the time Lowe begins to discuss the two francophone novels, there is little potential left in her nomad thought to make it deserve the label of heterogeneous and non-binary postcolonial. And the selection of Ben Jelloun’s *L’enfant de sable* as her primary text does not make her analysis less positivist than it already is. According to her reading, the novel “allegorizes problems of colonial domination, nativist reaction, and nomadic resistance in the protagonist’s ambivalent relationship to sexuality and gender roles” (45). Ben Jelloun’s novel may support Lowe’s critically unfounded notion of “nomadic resistance,” but it is precisely the sort of text that refuses to allegorize the cultural, political, and gender issues relating to colonial or postcolonial Morocco. *L’enfant de sable* is rather an exoticist (or self-exoticist) narrative which exploits the Moroccan South and the figure of the nomad to enchant the French reader with neo-colonial images of the Orient from which contemporary French writers themselves have turned away.

The perception of North Africa as a nomadic space becomes more authentic when it is shared by North African critics themselves. One of the critics who stands in *Yale French Studies* as a local representative of North African nomadism is the Tunisian Hedi Abdel-Jaouad. In his essay, Abdel-Jaouad describes the Swiss-Russian writer Isabelle Eberhardt as “this self-willed nomad” who “repudiated Europe and its civilization, converted to Islam, dressed as a man, assumed a male identity, and roamed the Sahara, untrammelled by the constraints of her youth and sex” (93). Like Lowe, Abdel-Jaouad drags Fanon into his “crosscultural” enterprise in an effort to postcolonize Eberhardt’s nomadic disguise: “Isabelle’s ‘écriture’ is remarkably protopostmodern and postcolonial: her treatment of Maghrebian reality is perceived by many readers in the Maghreb as an early attempt at what Meddeb calls ‘the rec-

tification of the Orientalist consensus” (101).¹⁰ Abdel-Jaouad naively takes Eberhadht’s disguise as a symbolic gesture implying the rejection of the colonial West and the adoption of a nomadic, North African identity. Yet the Western traveler’s disguise in the desert as a nomadic Taureg or bedouin is a common feature of the nomadist discourse, practiced by writers as diverse as Pierre Loti, T.E. Lawrence, Paul Bowles, and John Updike. Why is “becoming nomad” so different from becoming “native,” “Oriental,” or “African” as to be immune to postcolonial criticism?

Obviously, it is once again the misleading flexibility inherent in the term “nomad” that protects its users. On the one hand, to be a “nomad” signifies a loose identity, freed from its inherited constituents; on the other, it ensures a dose of “nativity” sufficient to admit the sedentary convert into the pleasures of the local scene without at the same time being stigmatized as intruder or outsider. Through the process of “becoming nomad,” so many historical conflicts and violent encounters are bypassed and pacified. The exchange of references to the marketplace of the nomadic desert gives the illusion that discourses of power such as Orientalism and Africanism are finally over. If Orientalism, as Anwar Abdel-Malek and Edward Said both tell us, underwent a major “crisis” after the Second World War, nomadism can only make it stand on its feet and provide Orientalism with a new cover to disguise its primitivist tropes as sophisticated critical terms. As long as nomadism continues to enjoy its multiple and flexible meanings, it risks recycling all the myths and discourses of power we thought we had already dismantled.

Notes

1. MLA Convention, San Francisco, December 1999.
2. See Foucault, Preface to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.
3. The biggest contradiction in *A Thousand Plateaus* is that all of its ideas about nomads consciously derive from European historical and anthropological texts. For an excellent critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s endorsement of ethnographic and colonial sources, see Christopher Miller’s essay, “The Postidentitarian Predicament.”
4. The nomadist discourse is the topic of my doctoral dissertation which I am currently revising for a book manuscript.
5. Woodhull worries that “in the name of affirming the resistant poetic force of Maghrebian writing in French, critics have developed a habit of reading this body of work in strict conformity with current French philosophical and literary norms as a way of ‘elevating’ it” (*Transfigurations* xxiii).
6. Woodhull sums up her critique of the novel in the following words: “on the one hand, the suffering of nomadic Sahrawi tribes who, having fled their lands in southern Morocco in the face of French invasion in the winter of 1909-10, undertake a seemingly interminable and ultimately futile march through the desert to the promised land in the North; and on the other hand, the pleasures of the nomads’ descendents whose enjoyment of the light, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations of the desert signals the possibility of freedom from both French and Moroccan domination in 1980, a freedom fundamentally depen-

dent on the recovery of both precolonial cultural traditions and the history of collective anticolonial struggle" (*Transfigurations* 172).

7. Some of the nineteenth-century French texts that clearly used the discourse of nomadism to expropriate the land in Algeria include Masqueray and Pomel. For a critique of how the French colonizer constructed the stereotype of the Algerian natives' incapacity to cultivate the land, see Guilhaume.

8. The article by Rapaport she refers to is "Vietnam: The Thousand Plateaus".

9. One of such definitions belongs to Jean Duvignaud: "La guérilla est un nomadisme dans la mesure où l'homme des villes rejoint l'homme des espaces ruraux pour entreprendre avec lui un combat contre l'Etat." Referring to the same geographical areas covered by Lowe's article, Duvignaud explains: "La guérilla est une plongée dans la terre, un retour aux bases. Ce fut le cas en Algérie et en Indochine où l'on a vu deux fois des partisans finir par l'emporter contre des armées organisées." ["The guerilla is a nomadism in the sense that the man of the cities joins the man of the rural spaces to undertake with him an attack against the state" . . . "The guerilla is a plunge into the land, a return to foundations. That was the case in Algeria and in Indochina where we saw twice the partisans prevail against organized armies," [au. trans.] (36, 37).

10. For an excellent critique of Iberhardt's tacit support of French colonialism in North Africa, see Behdad.

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