

Editorial Foreword

MAGIC, MEDIUMS, MONSTERS What scholars make of “magic” depends greatly on what they make of “science” or “religion.” These terms share a history, and their jurisdictions overlap. Pervasive critiques of the secular modern have, in recent years, brought new complexity to our understanding of how religion and science operate as languages of identity and power. As expected, parallel trends are emerging in the study of cultural forms associated with “magical thinking,” and the latter, retooled for political and historiographical analysis, have lost none of their uncanny, often disturbing appeal. Three contributors to this issue show how creative the results can be when the magical and marvelous are put to new interpretive uses.

Margaret Wiener rejects the “knowing wink” that signals, to metropolitan readers, the analyst’s refusal to be taken in by magic. Focusing on *guna-guna* sorcery in the Dutch East Indies, Wiener describes a colonial world in which many Europeans believed in, and many succumbed to, magical spells. Their vulnerability was especially acute in spheres of intimacy. *Guna-guna* permeated sexual and kinship relations between Europeans and “natives.” It shaped racial identities, Wiener argues, not only by buttressing ideologies of inequality and separation, but by exposing the “shared substance” of affection and abuse, a substrate of complicity that made “discrimination” itself susceptible to magical powers.

Neil Kodesh undertakes a similar re-working of evidence by turning African healing cults and spirit mediumship into new, highly suggestive sources for historiography. Arguing that older “oral tradition” approaches to pre-modern African history ignore performance settings, while newer, performance-oriented approaches are ill equipped to deal with the remote past, Kodesh suggests a third way. Stories of Kintu, legendary founder of the Buganda kingdom (in today’s Uganda) were originally told in healing shrines, and attention to this context of production, Kodesh argues, opens up avenues of historical interpretation not available to analysts who pay less attention to where the tales were told, why, and how performative constraints shaped their content. Healing cults were part of the complex biopolitics that fueled the expansion of African kingdoms. Kodesh warns that encapsulating these cults in conventional, Western notions of “magic” or “religion” will only distort contemporary attempts to write histories of Africa’s distant past.

Jorge Flores explores terrain on which neat distinctions between the magical, the scientific, and the religious are very hard to draw. In a rich account of early modern tales of wondrous beasts, monsters, odd people, and

miraculous events, Flores suggests that “the early modern” was—in the Iberian world—a period in which political and religious debates were dominated, as was the pursuit of knowledge, by a taste for the marvelous. This tendency was common throughout Eurasia. Focusing on stories of “the prophesying ape” and the “four hundred-year-old man,” Flores connects Portuguese and Spanish accounts to variants circulating throughout South Asian and Chinese societies, arguing that the global distribution of these fantastic tales is evidence of interregional connections that are not adequately understood.

SLAVES AND THE WRITTEN WORD Throughout the New World and in slave economies that developed elsewhere during the global expansion of European power, the link between slavery and illiteracy is strong. Evidence that some African slaves could read and write Arabic upon arrival in the Americas is ample, but this ability, like Muslim identity itself, is often portrayed as something slaves quickly lost. Literacy in European languages is treated, with equal predictability, as a source of power (or a threat to it). Literacy in the languages slaves brought with them into captivity is rarely considered at all. Likewise, the forms of communication that evolved in the zones between literacy and illiteracy, between writing and speech, have been difficult to capture analytically.

Pier Larson writes against these norms by locating his study in the Indian Ocean, as opposed to the Atlantic, and concentrating on slave populations that originated in Madagascar, not West Africa. This shift in position yields vivid contrasts. Larsen shows how, in the eighteenth century, most slaves on French plantations in the Mascarene Islands spoke Malagasy, as did many of the Catholic clergy who ministered to them. In this context, a literate form of the Malagasy slave vernacular developed, but it was used almost exclusively by French masters, merchants, and priests, all of whom had practical interests in managing large, Malagasy-speaking populations. Larson examines the products of this literacy—mostly dictionaries and catechisms—and the men who created them. He also speculates that literate forms of slave vernaculars might have evolved in the Atlantic slave trade and recommends that the possibility of their existence be more rigorously explored.

Sandra Lauderdale Graham blunts the sharp dichotomy between illiterate slave and literate master by giving careful attention to the means by which Brazilians, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, created legal zones of interface between those who could read and write and those who could not. Members of a “litigious” society well-stocked with public notaries, scribes, and lawyers, Brazilian slaves were no strangers to personal documents, and like free Brazilians (most of whom were also illiterate), slaves communicated with each other through dictated letters, possessed court documents, and composed petitions with the help of notaries. They also kept written wills and

manumission papers, and brought written complaints before Brazilian courts. Slaves were illiterates versed in textual culture, and Graham provides fascinating evidence of how this competence was expressed in everyday life. She also demonstrates the effects of orality on writing, showing how patterns of speech and bodily comportment were translated into texts that would be heard and spoken as much as read.

SUBJECT LESSONS The official curriculum is not the only subject matter taught in school. Students are themselves “subject matter,” and educators are heavily invested in reproducing and rearranging the gender, class, religious, national, ethnoracial, and other identities children bring to school. This process is often resisted, and colonial school systems, where civilizing missions were explicit, provide classic proofs of just how inconsistent curricula and subject matter can be within a single educational program. This misfit is evident in classroom failure, but also in academic success. In India, students often excelled at acquiring the content of classwork while remaining (in the eyes of their teachers) impervious to the “character formation” and “appreciation for learning” English education was supposed to encourage. What does this contradiction imply for the study of human subject formation, in and out of school?

Ian Copland looks at the popularity of Christian missionary schools in nineteenth-century India. Despite an unabashed commitment to proselytizing and teaching the truth of Christianity (and the errors of Hindu and Muslim belief), these schools attracted throngs of non-Christian students whose families were confident their children could acquire *feringhi* knowledge without risking conversion. Conversions were indeed rare. Copland is interested both in the confidence with which Indians approached Christian schools, and the scandals that erupted when students did convert. In 1839, when two Parsi boys at a Presbyterian academy were baptized, the ensuing furor was impressive (given the close ties between Parsi communities and the British authorities). Copland argues that protests against this school, and the eagerness with which Indians continued to enroll in Christian schools, usefully complicate recent theory on hegemony, resistance, and collaboration in British India.

Sanjay Seth takes up the issues of “cramming” (learning by rote memorization) and “instrumentalism” (pursuing education principally for economic advantage), both of which were assumed to be defining attributes of the Indian student pursuing “English education.” Although this stereotype developed in the colonial era, it remains healthy today, and Seth insists that it should not be dismissed as a brute mischaracterization fostered by smug Brits. Indian educators have been just as likely to criticize (and more likely to brag about) cramming. Seth sees in the persistence of these issues the presence of alternative subjectivities, some of them rooted in South Asian

pedagogical traditions and in assumptions about how knowledge is distributed in society. But concerns about cramming and instrumentalism also reveal the contours of Western subjectivities and the difficulties these pose for thinking about difference. Seth leaves us to wonder how such thought can eventually be coaxed away from its reliance on universalizing models of “the human” against which all Others can be understood.

IL/LEGAL IDENTITIES The “citizen,” as an official status, is almost inconceivable without legal props: rights, privileges, duties. Yet law alone cannot produce “citizenship,” nor can it always prevent a sense of belonging when, officially, this sensibility cannot be recognized. The relationship between governments and their citizens, or nations and their states, is constantly redefined through and (just as importantly) *despite* Wrecourse to law. Two contributors to this issue examine attempts to change the legal status of persons in response to changes in the shape and extent of the body politic; in each case, state intervention reveals identities, histories, and people who cannot be fully incorporated, yet are essential to the definition of what “full citizens” now can be.

Wilson Jacob charts the transition from hero to villain experienced by Cairo’s *futuwwat*, whose very name carries a rich history of meanings: “sufi brother,” “gallant,” “protector,” “local tough,” “thug,” “gangster.” For centuries, most Cairo neighborhoods had *futuwwat*, who were considered guardians of local turf. In the 1930s, *futuwwat* extended their protection rackets into Cairo’s self-consciously modern entertainment districts, and Jacob analyses several high profile crimes that transformed the *futuwwa* into a ruthless gangster, prompting government authorities—and Egypt’s culture-making classes—to define the *futuwwa* “type,” to control his movements and illegal activities. Recreating the *futuwwa* entailed giving him a new and negative relationship to “public security.” This process ruled *futuwwat* out of the body politic and reassigned them to a nostalgic past. Jacob argues that this process, however real in its consequences, is beset by misrecognitions and must be written against.

Pamela Ballinger analyses the dismantling of the Italian empire in the aftermath of World War II, a loss of territorial control—over a variety of African and Mediterranean possessions—that brought hundreds of thousands of Italians “home” as refugees, as claimants to an Italian citizenship that had to be explicitly redefined to accommodate or exclude them. Ballinger catalogs the terms on which Italian-ness was bestowed and denied to *rimpatriati*, giving special attention to implicit (and sometimes open) recourse to racialized conceptions of nationality. The latter, Ballinger argues, were always present in common-sense understandings of Italian-ness, but their selective use in determining the authenticity of returnees laid groundwork for the more transparently racial models of “the immigrant Other” prevalent in Italy (and across Europe) today.