

Watsuji and Deleuze and Guattari in the Climate of Culture

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**Seth Jacobowitz,**

**"Watsuji and Deleuze and Guattari in the Climate of Culture"**

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**Abstract:** Seth Jacobowitz, in his paper "Watsuji and Deleuze and Guattari in the Climate of Culture," analyzes theories of cultural properties in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* alongside Watsuji Tetsuro's prewar *Climate and Culture*. At stake in these investigations is the status of the West as a universalizing particular ratified by these authors in the instance of its own critique. We are confronted on the one hand with Deleuze and Guattari's exoticized, Orientalist promise of an alternative economy of meaning derived from the Balinese term for "plateau" and the morphology of the rhizome and, on the other hand, by the "human geography" in Watsuji Tetsuro's *Culture and Climate*, which explicitly places itself under the sign of racial science. Jacobowitz seeks to disclose how despite their articulation over and against Eurocentrism, these two theories in fact reify the cultural properties of the West and remap them on a global scale.

## Seth JACOBOWITZ

### Watsuji and Deleuze and Guattari in the Climate of Culture

I would like to begin with an observation into the persistence of the binary opposition between the West and non-West (a.k.a. "the Rest"), one deeply marked by a distinction between what is presumed to be a universally applicable theoretical vocabulary on the one hand, and the particularity of native, indigenous, or local experience on the other. I have in mind an example from a work which numbers among contemporary philosophy's greatest challenges to prevailing modes of thought and sociality: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. From this text which seeks to push Western philosophy from its traditional ruts and linear reductivisms into multi-dimensional -- if not necessarily higher -- grounds, I call attention to a key passage in which the authors ponder the factors of climate and geography for cultivating modes of thought, notably the arboreal obsession of the West: "It is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy ... The West has a special relation to the forest, and deforestation ... The East presents a different figure: a relation to the steppe and the garden (or in some cases, the desert and the oasis), rather than forest and field ... Does not the East, Oceania in particular, offer something like a rhizomatic model opposed in every respect to the Western model of the tree?" (18). The inspiration for the title of their work, Deleuze and Guattari continue, was Gregory Bateson's study of sexual play in Balinese culture, in which the term plateau signifies "a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end" (22). In short, the perfect orgasm; perfected, that is, by an exotic Oriental people, translated by a Western specialist and then adapted for the ostensible purpose of reforming Western thought. We have surely seen this sort of operation appear in the philosophic, artistic and literary traditions which Deleuze and Guattari will go on to problematize in other, far more effective ways.

But let us probe further. We are presented with a universal figure of the West, symbolizing domestic fixity and the branching of categorical knowledge toward the transcendental, brought into oppositional relationship with a foreign, extensible and subterranean other which promises an alternative economy of un hoped-for jussance. But as Deleuze and Guattari bring in the Balinese distinction of the rhizome-plateau, is this alienness understood on its own terms, or is it at every step interpolated through the filter, however self-critical, of the West? Deleuze and Guattari further qualify these seemingly incompatible up-and-down terms as follows: "We call a 'plateau' any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome. We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus" (22). Thus, the two terms form a symbiotic relationship, and repress the term plateau's connotations of an elevation, and perhaps even of a surface. We might also note the "weed in the human cabbage patch" called China, a reference to Henry Miller that presumably sets up a homology between China and Oceania, the weed and the rhizome. This question pertains not to how accurate Deleuze and Guattari are to an original Balinese conception, but rather what transpires when two incommensurable schemas of representation are brought into the event of translation.

But we are already past the act of translation, and it would seem for these two "plateaus" that one term has been wholly appropriated into the other. We are not made privy to what the Balinese term [X] means in its own cultural context. In rendering what they understand to be the already-translated Balinese signifier, Deleuze and Guattari nevertheless situate it in the positivity of the "universal" theoretical vocabulary of the West. This horizon of understanding will provide all of the supplementary and transferential associations with sexuality, the vectors of time and space, etc. that enable it to function as a critique of Western thinking. Thus, paradoxically, we encounter the problem of Eurocentrism at the moment of its critique. But it is important to keep in mind that this remains, ultimately, an internal critique. The semantic plurality of the French term *plateau* (or rhizome) has not been exceeded; rather, while we might say that our awareness of it has been enriched, we must question whether we have ever stepped outside the systematicity of Western philosophy.

This question of domesticating foreign languages is the central issue in explicating the hegemony of Eurocentrism that underlies the opposition between West and non-West, which we will return to in a moment, but first I want to pursue the adjacent historico-political implications of this remarkable passage in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari's self-professed "non-scientific" stance states: "We are no more familiar with scientificity than we are with ideology; all we know of are assemblages. And the only assemblages are machinic assemblages of desire and collective assemblages of enunciation" (22). Such a disclaimer notwithstanding, the appeal to natural differences as a determinant of cultural belonging deployed in their argument powerfully recalls the host of Eurocentric practices -- of which the science of race is an essential part -- initiated by Europeans in their increasing colonial encounters with Africans, Asians and Americans from the sixteenth century onward. But although historically associated with Europe and Europeans, such arguments can scarcely be said to be limited to them. Many arguments by those who identify themselves as non-Western may purport to criticize the West, but in so far as they internalize its premises into their own schemas of representation, they fail to liberate themselves from a certain anti-theoretical positivism. Indeed, the demand for equal recognition is invariably articulated from the standpoint of that most "European" of concepts, the modern nation and nationalism (whose etymology implies belonging to a place or group by birth). Thus, Eurocentrism is not reducible to that which operates by and for Europeans or so-called Westerners, but refers by extension to a much broader deployment of the politics of collective identity.

The non-European engagement with "universalizing" Eurocentric practices surely constitutes a vast field, but upon reading the arboreal passage cited above from *A Thousand Plateaus*, I could not help but be reminded of its striking similarity to another investigation of "human geography" which does place itself under the sign of racial science: Watsuji Tetsuro's *Culture and Climate* (*Fudo*; written in 1929 and published in 1935). Watsuji proposes that cultural and ethnic identities are a literal function of regional features including climate, vegetation and the natural environment in general. But Watsuji's world is strangely depopulated of actual persons -- it is a visually contained landscape witnessed at arm's length by a tourist and supplemented in equal measures by racist speculation and recourse to the classical literature particular to each region. Most strikingly, the body of the work is marked by the complete absence of statistical and sociological data one might expect; instead it is the sum of the author's subjective impressions and quotations from textual authorities. With exceptions few and far between, Watsuji ignores the vibrant heterogeneities of society and cultural change, and stridently defines ethnic and national groups according to categorical essentialisms. His claims might be generalized to the effect that "you can take the man out of the desert, but you can't take the desert out of the man" -- a formulation which lies at the heart of Watsuji's efforts to marginalize the Jews in Europe as the first step in a larger schematization of authentic and inauthentic modes of belonging. As a proponent of anti-Semitic theories who perceived the Jews to be a threat to the purity of natural communities, Watsuji could utilize this latter formula effectively to insist that the Jew took with him the destabilizing, anarchic qualities of the nomadic desert-dweller wherever he went. It was an argument already lent credence by the science of linguistics which distinguished the Middle-Eastern origins of this "Semitic" people from the "Indo-European" communities in which they lived. It is necessary to quote at length Watsuji's views to appreciate his tautological thinking and ahistorical condensations: "Even in dispersal, the Jews continued to retain their desert character. The dispersal began several hundred years B.C. Yet it was in such dispersal that the Jews taught Europe to form closely-knit religious associations ... But the Jews themselves, who were leaders in the formation of such religious groups are excluded from this association, and continue, instead, to preserve to the last their own national character. Persecution by the Europeans has forced this on them -- but it was the Jews themselves who invited such a persecution. Thus, even though the desert, as a socio-historical reality, is set in the middle of Europe's greener pastures, and even though it has passed through Europe's historical phases of feudalism, bourgeoisie and the like, it necessarily preserves itself intact" (51-52).

Watsuji divides the world (actually the Old World) into three basic zones: monsoon, corresponding to East Asia; desert, corresponding to Africa and Middle-East; and meadowlands for Eu-

rope. But regardless of which zone is under consideration, in virtually every case we find insistent comparisons made with the Japanese. This is especially true when Watsuji's discussion comes around to China, which shares the monsoon climate with Japan: the entire third chapter of the work is devoted to their local monsoon differences, as compared to the second chapter which covers the climates and cultures everywhere else in the world. Written in 1928 at the peak of Japanese expansionism into East Asia, Watsuji was clearly at pains to justify the superiority of a colonizing power over its colonies. But when published some fifteen years later, in what seems to be his anticipation for the impending loss of empire, Watsuji began retrospectively to revise parts of that past. In fact the English language translation by Geoffrey Bownas of Oxford University, which was published by the Japanese Ministry of Education and commissioned by Unesco, has a note from Watsuji dated to 1943 indicating he removed some of his more pernicious anti-Chinese sentiments. It telling reads: "I have taken the opportunity of this re-edition to revise the section on China in Chapter Three which was written in 1928, when leftist thinking was very prevalent. I have eliminated traces of leftist theory and now present this chapter as a pure study of climate" (*Culture and Climate* vii).

In a scene not unlike the arboreal observations of Deleuze and Guattari, Watsuji describes his encounter with the strangeness of Western trees while visiting "Italy proper," which he praises as both the epitome of the meadow climate and "the cradle of modern Europe." From the European heartland, then: "I realized that this feeling of artificiality arose from my being conditioned by the irregularities of tree shapes in my own surroundings; for, in Japan, such precision is the product only of man's hand. In Europe, however, the natural and regular go hand in hand; irregularity of form is unnatural. Whereas in Japan the artificial and rational go together, in Europe it is the natural that goes with the rational" (73). The symmetry of comparison structured by Watsuji deftly allows for a play of difference while nevertheless underwriting the European and the Japanese with a common trait. Irrespective of whether the trees that go into one's makeup are straight (European) or bent (Japanese), both units are defined by a mutual rationality. In contrast, affinities with the Chinese are at all costs disavowed by Watsuji. We are informed in the revised edition: "the Japanese appreciates a delicate fineness; he is unmoved by the sweep of grandeur that characterizes Chinese culture. Outward order is not vital to him as is an out-and-out inner refinement, conventional formality is not as attractive as inspiration in the heart" (133). Here the economy of difference is reversed. Seeming to belong to the same background, the Chinese and Japanese are in fact shown to have nothing spiritually in common.

The lingering question is how to explain the close connections in Watsuji's thought between anti-Semitism and anti-Sinicism. Having spent only about one year in Europe, Watsuji could have had little, if any, meaningful contact with Jews. Watsuji's views were undoubtedly influenced by the pervasive anti-Jewish sentiment in European letters, particularly in his study of German philosophy and the rise of the Nazi party. However, Watsuji's anti-Jewish views were clearly not shared by his colleagues in the Kyoto school circle such as Tanabe Hajime, Miki Kiyoshi, and Kuki Shuzo, all of whom spent several years abroad and studied amongst Jewish scholars in France and Germany. Miki published a denunciation of the Nazis, while both Tanabe and Kuki intervened on behalf of Jewish colleagues in Germany. In contrast, Watsuji's experience of the Jews seems to take place entirely at the level of the imaginary. But it was surely the Jews' figurative function, rather than any perceived threat to himself or Japan, which Watsuji found most compelling. During a time when the opposition between Hebraism and Hellenism was perceived to constitute not only cultural, but racial difference, Watsuji could appoint the Chinese as the Hebrews of the East, and project the Japanese as the Hellenic bearers of sweetness and light. It goes without saying that Eurocentrism for Watsuji was not solely a strategy for Europeans. But what is most patently obvious from Watsuji's argument is his desire to reproduce the order of the West through a parallel schema of representation in East Asia.

To re-phrase the question which I delayed posing from the outset, are there legitimate grounds for an opposition between West and non-West? The question presents itself at several levels (or perhaps plateaus), but what is at stake is the representation and translation of cultural difference. On one level, the division of humanities structured by the traditional Euro-American

university system, and which includes both nation and geopolitical area studies, lends an unmistakable air of solidity to the oppositional, yet interdependent, arrangements of West/non-West. As we see through Foucauldian discourse, however, these schemas are not merely abstract tools for the production of knowledge, but are institutionally fostered (as opposed to naturally given) by capital, disciplinary and indeed imaginary, investment. That governments, universities, private corporations and individuals sustain this status quo is indisputable, even if their relations do not appear immanent. But more pressing here is for us to call into question a universalizing language of power that seeks to distribute objects of knowledge each in its proper place. That is to say, property signifies both as a tangible right of possession and an essential quality that fixes particular identity. Also at play in the notion of proper place is a sense of propriety, that "each to its own" maintains a good and correct state of affairs.

There is an unmistakable exercise of this language of power underlying what has historically been seen as the overcoming of intercultural incommensurability; namely, the colonizing or appropriation (literally, "to make one's own") of other foreign peoples, lands, and languages in the contact zones of the imperialistic encounter. As Timothy Mitchell argues suggestively, "Colonising refers not simply to the establishing of a European presence but also to the spread of a political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real" (*Colonising Egypt* ix). Yet as the same time that Europe fabricated a new schema of global representation, it did so in decidedly unequal terms. The new forms of personhood, social space and so forth were segmented according to categories of race, class and gender. At the level of nationality, this could go so far as to the violent separation of ethnic enclaves into ghettos or so-called homelands, as apartheid demonstrated with localized persistence in South Africa well after the collapse of empire and the wave of decolonization following World War II. But the installation of hegemonic colonial power depended upon a much larger network of relations.

Despite the internecine contestations amongst the Europeans, the cumulative effect of their colonization efforts was to establish common loci of power (One personification of this power would be the figure of Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, into whose racial and cultural background all of Europe has contributed). As Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein argue, "The heritage of colonialism is, in reality, a fluctuating combination of continued exteriorization and 'internal exclusion.' ... The colonial castes of the various nationalities (British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and so on) worked together to forge the idea of "White" superiority, of civilization as an interest that has to be defended against the savages" (*Race, Nation, Class* 43). Working from very similar premises, Eric Cheyfitz explores the fundamental role of language and the regime of translation in appropriating the land of indigenous peoples in early European colonization of the Americas. Noting that the term translation itself is translated from the Greek metaphora, Cheyfitz introduces a distinction that will be indispensable to our understanding of the implicitly territorial claims for the figures of domestic and foreign, namely that "the verb metaphero (literally, 'to carry across') ... can refer to either the translation of one language into another or the transference of sense within a language is not simply what brings the idea of metaphor within the context of translation or the idea of translation within the context of metaphor. For as Aristotle's definition of metaphor suggests with its notion of the "transference" of an "alien name" into a familiar context, the very idea of metaphor seems to find its ground in a kind of territorial imperative, in a division, that is, between the domestic and the foreign" (*Poetics of Imperialism* 35-36). Cheyfitz clarifies the paramount role of property and place for colonization -- it is not, as an old saw would have it, that Native Americans did not possess a notion of property, but rather that their own concept was fundamentally incompatible with the alienated ownership of land and other forms of capital familiar to Europeans. Translation of land into property therefore did not occur across the incommensurable divide of the two incompatible systems, but adopted the position of the European as the basis of its legitimacy.

Although we cannot take for granted any straightforward unity of Eurocentric thought (and I have undoubtedly already simplified matters considerably), we can identify certain shared regularities amongst even the most heterogeneous body of texts and practices: first, the imaginary projection of the West as the centering concept of civilization (a place which cannot be drawn in geo-



graphic terms) and second, that the physical divisions of the world established under colonialism, and which persist after official de-colonization, point to the pathways of cultural and financial capital in the direction of the West. Anthony Appiah has observed that the notion of the Third World intellectual is a contradiction-in-terms, as virtually all such individuals receive their schooling in the First World, and thus maintain more complicated identities than a singular belonging to either West or non-West. By the same token, the fetishism, or facile trendiness, of Eurocentrist theory in academia throughout the world is understandably related to the possession, or more pertinently, the accumulation of cultural capital: the more we use "Western" theory, the more modern or "Westernized" we become. In this sense, the desire to fashion oneself or one's scholarship as Western is not unlike a brand-name; it brings about a superficial transformation whereby the designer's label stands in for the value of its possessor. The concept of accumulative cultural capital which I have in mind here is that articulated by Pierre Bourdieu. Appropriately enough, it was first brought to my attention in Ghassan Hage's study of multicultural discourse in *Australia, White Nation*. As set forth by Bourdieu, there is never an all-or-nothing distribution of power, but rather contestations according to degrees of belonging, which is precisely what we have seen repeatedly as the intimate relations between place and property. What is proper to national space and national subjects is construed under the auspices of those who rule, and in the Australian case (as also for North America and Western Europe), Hage maintains that it is mediated through an overdetermined field of Whiteness. It is no less critical, however, to note that the Blackness of Aboriginal Australians plays a part in the marketplace of cultural capital too, but in a largely negative way: it is the absolute which less-marginalized people of color (Lebanese, Greek, Vietnamese, etc.) can define themselves against in order to better affiliate themselves with enfranchised whites. As Hage illustrates, "Blackness, however, is present in the field of power as a marker. It allows various non-Blacks an access to Whiteness. All the cappuccinos, macchiatos and caffe lattes of the world that are neither black nor white, skin-colour wise, can use the Blackness of the Aboriginal people to emphasize their non-Blackness and their capacity to enter the field of Whiteness" (57). Beyond the proximity to white skin privilege, categories of belongingness become less tangible, but nevertheless socially binding elements of identity. Hage continues: "the dominant always aim to naturalize the field itself by naturalising the positions of all those who are located in the field. It is doing so that the dominant tend to construct themselves into an aristocracy vis-a-vis other subjects: into subjects whose rich possession and deployment of the dominant capital appears as an intrinsic natural disposition rather than something socially and historically acquired" (62).

It bears noting that since the 1850s, when the Japanese were first thrust into the black-and-white colonial paradigm of hierarchical race relations, the Japanese state has sought admission to the ranks of White nationhood, both at the level of international diplomacy and in the dissemination of Western cultural forms. Returning to the example of apartheid, the Japanese were designated "honorary whites" by the former regime. But in light of Japan's forays into the imperial contests leading to the first and second world wars, the desire for White recognition which this indicates was by no means remarkable. Indeed, it was only in so far as Japan promoted a common regional identity designated by the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (*daitoa kyoeiken*) that Japan's aspirational Whiteness was institutionally displaced, or more cynically veiled, by its self-appointed role as the leader in an anti-colonialist pan-Asian unity. Watsuji's attempt to navigate, or rather narrate, the proper place of Japan is emblematic of this maneuver and participates in its desire for recognition. Simply teasing apart these distinctions obscured by an understanding of Eurocentrism as a property only of Europeans (or Westerners or "Whites") does not mean we can readily overturn the economy of this universal language or schema of representation. But it is my hope that by critically reflecting upon this economy, we are that much less easily manipulated by it, and may find positions that begin to address the historical inequities that linger within its terms.

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