

such court decisions, the success rate of runaways, and the efforts of sympathetic whites, slavery in Nova Scotia “had probably ceased to exist by the 1820s” (86); as in New England, however, slavery in the Maritimes died a “slow death [that] extended over two decades” (106).

One of the less encouraging reasons for slavery’s demise in the Maritimes was its conversion to indentured labour. Cheap black labour, keeping its purveyors in a state of quasi-servitude, was easily available after 1783 because the land promised to the Black Loyalists regularly failed to materialize or proved insufficient. With rising resistance to slavery, the use of cheap black labour and indenture was often the easier solution for white settlers. Even when slavery ended, it “did not end discrimination or open up avenues of political and social inclusion for black people. Instead, they were subject to more insidious forms of racism and hardship. Slavery’s demise . . . did not result in racial or economic equality” (112). Whitfield thus points to some of the enduring legacies of slavery that continue to make its history relevant to our present.

For students and researchers but also the general public interested in the still often “uncomfortable subject” of slavery in Canada (4), Whitfield’s study proves a significant gift (and includes a very useful bibliographic essay). It joins other recent investigations of specific local or regional black histories—such as those by Frank Mackey about black Montreal (2004, 2010) or by Ruth Whitehead with regard to the “Book of Negroes” (2013)—that have worked patiently and carefully with many sources to help us better understand how Canada was really built and settled. Whitfield’s important and very readable study reinserts Maritimes slavery and black labour into the narrative of Canada’s many beginnings while also keeping the relevant black Atlantic connections in full view.

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**Zouhair Ghazzal, *The Crime of Writing. Narratives and Shared Meanings in Criminal Cases in Baathist Syria* (Beirut: Presses de l’ifpo). 572 pp, Paperback.**

In the last decades research on Ottoman documents from *shar’ia* courts has contributed to our historical understanding of legal conflicts and their resolutions. Great strides has also been made in the development of research on family law—personal status codes—in the Middle East and North Africa. But the same cannot be said for research on contemporary criminal law and cases in criminal courts in the region. There is also a lack of comparative criminal law in both historical and contemporary periods. *The Crime of Writing. Narratives and Shared Meanings in Criminal Cases in Baathist Syria* is therefore very welcome in beginning to fill such a gap. From 1993 to 2007 Ghazzal collected about one hundred criminal cases which had been

submitted to the criminal courts in the northern Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Idlib. Thirty four of these cases, mainly homicides, are used and discussed in the present book. The author is trained as a historian and he stumbled on contemporary criminal cases when he was working on Ottoman law in the archives of the courts in Aleppo. Interestingly, Ghazzal found it much easier to get access to the dossiers of these contemporary—and often open criminal cases—than to Ottoman archives. Judges or lawyers, in fact, often let him copy their personal files and access to the court archives was also unproblematic. The Syrian court archives, however, typically recycle dossiers ten years after a case has been closed. This has, of course, as noted by the author, repercussions on the future ability to follow cases and the development of Syrian criminal law. Added to that is the uncertainty of the court archives in areas that have been involved in intense violence since 2011.

During the reform period in the late nineteenth century the French legal system became influential in the Ottoman Empire and this continued in Syria during the Mandate period as well as after independence; then typically by adopting Egyptian jurisprudence. Syria thus follows a civil law tradition where the role of the judge is much more central in criminal cases compared to the Anglo-Saxon common law tradition. The investigating judge and the referral judge are essential in preparing cases. Crimes which are punishable with more than three years in prison go directly to the criminal courts. There is no jury and only the judge/s ask questions of witnesses and the accused during court sessions which are typically devoted to many cases. Postponement of cases is very common for different of reasons and criminal justice in Syria is thus generally very slow.

Most commentators on the over-all court system in Syria underline that slowness is partially due to the lack of judges and that people go to court for often flimsy reasons—often spurred by lawyers. But the court system is also seen to be very corrupt. These more socio-economic and political aspects of Syrian courts is not the focus of this book. Instead it is the role of writing which is central in Ghazzal's account. The initial texts—based on police examinations and the summary of the referral judge—forms the often stable basis of the case used in the court. During a court session the judge dictates, in formal Arabic, summaries of the proceedings to a scribe. The dossier hence consists of heavily edited texts which furthermore have been translated from colloquial to formal Arabic. The criminal narratives are thus in every sense of the word, constructed. I would have liked a deeper discussion of this work of translation and construction and—*pace* the title of the book—how shared meanings emerge, and who shares them. Through the act of writing a crime is narrated—it is made to appear or unfold to an audience—but does that mean that writing in itself is a crime?

Legal systems cannot easily be translated from language to another, or from one socio-legal context to another. And, as discussed by Ghazzal, nor can they easily be translated to different socio-legal contexts within one national legal system. Ghazzal's analysis is ambiguous. A number of the homicides in the book

concerns those classified in the penal code as “honourable killings.” This is typically a case where a woman is killed by a closely related man (husband, brother, father) who then delivers himself to the police by stating his “motive” for his murder. Such cases are very poorly documented. The narration can be said to be over-determined: the case is closed to interpretation, rather than open, even before coming to court. Furthermore, the written dossier is very slim compared to other cases of homicide. Nobody defends the honour of the killed woman in court and the sentence of the man who killed her is typically very light. In these cases it is, hence, rather the very lack of writing which can be considered a crime.

The author leans on a number of theoretical inputs from political philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology and cultural studies. He demonstrates that he is extremely well-read and able to creatively use ideas from a great many intellectual traditions. But this creativity also makes it rather difficult to follow his narrative. It is not clear if the cases and the people in them is the focus of the book or if instead the cases and how they are constructed in the courts and through the legal system, is the focus. There is ample psychoanalytical probing in Ghazzal’s analysis of the cases. He re-narrates and re-writes the narratives and the writing of the courts, but he does not tell us on exactly what grounds. It seems as if he is speculating about the motives and thinking of main protagonists in the cases as a way to force us beyond the writing in, and of, the cases. This is not an easily digestible text but it will hopefully inspire others to follow in the study and writing of criminal cases in the Middle East.

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