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# Review essay: DELEUZE AND RACE

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading *Deleuze and Race* has been both energising and frustrating. In many ways reviewing this book resonated with my experiences of reading of Deleuze and his frequent collaborator Guattari, and trying to make sense of their ideas and concepts. It was difficult. It was troubling. At times it was maddening. But it was also intensely productive and rewarding.

The essays reflect the fecundity of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking and writing. The book fizzes with suggestive ideas about how race, racialization and racism might be understood through a battery of Deleuzian concepts ranging from becoming to the abstract machine of faciality; from de-territorialisations and re-territorialisations to biopolitics in societies of control; from symptomology to encounters. The essays range widely across academic disciplines, geographical and historical contexts. For example, Laura Marks attempts to decolonise Deleuzian philosophy by tracing that she calls the 'occulted sources' of Islamic philosophy (especially the writing on Ibn Sina) that run through – but have been cleansed – from the bastard line of philosophy that Deleuze championed. John Drabinski (p.288) focuses on how Édouard Glissant alerted us to the fact the 'Americas are already Deleuzian' by 'recasting the rhizome and nomad as creolised subjects, collectivities and geographies'. Numerous chapters (including those by Arun Saldanha, Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, Suzana Milevska and Arun Saldanha, and Amit Rai) put Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy to work to challenge the representationalism that dominates most writing on race and racism across the social sciences and humanities; while others examine the sorting performed by the abstract machine of faciality (Claire Colebrook, Jason Michael Adams, Brianne Gallagher, and Simone Bignall).

In this review essay I distil what I see as some of the fundamental critiques and arguments that run through *Deleuze and Race*. The primary contributions are a set of elaborations of what Deleuze – as a key philosopher of difference (Saldanha, 2013, p.6) – can do for theorisations of race. While Deleuze and Guattari may have had relatively little to say directly about race in their writing, this collection certainly illustrates and elaborates the potential of (re)thinking race through Deleuze. But, I then want open up the discussion of what I see as some of the silences in this collection of essays, and question what this book wants and how it performs.

## A THOUSAND TINY RACES...

For me, the most compelling contribution of *Deleuze and Race* is the way it develops and consolidates what Amit Rai (p.277) describes as '...an effort to wrest the practice and concept of race away from reactive dialectics and the closure of

representation...’ My first encounter with this project of challenging entrenched habits of race thinking across the social sciences and humanities came from reading Arun Saldanha’s (2007) book *Psychedelic White* that turned to Deleuze and Guattari to argue for the need to ‘reontologise race’ (Saldanha, 2006). The encounter with *Psychedelic White* was beguiling and inspirational. At various stages during my PhD I had tried to make sense of Deleuze, but it was reading *Psychedelic White* that I began to see and make connections between Deleuze’s concepts and my research. In *Deleuze and Race* this challenge to the ‘representationalism’ that dominates academic writing on race matures. I read this book as an extension and elaboration of the arguments and experiments that I had first encountered when reading *Psychedelic White*. Reading *Deleuze and Race* didn’t spark the same energies as reading *Psychedelic White* – but this probably says more about me than this book. *Deleuze and Race* offers an exciting and important contribution that maps out how Deleuze and Guattari’s work opens up new terrains for thinking about race, racisms and anti-racist struggles.

### **A different difference**

‘This volume affirms that race is real, investigating racial difference *in itself* as it persists as a biocultural, biopolitical force amid other forces. This does not mean for a moment that race is set in stone. On the contrary, the absurdity of racial essentialism is brought into much clearer focus when its intractable fluidity is appreciated’

(Saldanha, 2013, p.8)

As Arun Saldanha suggests many of the essays enrol Deleuze (and Guattari) as part of an argument for the need for a radical ontological shift in how racial difference is theorised. In so doing, they echo recent arguments for the relevance of Deleuze to feminist theory, and the work of feminist writers like Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook and Rosi Bradoitti who have developed theories of sexual difference that ‘push out’ representationalism. The argument running through a number of chapters is that Deleuze and Guattari offer an alternate philosophy of difference to those inherited from Kant and Hegel, Freud and Lacan – and which dominate contemporary writing on race. Just as feminist engagements with the concept of ‘becoming-woman’ has been driven by a desire to ‘move away from the essentialist-constructivist dichotomy that has haunted the theoretical field [of feminism]’ (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013, p.132), a number of the chapters in *Deleuze and Race* seek to perform a similar manoeuvre to theorise race differently.

Elizabeth Grosz captures how Deleuze helps shift the foundations of how we understand difference – a shift that moves from a *difference-between-identities* or *difference from* to *difference in itself*. Deleuzian philosophy offers:

‘...a difference capable of being understood outside the dominance or regime of the One, the self same, the imaginary play of mirrors and doubles, the structure of binary pairs in which what is different can be understood only as a variation or negation of identity’

(Grosz, 1993, p.170.)

A primary concern in a number of the chapters is to invoke difference in itself (Deleuze, 1994) as part of a critique of the representationalism that underpins dominant theories of race and racism, and escape the ways in which '[r]acial difference has overwhelmingly been thought of as a grid of intimately related but mutually exclusive categories' (Saldanha, 2013, p.9).

Various chapters elaborate how race can be understood as immanent, unruly and multiple, in an attempt to avoid the deadening effects of framing race as primarily as a problem of epistemology and interpretation. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin's chapter is perhaps most explicit in the way in which it uses difference in itself to challenge and re-orientate understandings of intersectionality. Through a 'theory of emergence' that focuses on the processes through which racial (or sexual) differences are made, they dismantle the implied axes of difference that tend to characterise work on intersectionality. Elsewhere, in their chapter on 'the eternal return of race' Suzana Milevska and Arun Saldanha argue that 'deontologising' – or abolishing – race is insufficient for understanding and combatting contemporary racisms in Eastern Europe. Instead they propose a conception of race that affirms the unruliness and multiplicity of race, and argue for a 'rigorously materialist understanding of the wider histories and geographies of the racial order' (p.244). Amit Rai (p.269) pursues a different challenge to the dominance of representationalism, focusing on the '*worldly* scaffolding that comes to structure race and gender' to argue that racialisation needs to be approached through 'ecologies of sensation' that pay close attention to the affective intensities through which race comes to matter. Bianca Isaki mobilises an understanding of race as immanent, multiple and unruly to challenge the ideologies of colourblindness evident in conservative campaigns against policies that recognise Hawaiian ancestry and entitlements. This colourblind conservatism 'trades on a concept of racial difference as opaque and unknowable in order to propose its own ontology that, in turn, abolishes race from public, especially legal, spheres' (p.117). Isaki uses Deleuze to point to another logic of legality that focuses on how the making of citizenship is an encounter between racial difference and the law.

## **FACES**

'You don't so much have a face as slide into one'

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.177).

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the 'abstract machine of faciality' is another important motif running through the book. The abstract machine of faciality is like a 'cybernetic sorting device' (Saldanha, 2007, p.101) that orders and judges bodies through their resemblance to categories.

A number of the chapters in the collection enrol to concept of abstract machine of faciality to expose and explain the mechanics of racist structures of signification. For example, Brianne Gallagher examines the production of the white-man face – against which racial differences are sorted and judged – through circulating images and representations of the US soldier-body through cinema, video games and

prosthetic technologies. Michael Jason Adam's chapter – 'The King's Two Faces' - provides an interesting account of how the Michael Jackson transgressed and transformed the abstract machine of faciality, and how 'non-whiteness' is sorted and judged in the United States of America. Adam's argues that through *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* Michael Jackson's produced new forms of 'worldliness, Americanness and African-Americanness' (p.168) that deterritorialised and reterritorialised the abstract machine of facility and established the conditions of possibility for Barack Obama's election as president in 2008. The broader point is how popular culture, and the lines of flight established by Michael Jackson, provided the 'normalising political aesthetics of the neoliberal postracialism that followed in its wake' (p.169).

In a chapter on the Palm Island Riots – a violent protest that followed the death in police custody of an aboriginal man, Mulrunji Doomadgee, and the subsequent acquittal of the arresting officer of murder – Simone Bignall argues that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of faciality can help offer a 'strategy for combatting racist power relations and transforming racist structures of signification' (p.73). Faciality provides a means for understanding the technologies through which a 'field of whiteness' in Australia is ordered and normalised and against which racial difference is judged. The desire to then dismantle the 'White-man face' leads Bignall to argue for a rethinking of racial difference beyond its negative coding in the abstract machine of faciality. Instead she argues that race can also be 'positively seductive' and multiple, echoing arguments by other authors about the need to proliferate – not abolish – race.

## **A DELEUZIAN ANTI-RACIST POLITICS?**

*Deleuze and Race* offers some forceful challenges to how we might conceptualise race and racism. Many of these chapters reaffirmed my conviction of the usefulness of thinking in terms of racism of phenotype or focusing on habit to understand how race comes to matter in the quick processes of making sense. But what troubles me is that the taking part of the foundations of the social constructionism (and much of critical race theory) is not accompanied by an equal effort to imagine what anti-racist political struggles inflected by Deleuzian philosophy might look like.

Some of the chapters do hint at some of the ways in which Deleuzian concepts might inform anti-racist praxis and politics. For example, chapters on cinema begin to think through how thought-images might disturb habits of race-thinking and racist sense making, or format new ways of encountering racial difference. Sam Okoth Opondo examines how cinema offers 'creative moments of encounter that oblige us to think otherwise' (p.250). Focusing on the film *Mississippi Masala*, he suggests cinema provides provocative encounters that map an 'aesthetic and ethical impetus for thinking differently about race' (p.265). Alternatively, Chad Shomura considers the film *Snow Falling on Cedars* and argues that the film experiments with 'becoming-love' in ways that play on the indeterminacy of race, highlighting 'inchoate interracial intimacies dimly twinkling within the darkness of racism's shaded by monochromatic romance' (p.209). While the film falls back into 'monochromatic love', the story produces moments where 'interracial intimacies' are virtual – but

never actualised. In Shomura's reading the film's experiments with 'becoming-love' provides ethical and aesthetic engagements with racial formations, and suggests how things might be otherwise. Elsewhere in the book Suzana Milevska and Arun Saldanha, point to the how artists – like filmmaker Milutin Jovanović or performance artist Tanja Ostojčić - use shame to open up ethics. And yet, beyond a call for the affirmation of a different difference 'against the compartmentalizing and exploitative mechanisms of the neoliberal state the illicit joys of solidarity, cohabitation and compossibility' (Milevska and Saldanha, 2014, p.245), it is difficult to see what this anti-racist political struggle might look like.

In her essay 'A thousand tiny sexes: feminism and rhizomatics', Elizabeth Grosz (1993) suggests that one of the most promising conjunctions between feminism and the Deleuzian philosophy stems from the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari understand political struggle. Grosz (1993, p.170) sees affinity between feminist theory and practice Deleuze and Guattari's conception of political struggle as 'decentred, molecular, multiple struggles, diversified, non-aligned or aligned in only provisional and temporary networks, in non-hierarchical rhizomatic connections, taking place at those site where repression or anti-production is most intense'. And I think a parallel argument can – and needs to – be made about anti-racist political struggles. I think this book would have been more persuasive with contributions that tackled anti-racist politics and practice more directly. Recently a number of exciting books have been published that draw heavily on Deleuze and Guattari to imagine new forms of politics and political organization. For example, John Protevi's (2009) *Political Affects* examines the relationship between the social and the somatic in the making of political events like the columbine High School Massacre or Hurricane Katrina; William Connolly's (2013) *The Fragility of Things* that argues for a militant pluralist assemblage' to confront neoliberalism's contribution to the fragility of things; and in different ways Brian Massumi's (2013) *Semblance and Event* and Anja Kanngieser's (2013) *Experimental Politics and the Making of Worlds* explore how new forms of experimental politics around situations, performance arts, and 'thinking-feeling' might be constructed. It would have been wonderful to see chapters in this book draw on these kinds of ideas about politics and social transformation, and map out new forms of anti-racist politics and struggles. I think this kind of emphasis would have complemented the arguments for the need to reconceptualise race, while also introducing new dimensions of Deleuzian philosophy to work on race and racism.

#### **WHAT CAN A BOOK DO?**

'...like the book itself, the body is analysed and assessed more in terms of what it can do, the things that it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations it undergoes and the machinic connections it forms with other bodies, what it can link with, how it can proliferate its capacities...'

(Grosz 1993, p.171).

I read this book in fits and starts across a number of months and this undoubtedly shaped my encounter with the essays, but I think is also symptomatic of the book.

In these encounters with the book I found myself getting frustrated with how book was put together. The essays read as a haphazard collection – a montage, perhaps. On occasions the essays rubbed nicely along side each other. For example, the essays by Simone Bignall and Ian Buchanan shared an interest in racisms in contemporary Australia examined through the Palm Island Riot (Bignall) or an analysis of the ‘symptomatology of racial politics’ in the Australian film *Jindabyne* that resonates with John Howard’s ‘national apology’ to the lost generation of indigenous Australians, but did nothing to change the material living conditions of indigenous Australians or take responsibility for histories of dispossession (Buchanan). These occasionally productive juxtapositions felt serendipitous rather than purposeful. I don’t think the editors were putting the method of montage to work – although this might have been an interesting experiment.

Each time I sat down with this book I found myself wanting a stronger editorial voice. I don’t want to diminish the labour that has clearly gone into putting together such a provocative and varied edited collection. This is demanding and often unrecognized work. But I think the book might have better embodied the broader project to which it aspires. This may go against the grain of the way in which Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.4) characterised books or imagined their writing. For example, in the opening pages of *A Thousand Plateaus* they argue a book is an assemblage, with ‘lines of articulation, segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight movements or deterritorialisation and destratification.’ Deleuze and Guattari eschew questions of what a text means. Instead they are interested in how a book functions; how does a book connect with other things. What I am asking for perhaps falls back into the kind of tree-like, linear and ordered system that Deleuze and Guattari abhor. But not necessarily. There might have been imaginative ways of putting together the edited collection as a rhizome or a map that was explicitly orientated to experimentation and deterritorialising race. If we ask how a book performs – in the way that Grosz asks of books and bodies in the quote above – my sense is that this book falls short of its potential. More effort guiding the reader, differently organising the chapters, and shaping encounters with the different essays, would have enhanced the my encounter with the books and aided the work of making connections.

This question of how this book performs – and to ask ‘what does this book wants’ to borrow and rework W.T.J. Mitchell’s suggestive phrase – relates to another question that ate away at me as I read the essays and came back to the book: Who is this book written for? It is published as part of the Deleuze Connections series, so presumably the imagined audience is primarily Deleuze scholars. If this is so – and the way in which the book is put together convinced me this is the case – I think it misses an opportunity. Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas seldom feature in work from across the social sciences and humanities on race and racism – mirroring a lack of dialogue and engagement between feminisms and Deleuzian philosophy that Elizabeth Grosz identified in the early 1990s. In the last few years, I think we have witnessed a similar recognition of, and excitement about, what Deleuze and his concepts might offer for those seeking to understand and combat race, racialisation,

and racism. *Deleuze and Race* captures something of the excitement around what Deleuze's philosophy might offer academic work on race and racism. But the book could have done more to make connections and forge alliances. So, while many of the chapters offer valuable contributions to rethinking race through the more-than-representational, the collection as a whole makes little effort to reach out to scholars of race who are not well versed in Deleuze's ideas. The book does not offer a welcoming introduction to the philosophy of Deleuze and what it has to offer scholars of race and racism. My hunch is that the tone of essays, the styles of writing, and the vocabularies they rely on, will alienate the uninitiated and the sceptical. My worry is that this collection will talk past much existing work on race and racism, and this diminishes the contribution of the book.

This is a real shame, because I think engagements with the philosophy of Deleuze have the potential to shake the foundations of academic research on race. This is a project that many of the authors in this collection are leading. We might argue about where the responsibilities for dialogue might lie. There is certainly a case to be made for the need for greater curiosity and openness to difficult ideas – such as those developed by Deleuze and Guattari – within interdisciplinary work on race and racism. However, books like this need to do more work to reach out, translate and engage. Too many of the chapters fall back into what many will find to be obtuse language and faddish concepts. This is unfortunate because it provides an alibi for ignoring or dismissing the questions and challenges that this book poses. Much of this critique might be unfair. It is probably asking too much of a single book and it may misread the aspirations of the book. But this is certainly what I wanted of this book. I have found encounters with a number of concepts when reading Deleuze and Guattari - and many of the contributors to this book – enormously productive in my own thinking about how to conceptualise race and racism. I wanted this book to embody the critique and challenges that Deleuzian philosophy offers and to show a broad constituency what Deleuze and Guattari's concepts matter to all of us studying race. I wanted the book to live up to its potential to transform how race, racialization and racism are theorized across the social sciences and humanities, and to develop new forms of affirmative critique. The book promises much but in the end – for this reader at least – it didn't quite live up to these promises.

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