The United States echoes with accounts of the “clash of civilizations.” These seem credible when one examines political and philosophic discourse, but if one turns from elite culture to popular practice, one sees what Paul Gilroy calls “conviviality”: the ways people find to make a life together. These projects of hybridity and synthesis are ubiquitous, quotidian, and inscribed in diverse scripts. They travel, they change and they reproduce, often through curious forms of multiple miscegenation.

The paper examines specific instances of this conviviality in popular practice: the interweaving of imaginaries in the naming of American towns (Cairo, Illinois and Abdel Kader, Iowa), the genealogy of surf music, the reimagined past of novels and graphic novels, and the pedestrian realities of local government.

The paper then turns to what is at stake in the erasure of popular practices in favor of elite discourses. The reiterated production of the “clash of civilizations” has consequences for the multitude, the commons, the democratic in both the United States and the MENA. In the academy, the effects are visible in Derrida, Cixous, Rawls, Okin and Zizek. Outside the academy, they appear throughout the American media, where the politics of class power (debt, foreclosure, joblessness) takes second place to the dangers of Islam; terrorism justifies wars abroad and surveillance at home; and a mythic MENA is deployed to deflect critical engagement with sexual hierarchies in the United States.

The unrelenting production of fear legitimates antidemocratic American policies in the MENA, even as it enhances radical inequality domestically. The linkage of these two projects and sites reaffirms Rancière's linking of Islamophobia and the hatred of democracy and intensifies the stakes where the United States and the MENA intersect.