

REVIEW ESSAY



Ignore the Poets at Your Peril: A Reflection on *Neither Settler nor Native; The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*

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ABSTRACT

Mahmood Mamdani has posited a new approach to decolonization and to the question of extreme violence meted out in decades of independence, the age of political modernity. To do so, he explores the issues of justice and accountability in five case studies: Native Americans in the United States; the Nuremberg trials in Germany; South Africa and apartheid; South Sudan; and Israel/Palestine. Do his ideas offer his readers something really new? This review questions the historical methodologies used by Mamdani, a political theorist, and explores different artistic origins for people in these countries who have long articulated the lived experience between “settler” and “native.”

KEYWORDS

modernity; genocide; decolonization; perpetrator; victim; justice; imperialism; political identity

MAHMOOD MAMDANI HAS OFFERED HIS READERS a grand narrative with which to review and revise our investment in our political identities. After providing five case studies that outline how extreme colonial violence has infected the political modernity of various nation-states, he concludes:

Recognizing this history gives us the power to change perspectives and reality. The history of political modernity tells those of us who identify with the nation that we have been coopted. The nation is not inherent in us. It overwhelmed us. Political modernity led us to believe that we could not live without the nation-state, lest we not only be denied its privileges but also find ourselves dispossessed in the way of the permanent minority. The nation made the immigrant a settler and the settler a perpetrator. The nation made the local a native and the native a perpetrator, too. In this new history, everyone is colonized—settler and native, perpetrator and victim, majority and minority. Once we learn this history, we might prefer to be survivors instead.¹

Mamdani reaches this historical opportunity by exploring the legacies of extreme colonial violence in the United States, Germany, South Africa, Sudan, and Israel. In the United States, Mamdani analyzes the nineteenth-century genocide of Native Americans and what has happened to the survivors within U.S. politics today. In Germany, he explores what he sees as the great hypocrisy of the Nuremberg trials and the successful expulsion of Germany’s Jews to Palestine. Postapartheid South Africa represents for Mamdani a more honest reckoning with the binary of “settler vs. native.” South Sudan represents the worst kind of national failure. And, if I am reading him correctly, Israel might stand for a site of hope.

How can this be done? As Mamdani states, all of these places have been marked by “extreme violence triggered against groups framed and identified politically in the process of state formation.”² In each case, the countering of such violence has had “perverse” consequences.

“Those who call for criminal justice focus on individual acts of violence: they draw a list of atrocities, identify its perpetrators, and call for justice for victims.”³ The terrible mistake often made in doing so, to Mamdani, is that the identity of the victim is defined by the perpetrator, which “translates into court processes that call for each crime to be followed by a proportional punishment.” This individualizes each crime, and obscures the issues and the history, and hides a larger group of constituencies. To treat these crimes with criminal justice is to leave the political structure intact.⁴

It is a very challenging call, not to arms, but to what Mamdani considers a more radical restructuring of societies, based no longer on the investment in the nation-state. What is less inspiring, however, is that this is really not a new call. Audre Lorde said something much simpler and more direct in 1984 when she asked white liberal feminists to think outside of the structures that gave them privilege. Powerfully and succinctly, she said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁵ I can only hope Mamdani has read and internalized these words.

I will address the case studies shortly, but I bring Lorde into my review of a book where few women live. There is race in Mamdani’s offered world, but no gender. If women do appear, it is as victims of rape or murder (with the sole exception of Winnie Mandela in chapter 3, and her political leadership is muted and excised). Those “hunter-presidents” (Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln)⁶ whom Mamdani excoriates for their roles in the killing of Native Americans also lived in an ungendered world of political philosophy, and the writing of such a historical analysis in 2021 seems not only and decidedly nonmodern but bears all the marks of the master’s tools. Women scholars are sometimes invited to Mamdani’s intellectual party, but the experience, governance, leadership, and organization of women are nowhere to be found. This massive absence makes this book extremely frustrating. On the one hand, Mamdani skillfully invites us to rethink our own identities and our political (and personal) investment in how the nation-state structures our lives; but on the other hand, it becomes difficult to find oneself so unnamed. The exclusion of women falls into the very trap Mamdani would usher us away from, in his obvious and urgent concern about the intellectual prison of false binaries.

In chapter 1, “The Indian Question in the United States,” Mamdani studies the colonization of American Indians in the nineteenth century. Early in the chapter, he states that canonical nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. writers were fascinated by “the settler-colonial encounter, elaborating it in a mounting canon of Eurocentric and naturalizing stories.”⁷ However, with the turn of Americans in the mid-twentieth century to “class consciousness and later race and sex consciousness,” Indians were forgotten. Mamdani then writes: “Today Indians are absent from the work of cutting-edge intellectuals.”⁸ He adds, “As disfavored Latino immigrants, enslaved Africans, and the descendants of enslaved Africans occupy center stage in the drama of deracialization, the Indian is more marginalized than ever in the American story and resulting sense of national identity. Why this radical omission?”⁹

Mamdani answers his own question with the idea that social justice and human rights thinkers have conflated the African American and American Indian experiences. But nowhere in his bibliography is the compelling work of Native scholars themselves, historians like Ned Blackhawk,¹⁰ the legal scholar Maggie Blackhawk,¹¹ or novelists like Joy Harjo.¹² Tiya Miles has now written at least two books that explore the lived experiences that both divided and united Black Americans and American Indians.¹³ Instead of engaging in this powerful and vibrant new scholarship, Mamdani again borrows an outdated mode of seeing—he renders

all Native Americans dead or invisible in the current window of U.S. politics. No mention whatsoever of those Standing Rock activists like LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, who recently died at the unfair age of sixty-four, a Lakota Sioux politician who organized thousands against pipelines that would cross Indigenous lands. No one in her presence could begin to imagine that Native Americans have been erased from the U.S. political imaginary.

In “Nuremberg: The Failure of Denazification,” Mamdani challenges the idea that the Nuremberg trials held Germans to account for the crimes of World War II. One of the most provocative claims of this chapter, and one of the most interesting, is that Nazism was successful. He writes, “Now that the Jews are gone, Germans are content to uphold Israel as a refuge for the minority they could not abide under the terms of European political modernity.”¹⁴ In this view, Germany accepted guilt but does not, in fact fails to, recognize the “same nationalist ideology at work in both the Third Reich and Israel.”¹⁵ This happened, according to Mamdani, because other institutions, that is, U.S. corporations, profited from the slave labor of Jews in the Holocaust. There is no doubting this. Mamdani admits in one of the few citations he includes that Aimé Césaire noted this in his *Discourse on Colonialism*. To fully prosecute the bureaucrats of the Third Reich would have meant a U.S. reckoning with this racial and economic truth. But without more evidence—more historical evidence—Mamdani overlooks many of the same facts that Israel did in the early years of its existence, namely that a great majority of the Jews who fled the Holocaust to Palestine were not German but Polish. Far greater numbers of German Jews fled to the United States.

The only society that meets with Mamdani’s qualified approval for a truer accounting of political violence is South Africa. In chapter 3, “Settlers and Natives in Apartheid South Africa,” the author continues his idea that “settler and native are joined; neither can exist in isolation. Should you destroy one, the other would cease to exist.”¹⁶ How did they do this? By razing “one pillar of the settler-versus-native distinction in their country: race as political identity.”¹⁷ This is a key difference between South Africa and the United States, where only partial “deracialization” has taken place. In the United States, the “native-versus-settler distinction” is as deep as ever, while in South Africa, “half of those determinants [of native vs. settler] were made visible and were contested.”¹⁸

Reading the chapter, I do not understand how this could be. There are no footnotes, no experiential anecdotes, and no explanation of how this idea of deracialization occurs. It is always important to distinguish between the practices and legacies of racism and racist violence in African countries and the United States, but this book attempts to situate the United States as the harbinger of colonial and racial violence. Yet there is little offered to show us how the so-called “natives” have lived through this socially or psychologically, or how they have narrated this divorce from racial identity. And the condescension drips through sentences written like this: “The ANC [African National Congress] did not go away though. It turned to armed struggle, as would the faithful to a messiah.”¹⁹ And yet this is the only chapter in which a “native” woman is mentioned. Winnie Mandela earns recognition here, but only as an informant to her husband. Yet Winnie Mandela’s feet were on the ground, often in a terrifying way, that Nelson’s could not be for twenty-seven years. I suggest that her story is just as relevant, which deeply contradicts Mamdani’s view.

And then Mamdani turns to Sudan in chapter 4, titled “Colonialism, Independence and Secession.” If the author were truly trying to retell what he thinks is a familiar story of North vs. South, of Arab vs. African, he would have had to also immerse himself in the complicated

history of Sudan in the nineteenth century. There is barely more than a paragraph on the nineteenth century in this chapter. All of the racism and colonialism, all of the bitterness of violence between not only the north and south of Sudan but also Darfur (unmentioned), Mamdani attributes to the racial cartography of the British imperialists after 1898. As Mamdani describes it: “Steeped in European racial ideology, it was plain to the British that Sudan was home to Arabs and Africans, one could tell just by looking. What is more, the Arabs lived in the North and the Africans lived in the South, roughly speaking.”²⁰ No references are offered for this claim, which one might consider accurate if one did not explore the relationship between Sudan, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. Mamdani goes on to say that the settlers were “the Arabic speaker in the North,”²¹ not the British. Again, no source directs us to whom this northern Arabic speaker could have been. And finally, he claims that “postcolonial Arab nationalists looked to al-Mahdi as the founder of the nation, one in a long line dating back to those earliest migrants said to have brought the high Arabic culture to Sudan.”²²

Without a bibliography, it is difficult for me to judge what sources Mamdani read or consulted for these conclusions. In full disclosure, much of my earlier work has explored what colonialism and imperialism meant in the Nile Valley, and I had to rely on sources from the nineteenth century to learn that the racial configurations and discrimination that entrapped so many of the tribes located in the Bahr al-Ghazal emanated from the long trade in slavery between Sudan, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire. The sad history of Sudan’s tribal ascriptions, racial identities, and hierarchies can be found in the Arabic term *abid*. This term, the plural of “slave” in Arabic, is commonly used to taunt darker-skinned Sudanese in Khartoum and in Cairo, and is haunted by the convenient commercial “ethnographies” created by the *jellaba* (or slave raiders), often in the early nineteenth century. Nor does Mamdani explore the work of Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, whose scholarship has examined how Southern Sudanese have created their own culture in Khartoum, and thus where a figure like John Garang learned what it meant to be a Dinka leader for the Southern Sudanese.

To his credit, Mamdani does reference the Turko-Egyptian forces that colonized Sudan in 1821, although not the work of the many Sudanese and other historians who have devoted thousands of pages to historical analysis of this time period—an era in Sudanese history that lasted as long as the British colonial administration did. Yet when he moves into the idea of “Making the Arab,” as he calls it, he writes that “the British learned the stories the Sudanese told themselves about themselves—stories based in family genealogies going back centuries.”²³ What were these stories? Who narrated them? Could Mamdani have reread Tayeb Salih’s powerful, majestic, and violent novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (written simultaneously in Arabic and in English)? There is so much new literature coming out in Arabic from Southern Sudanese writers who have explored their racial and national identity in numerous languages, works that could have helped Mamdani hear the different vocabularies of tribal and/or racial identities and how fluid and fluent these can be. Unfortunately, he gives old colonialists like Harold MacMichael the last word on that.

Mamdani shares with his readers that he was a member of the African Union (AU) Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan in 2013. As he explains:

The findings of the five-member commission are contained in two reports. Four members agreed to sign the majority report. The lone dissenter was myself; I authored the minority report. Two questions divided me from the rest of the commission. The first concerned the scope of

accountability: Would the possibility of accountability be restricted to South Sudanese, or would anyone who was in the country at the time potentially be held accountable. . . . The second question was whether the violence would be conceptualized as political or criminal—whether trials would take priority over reform.²⁴

Mamdani's challenge to what he sees as this hypocrisy helps us to understand the framework of *Neither Settler nor Native*. After different, often tribally united, militias and armies launched terrible massacres of the civilian communities that had sought refuge in United Nations (UN) compounds in South Sudan, and the UN protectors did nothing, how could they too not be a part of such vicious violence? "How, I wondered, could the International Criminal Court demand that African leaders be responsible for ending a 'culture of impunity' when the UN itself was unwilling to hold its own leadership and functionaries accountable for what the AU Commission called 'crimes against humanity?'"²⁵ Here I recognized the profound anger and sense of social loss that is an important part of this often-frustrating book. It is at this moment of observation where *Neither Settler nor Native* finds its human touch and its sensitive chronicling. It can only have been heartbreaking to read the evidence submitted before this commission. Still, having myself witnessed and documented decades of Southern Sudanese refugees trying to survive in Cairo as victims of changing border policies and long civil wars, I have to ask: can people be who they say they are, and not only identified as "slaves"?

Mamdani then moves to "The Israel/Palestine Question" in chapter 5, which is an important concluding parable for this book. This chapter offers more documentation and more perspectives than many of the previous ones, although it remains hard to follow all of his sources without footnotes. There is no terribly new topic here but a significant discussion of the oxymoronic paradigm of Israel being a democracy, but only for Jews. Mamdani has the courage to say that "the expunging of non-Jews has taken the form of ethnic cleansing, dispossession, segregation, fragmentation, apartheid, and denial of identity,"²⁶ although whenever I see the term "non-Jews," I hear Lord Arthur Balfour and I cringe. Mamdani spends pages examining the identity of those who bridge the invented worlds between "Arab" and "Jew"—both the Mizrahim and Palestinian citizens of Israel—often in a very interesting way. But his fight against the structures of these identities fails before the history of lived experiences.

For example, Mamdani states that the "Mizrahim have been de-Arabized through the suppression of the Arabic language and associated culture in Israel."²⁷ There can be no doubt as to the severe discrimination against Mizrahi communities that began in the late 1940s (if certainly not before with French-Jewish missions sent to Morocco to "enlighten" Maghrebi Jews in the nineteenth century). He rightly cites the important work of Ella Shohat in particular. But these Mizrahi Jews were not de-Arabized. In fact, in certain regiments of the Palmach, and in intelligence units throughout Mossad or Shin Bet, generations of Mizrahim used their Arabic to amplify the security status of Israel. And there are also the powerful works of Mizrahi novelists and short-story writers like Sami Mikhail and others who wrote—in Arabic—after coming to Israel from cities like Baghdad in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

I do find it both fascinating and provocative that Mamdani writes that the Mizrahim were "colonized by the Ashkenazim."²⁸ In the many Israeli films that I have watched with Mizrahi characters—and these are usually comedies—I would argue a little differently and say that being a native Arabic speaker who is living in a world of Hebrew vocabulary is played comedically as "passing." There is a scene in *HaShoter Azoulay* (The policeman Azoulay, 1971) in which Azoulay, himself a Mizrahi officer played by the Ashkenazi actor Shaike Ophir, falsely accuses a Mizrahi

criminal of being Palestinian. The criminal, played by Yosef Shiloach, is deeply offended. The two squabble in Hebrew, but then begin to soften and speak colloquial Arabic before Azoulay moves into beautiful classical Arabic. Both characters use the language to pass—as Israelis but also as Arabs. The film won the Academy Award in 1972 for best foreign language film.

In this review, I have repeated my wish that Mamdani had done historical research more carefully. It is not true that the Zionizing project began in the early twentieth century.²⁹ It began a generation earlier, in Russia, with groups like BILU and Lovers of Zion. Balfour was an anti-Semite who was indeed a supporter of Zionism because of his own reading of the Old Testament, not because of “political Zionism.”³⁰ The first High Commissioner of Palestine was Sir Herbert Samuel, not Robert.³¹ I craved more voices of Palestinian Arabs in this chapter, in testimony to the many ways in which intellectuals, writers, and artists have confronted the world between binaries as Mamdani has tried to do—where is Mahmoud Darwish or Emile Habibi?

What Mamdani does give, particularly in this last chapter, is an absorbing and frustrating narrative of the Israeli colonizing of Palestine in the twentieth century. Populations who do not fit into his structure are unfortunately omitted—there are only crumbs here for Ethiopian Jews. I was surprised to find less on the very long and intimate alliance between the United States and Israel. Then he concludes with some very American finger shaking at the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement (which he does admire, mostly): “BDS neither works systematically with anti-Zionist forces within Israel nor makes efforts to cultivate more such forces. To change minds en masse will require something else: a political mobilization that includes BDS but goes beyond it by presenting to Israeli Jews a livable future beyond Zionism. The South African movement provides a model for such mobilization.”³²

I too wish to find hope in the success of South Africa’s decolonization and to harness that hope when thinking of the future of Palestinians and Israelis. It pains me that our Mandela-inspired romance with the ANC has come apart with the news of violence and corruption coming out of South Africa. I have learned, however, from the political scientist and anthropologist Wale Adebani (also my colleague) that for many young Black South Africans, the inability of the ANC to provide even street signs in poor neighborhoods amid the proliferation in Johannesburg of gated (armed and walled) wealthier neighborhoods has led them to revolt against the ANC’s own self-identity as decolonizers. I wish I could trust Mamdani’s vision—an aerial view from thousands of miles above these different countries. But I cannot find my trust. I finished *Neither Settler nor Native* wondering who has the right to articulate these identities. Who has shown us the path away from the nation-state while still internalizing a deeper sense of political, cultural, racial, or ethnic identity? From the poets, storytellers, and filmmakers, we must learn that languages already cross these boundaries. Those are the voices I trust more.

About the Author

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Endnotes

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3. Mamdani, p. 15.
4. Mamdani, p. 16.
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20. Mamdani, p. 197.
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23. Mamdani, pp. 207–8.
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29. Mamdani, p. 257.
30. Mamdani, p. 258.
31. Mamdani, p. 259.
32. Mamdani, p. 323.