In the Critic vs. Caretaker Dichotomy A Magic Dwells: Parroting McCutcheon, Policing “Religion” (A Rejoinder to Merinda Simmons)\(^1\)

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Abstract
This essay rejoins Merinda Simmons’s protection of Russell McCutcheon’s critic vs. caretaker dichotomy in her response to my “Can a Critic be a Caretaker Too? Religion, Conflict and Conflict Transformation” (JAAR 2011). While Simmons aims to preserve McCutcheon’s binary as a purportedly benignly unavoidable opposition, I expose the perils of epistemic anti-realism at the heart of that dichotomy, as well as the fetishizing of discourse analysis and ignorance of real world cases which hold this would-be field defining dogma in place.

Keywords
religion, conflict, conflict transformation, critical-caretaking, religion and conflict, justpeace, religion and peace, religion and peacebuilding, anti-realism in religious studies, Jonathan Z. Smith

I note the extensive effort that Merinda Simmons has dedicated to my JAAR article, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker Too? Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation,” (Omer 2011) and I thank Aaron Hughes for the opportunity to respond. Russell McCutcheon, whose categories my article subsumes and applies quite differently than he ever intended, has had to respond for himself (McCutcheon 2012). Reading Dr. Simmons’s article therefore provoked an acute sense of déjà vu, in that what she writes echoes—where it does not directly repeat—her senior colleague’s engagement with my article. Thus I invite readers to consult my rejoinder directly to McCutcheon’s defense of himself (Omer 2012). Simmons reiterates much the same mis-reading of my article that characterizes her colleague’s more parsimonious diatribe. “For the

\(^1\) I am grateful for critical feedback and editorial suggestions from R. Scott Appleby, Martin Kavka, and Robert Orsi and for substantive contributions from Jason Springs without whom this paper would have looked very different.
sake of brevity, this response will not be one that goes point by point through the essay,” says Dr. Simmons in her introduction. This rhetorical “path not taken” would have been more advisable, for the scattershot and fragmented treatment that ensues contributes greatly to Simmons’s misunderstandings of my argument, the resulting mistreatments of it, and her inability to see the many points where what she takes to be criticisms not only agree with, but actually affirm, many of my central claims.

Simmons’s article amounts to little more than policing of intellectual turf. As was the case with McCutcheon’s response (which redacted my original essay liberally), a careful reading and consideration of the actual cases I bring to the fore might have avoided the ensuing misrepresentations. But, as it turns out, neither McCutcheon nor Simmons are particularly interested in cases, in history, or in what transpires on the ground, among the various living, breathing actors who are not firmly ensconced in the safety of their studies. Neither McCutcheon, nor Simmons felt compelled actually to provide an exposition of my article, on the apparent presumption that my article aims to carry forward the tradition McCutcheon has devoted himself to consolidating in *Critics not Caretakers* (2001) and in the rest of his work. It does not. As I write in my rejoinder to McCutcheon’s critique, “I delight in conscripting McCutcheon’s brittle dichotomy for my own purposes; however, my use of it might contradict his ‘authorial intent.’ It provides a pithy bit of jargon with which to begin” (Omer 2012: 1093).

At the same time, Simmons’s defense of McCutcheon is refreshingly forthcoming about the basic discursive, epistemic, and scholarly commitments that are at the heart of his ideology. There is much to learn from her articulation that often gets muddied by McCutcheon himself. “Scholars comprise McCutcheon’s data,” she explains. For him, as for his followers (evinced by Simmons herself), “religion” and “identity” do not point to “real objects out in the world that are empirically available. Rather [McCutcheon] discusses *discourses* on religion and identity”. With this passage (among others) Simmons states with admirable clarity what amounts to a discursive solipsism and vulgar antirealism at the heart of McCutcheon’s conception of the study of religion. I elaborate on these helpful features of Simmons’s account only after working systematically to correct her mis-representations of my article.

Simmons and I are agreed that the “critic v. caretaker” dichotomy is stultifyingly blunt as an analytical instrument (she likens it to a jackhammer). I do find in it some limited utility once mediated, and thus employ it for my own purposes. Simmons, by contrast, strives to conserve it as it is. Indeed, she is determined to hold its opposing categories protectively in place. And yet, as I demonstrate below, McCutcheon’s and Simmons’s protection of the critic vs.
caretaker instrument exposes it as no mere banal and uncontroversial, inferentially related pair of concepts. Simmons, in effect, claims this is just an unavoidable dichotomy in a world filled with unavoidable dichotomies, while McCutcheon institutes it as a would-be dogmatic demarcation of the field.

I. About the “Endgame”

The title of Simmons’s critique of my JAAR piece, “Regulating Identities: the Silences of Critical Caretaking,” reveals her preconceptions about my “endgame,” as she phrases it repeatedly, and my positionality. According to Simmons, Omer must be a liberal western academic who is in the naïve-bordering-on-paternalistic business of “rescuing” inaudible subalterns and yet who is deaf to (or rather “strategically” un-reflexive regarding) the silences that assuage her progressive conscience and reinforce her normative commitments. Despite a pretense of universality, Omer’s liberal biases (“pseudo-progressive [of the neoliberal variety]”) are all too particular. On these bases Simmons classifies or derides me as a “scholarly savior,” a ready-made McCutcheonite category customarily attributed to works in the phenomenology of religion, devotees of which are all still supposedly animated by the enduring ghost of Eliade that lurks around any nook and cranny not clearly sanctioned by McCutcheon’s honorific, “critic.”

As Simmons has it, it requires a McCutcheonite “rhetor” to denaturalize and expose the fact that “beneath the seeming progressivism that gives the essay its impetus,” as Simmons writes, “[Omer] conserves a very particular set of ideological preferences for particular and not universal ends.” This conservatism masquerading as faux progressivism pigeonholes me as the familiar intellectual imperialist and caretaker of western (neo)liberalism. Or I should say of a caricature of western neoliberalism, which the critic-qua-rhetor needs so fundamentally for her own positionality over and against her data, which comprise “scholars in the study of religion.” So while McCutcheonism cries out against the notion of the “scholarly savior,” this tradition itself assumes the role of the critic-qua-savior; critical rhetors set out to save scholars of religion from their own lack of self-reflexivity.

This McCutcheonite exercise should bear no relevance to anything in the real world, however. For, as Simmons tells us, scholarly discourse (at least on McCutcheon’s account) does not point “to real objects in the world that are empirically available.” But my exploration of the Israeli case exposes the absurdity and narcissistic anti-realism that follows from this type of fetishizing of critique. Is it the case that critiques and findings that punctured the dominant
Zionist historiography and ethos (beginning with the movement of Israeli revisionist historians, sociologists, and cultural theorists in the 1990s) should remain just that—an exercise in navel-gazing self-discovery, while the discursive formations in the “real world” stay intact? Evidently, “the scholar’s discourse” refers, according to McCutcheon-Simmons, to nothing in the world save that which is produced by the dogmatic restrictions of their particular discursive policing. This is what I will demonstrate, after first clarifying some of the many points at which Simmons’s “brevity” prevented her accurate engagement of my argument.

II. “J.Z. Smith 101”

Before proceeding, let me assure the reader that my “endgame” as it relates to the case I explore in my article and more extensively in my book (Omer 2013) is not to secure a scholarly turf for so-called “religionists” by means of “intellectual imperialism.” Rather, I argue in my article (2011: 478-496) that the discourse of peace and justice in Israel/Palestine is profoundly beholden to euro-Zionist hegemony and its particular narration of Jewish history and identity. Likewise, there is nothing particularly exceptional about the case of Israel and the relevance of religion to the drawing and redrawing of ethnonational boundaries that cannot be compared to other cases in which religion and nationalism interface around the globe.

So did I find comparative relevance to other contexts? Yes. Is my appeal to the “comparative” an instance of intellectual imperialism, as Simmons alleges? Does it constitute an instance of homeopathic magic à la J. G. Frazer? No, it does not. I too read Jonathan Z. Smith’s critique of the “encyclopedic,” “morphological,” and the “ethnographic” defective models for comparison in the study of religion. But I also recall Smith’s conclusion in his “In Comparison A Magic Dwells” that for comparison to be “interesting (rather than tautological),” it required “a methodological manipulation of difference, a playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end.” (Smith 2000a: 40). So when I study how the interrelated discourses of orientalism, secularism, colonialism, and nationalism (with its homogenizing logic) play critical even if divergent roles in contexts as diverse as the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the civil wars in Sudan and Sri Lanka, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I do see “some useful end” for the comparative act. After all, as Smith writes in his epilogue to A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age, the point of comparison “is the redescriptions of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been
imagined” (Smith 2000b: 239). Here, Simmons’s flagrantly mis-reads the thinker she holds out as her ostensible exemplar. For Smith explains the comparative process as entailing necessarily a “double contextualization,” one that involves actual historical and anthropological explorations to decipher “social, historical, and cultural environments that invest [an exemplum] with its local significance,” while also entailing describing how a “second-order scholarly tradition has intersected with the exemplum” (Smith 2000b: 239). This first and pivotal portion of Smith’s work is conspicuously (and conveniently) absent from Simmons’s account. She is, admittedly, only interested in scrutinizing the second-order scholarship about religion. This is her “data.” So, considering how she departs from Smith’s own approach to the relation between first and second order description and redescription, my allusion to how a comparative angle can enrich the analysis of the interfacing of religion with direct, structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of violence surely does not warrant Simmons’s “J.Z. Smith 101” digression concerning the logic of comparison. This account of comparison was enlightening when Smith originally wrote it back in 1982. Parroted back by Simmons several decades hence (and lacking pivotal nuances), it is pedantic and empty.

III. About Regulating Identities

Regarding the case of Israel/Palestine, I make the case for a constructive role for scholarship in religion in discursively exposing and then reimagining the interfacing between Judaisms, Jewish people, and Israeliness. I stress that the margins’ “acts of critique cannot simply dissolve Jewish-Israeliness out of existence. Rather, these sites of critique can be re-conceived as participating in both transgressing and reimagining the meanings of Jewish-Israeliness” (Omer 2012:1085). This is a highly hermeneutical approach indeed. Now if denaturalizing the axioms of Zionism and how they inform the attendant interpretations of peace and justice in Israel/Palestine is not about de-regulating and denaturalizing identities, I am not sure what is.

Simmons attacks this claim with her assertion that to identify anything is to regulate it. This reflects a rudimentary philosophical mistake about how concepts work. And so, to consider but a small example, were I to see Dr. Simmons walking across the quad and call to her “Amanda! Amanda!” giving chase when she declined to respond, and persisting louder and more insistently “Amanda! Amanda! Amanda!” I would find myself perhaps corrected or waved off. If I continued to persist I would find myself apprehended by campus security, likely handed over to local police and slapped with a restraining order, and despite identifying her with all the “Amandas!” I could muster, eventually
placed in a psychiatric hospital. All my insistence and persistence in identifying “Amanda! Amanda! Amanda! Amanda!” (even if only to thank her for her response to my article) would have in no way “regulated” her identity or the circumstances surrounding our interaction. Rather than regulating her identity through my identification of her, her identity would be that about which my identifications would be wrong. In fact, my identification of her is regulated by the constituent normativity of concept and language-use.

Now, any reader of Foucault will point out at this point, discourse analysis does expose the fact that names, concepts, identifiers by which one positions and approaches what one studies (and is positioned and approached) are not “natural kinds,” but rather are products of contingent histories of power, complex institutional locations, which might have been (and, perhaps, could become) otherwise. Moreover, the apparent stability—even necessity—with which such identities often present themselves (as if they were, in fact, simply self-evident facts of the natural order) is characteristic of what many discourse analysts identify as symbolic violence. This is the sense in which “discourse” (in Foucault’s account) is productive, and that its productivity is ever-infused with manifestations of power. But this is not the notion of discursive “regulation” that Simmons has in mind when she hurls the charge at me. The instability and non-necessity of concepts does not equate to pedantic anti-realism, which claims that something is whatever one identifies it to be. Identifiers, and concepts generally, are subject to—indeed constituted by—normative constraints, and exert constraints upon what any particular scholar or commentator asserts, or says. In short, claims are accountable to, and are constrained by, the constituent elements and features of discourse, which include (pace Simmons) “real objects out in the world that are empirically available.” The scholar does not create ex nihilo when she uses words for purposes of naming, identification, and assessment. And while Wittgenstein was certainly correct to highlight how meanings fluctuate with uses and contexts of use, he simultaneously pointed out that identifiers do not have whatever regulative force the one doing the identification wants them to.² Hence my position is a qualified realism—as opposed to the naïve empiricism that Simmons erroneously attributes to me. To identify something arbitrarily or without reference to real objects is hardly to regulate it; rather, it is to create a phantasm.

² For a helpful exposition of how Wittgenstein’s account of “meaning as use” does not simply reduce meaning to use (i.e. determine the meaning of a concept, word, or claim purely and simply in virtue of how some speaker uses it), and the broader ways that Wittgenstein’s account is particularly relevant for cultural theorists in Religious Studies, see Springs 2008: 934-969.
IV. She Never Defines Something Called “Peace”

After classifying my work to fit her intellectual topography, Simmons proceeds to expose my unacknowledged presuppositions and conceptual biases by providing an archeology of the dichotomies informing my own analysis. One set of binaries Dr. Simmons excavates from my work is that of peace vs. conflict. She writes as follows: “The critique of McCutcheon’s so-called binary is one that is itself made possible by all sorts of binary oppositions. For instance, [Omer] adjudicates with this silent structure what counts as, just for one example, something called peace in the first place—a term she often uses and stacks against ‘conflict,’ but yet never defines.” This is a curious accusation that is not resolved at all in Simmons’s effort elsewhere in her critique to mention (albeit parenthetically) how “Omer takes pains” to distinguish negative from positive peace. Of course Simmons does not use these particular technical terms. Why would she? She interposes this parenthetical node with a dismissive allusion that such nuances and interpretations of peace are defined “according to specific academic and political/human rights coalitions” and thus constitute yet another form of an all too familiar caretaking. Clearly what she means by the designation of “academic and political/human rights coalitions” is the faux progressivism into which she forcefully molds, and then pigeonholes, my work.

To assert that I presuppose what “peace” is to be self-evident is absurd, considering that I devote significant space to articulating the orienting concepts of peacebuilding and justpeace (for example Omer 2011: 461). What I do develop is an approach to the study of religion and conflict that takes the neologism “justpeace” as its orienting point of departure (drawing on Appleby and Lederach, 2010). As I also write in response to McCutcheon’s virtually verbatim accusation, my interpretation of peace with justice (justpeace) does not presuppose a telos and does not presuppose the end of conflict but rather its transformation, in which “conflict” does not “resolve” but rather persists in different forms, a deeply hermeneutical and deeply contextual process, with pragmatic objectives that move beyond the fetishism of critique (Omer 2012: 1085). This is a lens I import from the field of Peace Studies, while nonetheless expanding its scope to encompass discursive and historicist tools of critique and analysis, which are foreign to conventional (still dominantly political science leaning) scholarship in peace and conflict studies. The justpeace lens enables analysis not only of direct physical violence but also of the relevance of religion to symbolic, structural, and cultural forms of violence, the kinds of violence that the “critical rhetor” purportedly aspires to deconstruct, though (as Simmons and McCutcheon together clearly state) not for any particular purposes pertaining to “real objects in the world.” Such “real objects”, as Simmons underscores, are
irrelevant for the rhetor, who is busily focused on rescuing scholars in the study of religion from their Eliadean captivities. This is religious studies turned into one big faculty meeting. Yet, in Simmons's and McCutcheon's self-styled vigilance against Eliadean scholarly gatekeeping, they simply manufacture a new form of gatekeeping. How lucky are we to have such a recently minted faction of caretakers.

Truth be told, as much as my colleagues in the study of religion fascinate me, my conception of critical-caretaking is not so much fixated upon scholars and their “endgames” as it is oriented by “actually existing sociopolitical discourses, in which justice and peace are points of persistent re-negotiation (rather than dictated by a fixed and a priori telos)” (Omer 2012: 1085). This point was most certainly (dis)missed by Simmons, who introduces my discussion of cultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood's work on pious women in Egypt as operationalizing my hybrid notion of critical caretaking. But, once again, this is wrong. In fact, I critique Mahmood's analytic approach as lacking: it is precisely at this juncture that I link the deconstructive angle of critique with the constructive orienting frame of justpeace, with its complex interfacing with a human rights tradition (as I historicize and reconfigured that discursive tradition). Indeed, this interfacing is complex and bears no resemblance to the simplistic synonymy Simmons attributes to my approach. Unfortunately, Simmons's misreading of my discussion of Mahmood is characteristic of her broader response. In molding my work into her familiar categories she overlooks how and where I distinguish myself from a variety of approaches to the study of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding as well as my extensive discussion of the indispensability yet insufficiency of the human rights frameworks. As I point out in my rejoinder to McCutcheon (Omer 2012: 1091-2), the human rights framework is not discarded, but innovatively integrated, by critics such as Edward Said and Michel Foucault (who are oxymoronically celebrated by McCutcheon himself as model “critical rhetors”). Unlike the McCutcheonite rhetor, who resides in a house of mirrors of scholarly trope upon scholarly trope, Foucault and Said were acutely concerned with engaging actual sociohistorical institutions, practices, histories and the forms of domination that permeated them.

V. Simmons’s Eureka! Moments

The closest that Simmons’s response comes to touching the ground—to even taking up case-specific considerations—is where she devotes a few lines (four to be exact) to consolidating her critique of my work with her supposedly novel insight that “When ‘peace’ came to Northern Ireland in 1994, it did not mean a wholesale sociopolitical change so much as it meant simply a ceasefire on the
part of the IRA. Or, to look at the manufactured nature of peace another way, one country's 'peace-keeping forces' is often another's antagonistic 'occupying foreign power.'” This is one of the points at which I had to stop and ask whether she actually read my article. Such an assertion bears no sign of her having done so. For while Simmons takes this assertion to have exposed a blind-spot in my account, in fact, it affirms one of my most pivotal claims.

“Can a Critic be a Caretaker Too?” is rooted in how the interpretations of peace within the Jewish-Israeli landscape are delimited by seemingly axiomatic conceptions of national identity and teleological and homogenizing reading of Jewish history. Listening to voices that are marginalized with reference to this particular prevailing hegemony (a point I make on countless occasions throughout the article, but to which Simmons pays no mind) illuminates the historical contingencies of (e.g. denaturalizes) Ashkenazi Zionist hegemony that presents itself as simply “history,” and then identifies its further dependence on the discourses of colonialism and orientalism. My exposition takes place through the prism of justpeace, with a relational or multiperspectival approach to justice. As such, “justice” can only be imagined contextually through persistent processes of dispelling collective amnesia by way of recognizing the suffering, discrimination, and marginalization of various others, and breaking up and ventilating the discourse about what constitutes justice in this context in ways that might become informed by the perspectival contributions. Hence, justice becomes re-conceived as a historically unfolding, self-correcting, situation-specific, multi-perspectival discourse.

In the case I examine, those others include Palestinian Israelis, Arab Jews, and non-Israeli Jews. The enduring hegemony they critique by their very embodied experiences is that of Ashkenazi Zionism, itself nested within the broader discourses of colonialism, orientalism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism. A key to thinking about conflict transformation (a process focused more on systemic causes than symptoms, though without neglecting the latter) is to interrogate and reimagine the interrelation between religion and the construction and reproduction of national boundaries. This process of self-estrangement is thoroughly relational and multiperspectival. Thus I stand critical of Yossi Beilin, one of the main Jewish-Israeli proponents, politicians, and activists pursuing peace in Palestine/Israel. I explicitly wrote: “A scrutiny of Beilin's position as well as that of other Israeli secularists shows how the dominant Zionist interpretation of the interrelationship between religion and national historiography has delimited the possibility of reimagining alternative relationships between Judaism, the Jewish people, and Israel… This example demonstrates that despite the trappings of the liberal-secularist discourse, Beilin's position is
myopic in that it normalizes the illiberality of the undergirding ethnonational discourse” (Omer 2011: 479).

I provide numerous other examples of groups (e.g., Rabbis for Human Rights) and collaborative efforts to engage substantively synagogue-state relations (e.g., the Gavison-Medan Covenant) that reinforce the hegemonic discourse even if attempting to revise and critique it on various and divergent fronts. In fact, they often do what Simmons accuses me of doing—“conserv[ing] a very particular set of ideological preferences for particular and not universal ends.” Hence, Simmons’s own discovery that what some people call peace can be utterly violent is anything but a unique discovery. It is, rather, a realization of (and, in fact, in agreement with) the concepts that animate the very notion of justpeace discussed above and throughout my original article. “After all,” she exclaims, “‘peace’ is present wherever there is not a clear challenge to the dominant power source, regardless of whether this power source might be called tolerant or oppressive by scholars outside that context.” The distinction between peace and justice implied here is the one I articulate but which she, let us recall, dismisses as involving “academic and political/human rights coalitions”. This is the distinction between negative and positive peace: “Peace is more than the cessation of violence (‘negative peace’); it is also the cultivation of productive relationships and social justice (‘positive peace’). In the parlance of peace studies, sometimes the always contextually contested concept of just-peace is used to capture the meanings of peace with justice—peace processes that aim not only at the elimination of direct forms of violence but also at the long-term elimination of structural violence” (Omer 2011: 461). That Simmons failed to even mention my extensive discussion of the elasticity, and intrinsic multi-perspectival and thus intrinsically contestable, character of conceptions of peace and justice and their relevance to the regulating of identities can only be explained as itself an act of conservation and protective neglect. Simmons, it turns out, exemplifies precisely what she (erroneously) accuses me of doing as the words of her title capture: policing ideological boundaries—a silencing process indeed.

VI. Silences of Consequence

A thrust of Simmons’s critique therefore is that, in transgressing McCutcheon’s binaries of critic vs. caretaker, I rely uncritically on a host of binaries and this reliance renders my “seeming[ly] progressive” lens vulnerable to the very thing I set out to deconstruct or overcome. Simmons writes: “In suggesting
how critics might also be caretakers of marginalized identity groups . . . [Omer] does not see identity as a fully regulated thing. Instead of fully regulated, identities—and what constitutes peace or conflict, for that matter—are portrayed as fully formed concepts and categories. As such, they are ideas that scholars can locate, access, and project onto scenarios or contexts that they deem in need of them. Omer fails to own this regulatory role to identification, and this is a silence of consequence to her ability to critique those positions with which she disagrees.”

As to the first accusation that I accept identity, peace, and conflict as “fully formed concepts,” I can only relate the reader back to my account of justpeace. I already discussed above the underlying philosophical fallacy relating to the accusation that I fail to own up to my regulatory role. In looking concretely at the case of Israel, I scrutinize the margins in clear relation to the Zionist hegemony. I did not invent these margins. Their existence becomes evident through the exposition of the hegemony of Ashkenazi-Zionist discourse, an exposition that illuminates the profound conservatism of Israeli peace talk and why recognizing subaltern experiences could become a mode of denaturalizing seemingly ontological and epistemological certainties about identities. This is in fact precisely what many Mizrahim (Arab-Jews) in Israel have engaged in: rereading Zionism through a post-colonial lens, illuminating Zionism’s orientalist underpinnings, and reclaiming Arab-Jewishness, a seemingly oxymoronic hybrid space (for instance, Shenhav 2006).

In short, (pace Simmons and her accusation that I write “as if” religion and identity “have clear and knowable referents”), I am not just making this stuff up. It is actually existing discourse, replete with histories, institutions, laws, political consequences, and self- and other-ascribed identities (embodied in language, accent, skin and hair color, identity cards, etc.) on the basis of which some are permitted passage through walled checkpoints and others are turned away at gunpoint. This is not simply dis-embodied scholarly projection. Might the reclaiming of Mizrahi identity have the potential to also reorient imaginings of peace and justice in Israel/Palestine? This is what I argue. The Arab-Jew, by virtue of overcoming this apparent binary, itself a product of the Zionist discourse that posited “Arabs” and “Jews” as antonyms could profoundly deregulate the justice discourse as an upshot of reimagining Israeliness, as some Mizrahim already do. Perhaps someday the Mizrahim will take a moment away from deciding how to cope with, and mobilize themselves against, the contemporary orientalist Zionist topographies and trek to the Supreme Court Of Good And Bad Religion in Tuscaloosa to apologize to Simmons and McCutcheon for their very identities.
In articulating critical caretaking as an approach to thinking about questions of conflict, peace, and justice, I do not suggest, as Simmons parrots McCutcheon, that scholars of religion “join conversations about peacekeeping and conflict.” To begin with, I do not use the term “peacekeeping” (and quite intentionally so). Not once. That she attributes this term to my analysis and thereby caricatures my work indicates not simply her carelessness, but further reflects the reactionary protectionism of a rigorously regulated academic turf. It is Simmons’s conservative protection of McCutcheon’s notion of the scholar of religion-qua-rhetor that erroneously leads her to categorize my article as yet another “phenomenology” that assumes “notions like peace, conflict, religion, margins, and identity” as “self-evident and able to be described without situating the amount and kind of value different people attach to them.” Unacknowledged by Simmons, I state clearly and explicate that what is meant by “peace” and “justice” is constrained by various myopias that often needs to be dispelled in order to reimagine “peace” and “justice” through what I call the “hermeneutics of citizenship,” which entails reinterpreting the subjective boundaries of Israeliness (see for instance Omer 2011: 478-480).

Therefore, to think constructively about the hermeneutical processes necessary in order to reimagine possibilities by pushing beyond the restrictions naturalized and imposed by a prevailing national discourse entails deregulating ontological claims about who we are. Such deregulation takes place through the very relationality entailed in a multiperspectival approach to justice. So, to return to Simmons’s four-line treatment of Northern Ireland, to know that the peace in Northern Ireland she referred to is merely “negative” and possibly complicit with further structural and cultural forms of violence despite an apparent cessation of direct violence, does not contradict my analysis of the case. It affirms it. Nor does it contradict the kind of work that asks us to analyze and possibly participate in transforming structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of violence. It is a crucial analytical first step in doing precisely that.

Here, a “silence of consequence” is Simmons’s own failure to consider how I operationalize the construct of critical caretaking in reference to the case of Zionism and the relevance of critical caretaking for the analysis of conflict and peace. It is the silence she must deploy as an uncritical caretaker of her scholarly tradition that is indeed unconcerned with the empirical realness of discourses such as Zionism and orientalism, only with how scholars may become complicit with such discourses.

Interested in methodological abstractions rather than in the case of how my discussion deregulates the hegemonic discourse of justice in Israel/Palestine, Simmons resorts to decrying that “reconcil[ing] criticism and caretaking” does not change the fact that “there are players at the table—a table which
someone certainly must, in fact, own—there are rules, and there are people being left out of the discussion.” That she arrives at such a conclusion leads me to think that she missed how a critical caretaker such as Judith Butler, for instance, completely breaks down the proverbial table, and how likewise my approach of a hermeneutics of citizenship deconstructs the “table” but also asks how and what resources may be available to imagine other configurations for discourse, considering that some such configuration will be necessary to link people together meaningfully so that they will be compelled, for instance, to pay taxes to maintain a spatially reconfigured Israel/Palestine.

VII. The Rescue Business

Simmons refers to my project as one of “recuperating silences, [a project] of showcasing the voices from the margins.” But these margins are enabled, Simmons proclaims, by unacknowledged silences on my part that determine which “silences” are “identified and thus regulated.” After all, she continues, “to identify where margin starts and stops, one must make a decision about where a center (i.e., hegemony, dominance, etc.) is in relation to that margin . . . That center, in turn, needs to be maintained for ‘margins’ to have any sort of spatial or rhetorical significance—i.e., they are in necessary binary relationship defining each other. Omer fails to see the second part of this relationship—that identification occurs only through regulation, but this silence is strategically advantageous to her claim.”

This critique illuminates how aggressive Simmons’s misreading of my article is. What she missed are the kinds of things that would have become clear had she actually reflected on how the hermeneutics of citizenship provincializes Zionist teleology with its eurocentrist and orientalist underpinnings. The so-called “rescuing” of the margins, when theorized through the prism of just-peace, which I define very clearly as a lens not a telos, entails re-narrating boundaries or the proverbial “center” or “table.” Will there be new silences to be further unsettled and brought to bear? Surely yes. There always are, as the reader of Foucault will again point out. That is the nature of critique. But my notion of critical caretaking is constructive, not conservative. As the case of my critique of Israeli liberalism reveals a relational or multi-perspectival approach to justice challenges, at their very core, the axiomatic conceptions of identity that determines also conceptions of justice and peace. Did I invent the margins to reinforce my own positionality? No. As stressed above, Palestinian-Israelis, Mizrahiim, and non-Israeli Jews such as Butler are marginal. They say so. I did not invent them out of nowhere in order to regulate the discourse. I engage
their critiques in my analysis in order to challenge the prevailing hegemony of symbolic boundaries of Israeliness, and in order to problematize hegemonic historiographies and indeed the “something called peace” which Simmons complains I assume to be “self-evident.”

Unfortunately, and in the same vein of exposing my supposed “endgame,” Simmons also critiques my allusion to Judith Plaskow’s insight about how Judaism after feminism must reorient itself normatively (and indeed through a hermeneutical process). Simmons is once again quick to assimilate my discussion of Plaskow’s feminist lens to her general rendering of my work as yet another form of unreconstructed liberalism, with its “savior” complex. To clarify, Plaskow’s work appears in my article as a brief allusion to what it means to reimagine and hermeneutically reinterpret (rather than merely demolish) boundaries in light of critique. That Simmons presupposes that the orienting concept of this reimagining is “a regulatory formula of something called equality” only further illustrates her own silences of consequence. Below I continue to explicate how “equality” and a human rights discourse per se can gloss over the kind of denaturalizing necessary for conflict transformation oriented through the prism of justpeace. The extensive digressions into the “postcolonial feminist project” function, therefore, to reinforce Simmons’s pigeonholing of her projection of my “endgame and positionality” and grossly erroneously so. Her misreading of my discussion of the human rights tradition functions similarly.

VIII. “Pseudo-progressive Human Rights Idolatry”

Simmons, in the very same manner that McCutcheon did in his response to my JAAR article, overlooks my extensive discussion of those points where I diverge from and expand upon the supposedly simplistic “intellectually imperialist” human rights approach (see, for example Omer 2011: 477-482). Clearly, Simmons missed my conclusion that the human rights approach “must be accompanied by a transformative, embedded, and therapeutic confrontation of the underlying causes of conflict” (Omer 2011: 482). She, like McCutcheon, characteristically overlooks also how I exemplify the conceptual blinders of a human rights discourse that lacks the kind of de-regulative self-reflexivity necessary to engage in a multiperspectival (and yet non-relativist) conversation about justice or rather meta-injustices and mis-framing of the justice discourse. This oversight is “typical” because their data is comprised of scholars of religion, and not anything empirical such as the case of the Gavison-Medan Covenant on state-religion relations in Israel and how the human rights language, in this particular case, becomes complicit with ethnocentric and chauvinistic practices.
I address this case in my article and offer it as well as other cases to illustrate an expansive interpretation of violence as cultural, symbolic, and structural (beyond the obvious forms of direct violence).

And here is the main point: Simmons focuses exhaustively on me—the scholar and her endgame—without any attention to the case I put forward and the kind of challenges and interventions it may offer to broader conversations about religion and conflict. How she can understand what I am arguing without seeing it in relation to the case I am examining is beyond me, yet it is consistent with the method and approach of her mentor. These are indeed silences of consequence that lead to absurd characterizations. She purports to expose my lack of reflexivity on the grammar of human rights informing my own pronouncements that, for instance, as she quotes me: “Of course the Palestinians do not need the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to know that Israel’s policy of land confiscations hurt them, but the human rights framework nonetheless provides an empowering and vindicating vocabulary that is deeply comparative, drawing analogies to other cases of injustice elsewhere.” She then asks her next eureka question: “what constitutes ‘confiscation?’” “Certainly,” she writes, “there are many who would not use that criteria to describe Israeli foreign policy.” Bingo. This is what I mean by the hermeneutics of citizenship and the method of critical caretaking. As we see here, as in many of her unrecognized “Eureka!” moments highlighted above, Simmons agrees with, and indeed affirms, many of my central claims despite her best efforts to play the would be relentless “rhetor.”

So, in my analysis of Israeli liberalism and the Israeli peace camp more broadly I illuminate how a relational or multiperspectival lens to justice can challenge how “reclaimed” or “liberated” and even “redeemed” land is, in effect, simultaneously “confiscated” land (it appears that Simmons might be beginning to understand the nature of “multi-perspectival” despite herself). Such multiperspectival approach is not afraid of the kind of normativity that would render “confiscation” and the related politicide of Palestinians as “wrong.” In my critique of Israeli liberalism I illustrate how the Green Line denotes not only territorial and spatial division, but also a normative division that informs and regulates any discussion of justice. In other words, the 1967 illegal occupation normalized the territories of 1948 (so-called “Israel proper”). In fact, many Israeli and non-Israeli Jews would characterize Simmons’s classification of policies in the territories of 67′ as “foreign policy” as deeply ignorant, and of course, as such, violent. Simmons evinces no frame of reference or even basic knowledge of the actual cases about which she is rendering critique to recognize that her claims implicate her in the normative differentiation demarcated by the Green Line. Hers appears to be a critique based on willful ignorance.
IX. On Political and Ideological Context

As Simmons portrays it, the “rhetor” of religion dwells in a house of mirrors. And yet, in an odd way, this is the beauty of her modeling of McCutcheonism. For in stark contrast to the extensive pretense that McCutcheon makes that his self-styled scholar of religion is importantly concerned with public relevance (“redescribing the public study of religion”), in her own effort to staple his binary opposition in place by quoting chapter and verse from McCutcheon’s corpus, Simmons exposes this for just what it is—vulgar antirealism. Mediated through Simmons’s essay, it amounts to discursive solipsism as it does not simply doubt the existence of referents for the scholar’s discourse (no “real objects out in the world that are empirically available”), but then, it enforces that as a parameter for acceptable and legitimate participation by policing that boundary that holds the “critic/caretaker” binary opposition in place. This is not the unavoidable inferential relations between concepts by which Simmons would defend McCutcheon’s dichotomy (arguing that his manufactured dichotomy is just another unavoidable fact of saying anything and therefore no more culpable than the unspoken opposite inferentially present when one speaks any word). That this is a manufactured dogma and parameter for participation is nowhere more evident than in McCutcheon’s racing onto the scene to hold his manufactured dichotomy in place as the base “ground rule” for religious studies in his response to my having employed its mediated remnants for my own purposes.

It is important for the rhetor to pay careful attention to what I say next. In no way does my argument place in question the inescapability of discursivity. It does not suggest that scholars of religion somehow return to “the things in themselves,” the world as it is apart from human conceptual practices. At issue, rather, is the fetishizing of discursivity preached by McCutcheon and practiced and defended by Simmons. In fact, the unavoidability of discursivity is fully consistent, and in fact, interwoven with, the “solidity,” “lumpiness,”—in short, the object-directed character of the discourse. This object-directed-ness is normative in the sense that it is something about which the scholar’s assertions can be correct or incorrect.

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4 Scholars in the study of religion who have helpfully devoted their efforts to mediating the opposition between naïve, un-reconstructed realism (of the kind Simmons erroneously ascribes to me) and the vulgar anti-realism that Simmons models, have unpacked, critically sifted, and made their reflections available with admirable lucidity and philosophical rigor. For the most relevant discussion see: Stout 2007: 7-31; Stout 2002: 25-52. For a comparable (and so far
Thus, the realist features of William James’s claim that the “trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” (James, 1906, Lecture II) contrast drastically from the tail-eating serpent that Simmons exposes McCutcheon’s work to be. What Simmons helpfully makes clear is that the rhetor does not simply choose not to engage data (besides other scholars) in the study of religion; it is impossible for her to do so. “Religion,” like “identity,” is purely and exhaustively a scholarly invention, and Simmons’s article indicates the same about “justice” and “equality” and “compassion” and “female genital mutilation.” It is always and everywhere something else, and thus, in need of being reduced to what is surely more stable “ideology and political context.”

Yet, with this, the rhetor blinds herself with her own fetishizing of discursive excess. What she is unable to see is that the same reductionist antirealist excesses of her belief in “rhetoric” and “critique” apply equally, and no less reductionistically, to her conception of politics and ideology, as well as the concept of culture. Yet vulgar anti realism, in which the discourse always and already entirely produces what it claims to name in the world, renders self-described political motivations equally and ineluctably subject to reduction to something else (anonymous diffusions of domination, the animal spirits, group think, libido, greed, will to power, materialist compulsion, and so on). The same is true of the claim that “culture” is somehow the basic level of analysis in religious studies. In other words, there is no salvation from the “rhetor’s” self-referentiality by reverting to “religion in culture.” If McCutcheon is to be anything other than self-refuting—though this has not concerned him before—that equation reduces to “nothing in nothing,” or “scholarly projection in scholarly projection.” The same is true of “ideology.” Hence, far from rescuing Simmons from the purportedly devastating criticism of reductionism, in falling back on an appeal to “political and ideological contexts” as the true subject matter for the scholar of religion, the “rhetor” only impales herself upon that very criticism. It just naturalizes a new set of terms, and invests them with the sui generis.

Put simply, the anti-realism at the heart of the critical rhetor’s ideology devastates his or her own efforts to “explain and analyze” with the same essentializing offenses that he or she levels against those he or she identifies as so-called “religionist” opponents (that is, scholars who see “religion” as not simply or not exhaustively a projection of the scholar of religion’s efforts, but also as actual historical and social developments, whether in virtue of being identified or as self-identified—or some combination—of practices, institutions, cultural

as I see, compatible) account of the objected-directed character of discursivity, see: Schilbrack 2010: 112-1138.
complexes, histories). Moreover, now such “rhetors” have come to play the role of religious studies’s very own Westboro Baptist Church. For wherever some scholar of religion addresses subject matter “out in the world,” McCutcheon appears on the scene with placards proclaiming, “You’re an Eliadean!” or “You’re a caretaking savior!” This analogy is intentional and particularly apt, for just as one would expect from any fundamentalist committed to inerrancy, the moment that one trifes with his categories McCutcheon rushes onto the scene to hold his would-be field-defining dichotomy of “critic not caretaker” firmly in place, insisting “No, that is not what I meant at all!” And, as suggested in Simmons’s reply to my article, we now witness his students doing the same. With this urgency to protect the definitional dichotomy against being aufgeho
ten, or pragmatically taken up and innovated with, it becomes all the more clear that McCutcheon has simply manufactured a new would-be field-defining discursive dogmatism in place of the Eliadean “sacred.” This dogmatism is replete with its own protection of totems and regulation against taboos, its own faith in the stability and reliability of replacement concepts like “culture,” “ideology,” “politics,” and “verifiability” that somehow stand protected against the inexorable phantasmagoric nature of “religion.” And now this manufactured discourse is replete with its own followers. However, this new sacred in the study of religion is indwelled by a magic all its own. In fact, Simmons’s response to my article models all this quite elegantly. She stands wholly implicated in the very thing she critiques. This self-consuming position attempts to instantiate the Ouroborus—the snake that would consume its own coils in their entirety. But the Ouroborus exists only in the “primordial mists of time.” And thus, Simmons makes admirably clear that the “critical rhetor” is a category animated by its own magic.

X. Conclusion: “Clitoridectomies, Clitoridectomies Everywhere . . .”

Again, Simmons’s critique, however, depends first on her classifying mine as a liberal and pseudo-progressive agenda and then upon purporting to deconstruct my use of postcolonial tools to “rescue” silences. She supposedly repudiates my approach when she points out that my article “does not offer recuperated silences coming from women who perform clitoridectomies on their daughters. Their time-honored ‘ritual’ is our ‘female genital mutilation.’” Huh? Why would I discuss clitoridectomies? This random comparative rhetorical exposition of my supposed liberal pretenses is of absolute no actual relevance to the case of deregulating euro-Zionist hegemonies, and exemplifies the very “why not this?” approach to comparison in religion that Smith critiques.
(I explain in what follows why Simmons cannot but imagine this particular practice to be a relevant example). That Simmons tritely invokes it is indicative of how framing me as an uncritical caretaker of western liberal feminism is the basic agenda of her essay, entirely abstracted from the realities of the cases I profile and silent on the orienting lens of justpeace and my explication of how it informs my analysis of subaltern voices and their deregulative and constructive potentialities. Hence, Simmons’s digression about clitoridectomies simply attests to how out of touch her caricature of my work is from what I am actually saying.

To review, Simmons demonstrates a clear and abiding obliviousness to the case that is the focus of my article. She says, in effect, “let’s change the subject to genital mutilation and feminist discussions of compassion”—neither of which even comes close to touching upon, nor in any way relates to the cases I examine or gesture toward in comparison. And yet, for Simmons, heavy handed assimilation of my project with Mahmood’s version of critical-caretaking (with no regard for my extensive critique of it), or changing the subject to randomly selected examples of various feminist appeals to compassion and the quandary of female genital cutting is not only natural, it is necessary. These are all perfectly interchangeable. Through the McCutcheonite lens of the critic v. caretaker dichotomy (unmediated), all of these are examples of the same thing (“caretakers”). This is indeed rhetorical analysis with a jackhammer. It eradicates nuances; conflates oppositions, denies concrete cases, glosses over details, and in the words of J.Z. Smith above, makes unintelligent comparisons. In this, Simmons exemplifies why McCutcheon’s dichotomy cries out to be aufgehoben: when the only tool one has is a jackhammer, everything looks like concrete.

Ultimately, Simmons’s manufacturing of “rhetor’s” analysis suffers not just the self-referentiality of a would-be “radical critique” that purports to criticize comprehensively by allegedly standing nowhere, but this analysis is unique as an egregious example of critique. The object lesson here is powerful and clear. Parroting McCutcheon’s effort to “make other scholars his data” does not simply immerse itself in obliviousness to the subject matter of the scholars he studies. Remaining at a level of ignorance about the cases and objects and data around and about which the scholarly discourse both is directed—and which contributes to the accountability of what scholars say—because such data are not “empirically available in the real world” is an invitation to absurdity and scholarly banality.

Thus, Simmons has done a considerable favor for those who mistakenly take McCutcheon at his word when he says that he is concerned with the “public study of religion” and is aimed at interdisciplinarity. She exposes this as pure
pretense. Her analysis unequivocally answers the questions I raise rhetorically in the concluding paragraphs of my direct rejoinder to McCutcheon’s response to my article. Despite his burning desire for public relevance, when colleagues throughout the academy (especially the fields of political science, international relations, policy studies, law, economics, etc.) ask what a scholar of religion might have to say about religiously identified traditions, practices, institutions, conflicts, wars, texts, identities, values that vex the “public world,” McCutcheon’s critical rhetor has this to offer: nothing. For these are questions and concerns that purport to exist with referents in the “real world.” “We study only other scholars,” the rhetor responds. And yet, at the same time, this is a “nothing” immersed in a froth of self-styled “rhetor’s” jargon, adorned in theoretical sloganeering and contortions of the critics in whose image it purports to fashion itself (i.e., J.Z. Smith, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, among many others). In the case of Simmons and McCutcheon, and specifically regarding the subject matter I take up in my article on critical-caretakers—and Simmons demonstrates this, in particular—this is a “nothing” adorned not just by convenient refusal to address the concrete cases in question, but an incapacity to address those cases. This incapacity is born not simply of ignorance about those cases, but born out of its (ultimately untenable) anti-realist epistemic commitments. In short, the lock-step following of McCutcheon that Simmons models here does not simply turn scholarship into folly and farce, it renders that would-be scholarship obtuse. Simmons’s empty parroting of this banal theoretical position makes it clear that whatever currency it may have had fifteen years ago, its day is over.

References


