

## Signifying “Der Rassist” in Religious Studies and the Axes of Social Difference

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The important point is that those in such a school’s subsequent generations are never characterized as merely doing derivative work and failing to think for themselves. Instead, we reverentially talk about such people’s intellectual predecessors and identify their *Doktorvater*—saying it in German, as many English speakers whom I’ve met tend to do, makes this imprimatur and thus lineage seem all the more profound and thus legitimate (as does the Latin term imprimatur itself, no?).

Russell McCutcheon (2015: 136)

The task of constructing a history—let alone a history of religions—lends itself to the cultivation of tropes. These tropes are the familiar talking points that ease the labor of those working in a field of study. They are “a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary fictions or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot structure of one or another of the genres of literary figuration” (White 1987: 47). Tropes are the commonplaces, touchstones, and signposts that give subsequent students an opportunity to find their bearings within our field’s vast intellectual terrain. In times of unsureness, they are the moments where we can find our footing in registering similarity and difference.

That distinction is paramount, for it is in that metric called comparison that we ultimately chart knowledge. In the juxtaposition of heretofore singular instances, the cunning scholar derives meaning befitting that auspicious and yet austere title, the “science of religion,” *Religionwissenschaft*.<sup>1</sup> It is auspicious because of our modern genuflection to all things “scientific”; austere, on account of science’s calibration toward the disprovable rather than the provable. In this our fieldwork is

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, I commend Reinhard Pummer’s (1972) exploration of the conflicting ways scholars have signified their specific intellectual branches and conceptions of the field with this sign.

nothing more than degrees of observation. And so to a significant extent, strengthening our assertions depends on the finding of precedent until our own observations can *take precedent*.

As we, scholars of religion, pay attention to the plowlines, we would do well to ask whether we tread where those who came before had gone or venture to the places they did not or could not reach. It is a question that prompts us to acknowledge our dependence upon previous workers and their work, for how we narrate this intellectual heritage—its call and our response—makes a harrowing difference. At the very least, it distinguishes the *Doktorvaters* and *Doktomaters* that we effigiate from the ones we eulogize to subsequent generations (McCutcheon 2015: 136).

At its most honest, the history of religions is a chronicle of legacies and the sowing and reaping necessary to be remembered. This account of the academy is by no means unique to Religious Studies, and yet on this point Jorge Luis Borges might regard our field as a setting ripe for reflection. In *Three Versions of Judas* (1944), the Argentine writer entreats readers to a fantastic short story in the guise of an erudite, footnoted article about the life's work of Nils Runeberg. Runeberg, we are told, was an early 20c. Swedish scholar whose work centered on the figure of Judas Iscariot.

Runeberg could not abide the simplistic plot device of the secret betrayer, reading it as unnecessary in light of Jesus's provocative, counter-cultural behavior. In his first book, *Kristus och Judas* (1904), he opined that Judas was motivated by obedience to God's cosmic plan rather than animus toward his teacher. God's plan preordained Judas's premeditated action so as to demand an equal and opposite reaction from Christ. Judas's sin required an ascetic piety equal to Christ's glorious sacrifice, making the one a Doppelgänger of the other. Runeberg developed this thesis further in the second edition of the book (1909), arguing that the burden of Judas's task—and its associated infamy—was more virtuous than the renown enjoyed by Jesus.

By this point Runeberg had failed to sway his colleagues away from convention at great risk to his own career. He wondered whether the majesty of God's incarnation was realized more in the

rejection of Judas or in the orthodox exaltation of Christ. Runeberg then hazarded that the mystery of faith was not God becoming Jesus, but God becoming Judas, for the suffering servant must have been the figure of illest repute. Runeberg revealed his identity in a final book, *Den hemlige Frälsaren* (1909), “The Secret Savior.”

At the start of Borges’s essay, Nils Runeberg plays agent provocateur, inviting us into the heresy of daring to ask the unquestioned. But Runeberg dies a true believer, the faithful devotee whose piety gains him no renown (save for God’s sake). His conclusions, thrice rejected by his colleagues, lead him out of academic discourse and into obscurity. Presumably his own mental probing caused a sudden aneurism, though history hinted to him his fate.

He felt that ancient, divine curses were met in him...Saul, whose eyes were blinded on the road to Damascus; the rabbi Simeon ben Azai, who saw the Garden and died; the famous wizard John of Viterbo, who went mad when the Trinity was revealed to him; the Midrashim, who abominate those who speak the *Shem Hamephorash*, the Secret Name of God. Was it not that dark skin that he, Runeberg, was guilty of? (Borges [1944] 1998: 167).

The nature of “the dark sin” presents a paradox. Is it to discover the undiscovered—the very name of God, as it were—or is it to challenge the presumed realities cultivated in the field?

From this integral question we can derive another view of the perimeter within which we work—the place where we “can read our titles clear.” “The British hymnist Isaac Watts wrote “When I Can Read My Title Clear (1707)” to triumphantly describe seeing “paradise.” But its intonation in the Black Church music setting of “Doctor Watts” hymnody, popularized by Charles Dorsey and others, became a multivalent acknowledgement of what happens when the wrong body “doth protest too much.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever we may say about “religion,” it is nothing if not a regulated space of vying, where some are more free to dare than others.

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<sup>2</sup> To hear an example of this hymn performed, listen to Rev. Lonnie Weaver “line-out” the celebratory dirge for antiphonal singing on the live album recording, “Take Me Back to the Old Landmark” (Stamps Media & Entertainment, 2009), Accessed October 1, 2018.

I wager that the racial and ethnic dimension to religion's "dark sin" would not be lost on Borges. In the one story, we already see that the dark sin is not a matter of volition. It is the defeating inertia exuded from a social topography. Already in the one story Borges shows interest in the way humans determine the place, utility, and potential of other humans. On this he was wont to leave no stone unturned, providing a map of the racial terrain in an earlier 1941 short story called *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

*The Garden of Forking Paths* is a hypertextual tale set against the backdrop of World War I-era spy games. To summarize the story on account of a single protagonist or antagonist would do a disservice to the literary experiment alluded to in its title and executed through the author's employ of Doppelgänger, frame story, symbolism, and *in media res*. *The Garden* is a narrative labyrinth wherein one could begin at any number of plot points and presumably enjoy the same story. Cloak & dagger espionage and literary riddles infuse the story's agents with a postcolonial irony as whimsical as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and as tragic as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

Readers learn that in 1916, Captain Richard Madden—an Irish officer working for the British—had apprehended and killed Viktor Runeberg—a German spy. Runeberg's associate, Dr. Yu Tsun (a Chinese English teacher spying for Germany) had been on the phone with Runeberg, heard an altercation happening in German, and recognized Madden's voice—surmising that he would come for him next. In an effort to flee Madden and complete his mission of reporting the location of a British artillery base, Tsun visited and killed Dr. Stephen Albert, a British missionary turned Sinologist who, Tsun learns, had solved a maddening riddle called "The Garden of Forking

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVw\\_ncYU8wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVw_ncYU8wc). Read Current (1982) for further history about the wider Black Church music tradition of which this hymn is a part.

Paths,” written by one of Tsun’s ancestor. The family had wished the story to die with their ancestor, but it had been published by the estate’s executor—“a Taoist or Buddhist monk.” When Madden happened upon Tsun and Albert discussing the riddle, Tsun killed Albert, whose otherwise mysterious death was soon recorded in British newspapers. Meanwhile, Tsun was hung, but not before being deposed by a British court. Borges presents these events in the form of Tsun’s affidavit, the dictation of which is missing the first two pages and accounts for most of Borges’s *Garden*.

Borges’s *Garden* also includes three other graf. The first is an epigraph that introduces the near-complete affidavit with an editorial note calling into question the explanation given by military historian and WWI veteran Captain Liddell Hart regarding why British forces were delayed in their attack against Germany at the Serre-Montauban pass in France. In his *A History of the World War*, Hart maintained that “torrential rains” were to blame. The affidavit implies that Hart only told half the truth, for it was the rain of German bombs upon *Albert*, France that was to blame for the Allies’s protracted advancements on the Western Front (otherwise recorded as a series of conflicts referred to as the “Battle of Albert”). The second graf is an editorial footnote to the affidavit that revealed, contra Tsun, that Viktor Runeberg was the alias of a Prussian spy named Hans Rabener who was shot for resisting arrest from Captain Madden. The third graf is the larger essay’s address or dedication to Victoria Ocampo, an avant-garde Argentine writer and publisher whose literary magazine featured the works of Borges and others—arrogating Borges’ *Garden* with that of Albert and Tsun’s ancestor.

Like “religion,” Borges theorizes “race” as a bounded, contentious, and determining space of human striving. The labyrinth that is *The Garden of Forking Paths* turns around at least two clear axes—which are in fact one and the same. The first is that the desired knowledge (that is, riddle) is shrouded in darkness. For instance, the “Battle of Albert” is never explicitly mentioned, though a

reader familiar with European geography and history can extrapolate the central event from the epigraphic reference to “Serre-Montauban” and “the World War.” As Dr. Albert explains to Dr. Tsun, ““To *always* omit one word, to employ awkward metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is perhaps the most emphatic way of calling attention to that word”” (Borges [1941] 1998: 126).

Second, the rising conflict results from a person of one race killing someone of another in an attempt to prove their allegiance to a colonizer—always resulting in a calamitous result. Tsun interpreted the Irish Madden as having to shake the shadow of British doubt, just as he was trying to placate his German “Leader.” Tsun’s *raison d’être* was the “sens[e] that the Leader looked down on the people of my race—the countless ancestors whose blood flows through my veins. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies” (121). The Doppelgänger never see each other—but understand each other—because of their mutual situatedness in “darkness.” This darkness was not simply about the ontology of their melanin (Anderson 1995), but “the imperative of running for life to a zone of discursive and ideological marronage ... [o]n account of forced place-ment in a zone of nonsubjectivity” (Wimbush 2011: 23). Madden was “obliged” to work relentlessly even though he could never be enough for his colonial overlords (119). Tsun, lived out his last day in spite of his endless cunning performance in the European theater (120). Thus, Borges describes both Tsun and Madden as “implacable” in their desire to read—and not be read—their titles clear.

Race—like gender, citizenship, or class— is shorthand for some of the authoritative and authorizing social forces that justify, as Frantz Fanon put it, “*comparaison*,” the constant preoccupation with self-assertion and the ego ideal,” “the self-positioning or self-fixation [that] maintains a relationship of dependence on the collapse of the other,” that which “build[s] its virility” upon “the ruins of [one’s] entourage (Fanon [1952] 2008: 185-186).” The dark sin is forgetting how little “the self” has to do with one’s formation and confusing the novelty of content with the

determinance of form. Is this trope not the heroic genius and grotesqueness of race (Anderson 1995: 120-131)?

To me, Borges's oeuvre is convincing enough to suggest that scholars of religion—particularly those who see themselves as part of the critical or “Copernican turn” toward theorizing—could have a lot to say about race (Newton 2017a: 461; King 2013). And indeed they have. Despite employment trends in our wider field, departments are reconstituting programs and resources to establish faculty lines committed to the study of race and religion. I myself have enjoyed now a number of gainful positions on account of institutional interest in subjects like “African American Religions” and most recently “Social Theory of Race and Religion in the U.S.” I include this detail on account that, if historicized, betrays an acknowledgment of the exceptions and rules at play in the landscape of higher education.

My sense is that while viable, prescient religious studies programs have wagered the importance of discussing race in unprecedented ways, it is unclear what those discussions could and should entail. Is it the work of an area specialist? Is it the purview of the generalist who sees the forest for the trees? What are we to make of the often conjoined term “ethnicity” let alone the categories of “race” and “religion?” Truth be told, I fear that the prospect of critical work on religion and race too often confounds scholars like a Borgesian garden because we try—as best we can or know how—to leave unsignified the sign that is “race.” For we know something of the dark truth that there is power in mystifying definition (Newton 2018).

I take Borges's work as an intimation that Religious Studies scholars have tools to contribute to the study of race, but the riddle requires us to come to terms with the legacy of race in the field. In this working paper, I return to models in the studies of race and religion that frequently fetishize rather than explain the making of human social difference. I then qualify and retrofit them to create a framework for charting how humans map desire upon bodies (i.e. “race”) especially in relation to

land (i.e. ethnicity). The paper discusses how some of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. (and some would say, obsolete) tools from our field can be effective in naming—that is, signifying—the axes by which humans mark social difference—particularly social actions, environments, and ideological orientations.

### **Race as Modern Riddle**

Given our prior study of so-called axial social movements, I hypothesize that we can narrate some of the ways humans take precedent over others while qualifying and quantifying the cost-benefits associated with this body-language game. Despite the rise of Critical Race Theory or race consciousness, “race” persists as a modern riddle, in part because of the tempting gains that come with essentializing it. Much of the jargon now present in public discussions of racism obscure the social features that by which cultural critics have identified race at work.

Take for instance the designation, people of color, frequently abbreviated as POC in written form. Today the term is synonymous with non-white, but three decades ago, Donna Haraway argued that the coining of phrases such as “women of color” and “people of color”— were not designed to champion “relativisms and pluralisms” but to produce what Chela Sandoval called an “oppositional consciousness,” a rendering of identity premised on its composition of “contradictory locations and heterochronic calendars” (Haraway [1985] 1991: 155-156). In fact, as a “self-consciously constructed space built solely on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, [and] of political kinship,” these phrases arose as a mechanism for eschewing rhetorics of naturalist identification, of which I would count the latest in vogue phrase, “diverse persons.” With each of these names, cultural critics have attempted to signal pervasive power dynamics—albeit through specific discursive circumstances (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality). But somewhere, these

terms were elided into euphemisms for missing the mean quantum of whiteness, whatever it may mean.<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, I am not arguing for the jettison of identity politics, but a return to the savvy of signifiers like the Combahee River Collective, a Black Feminist and Lesbian Socialist collaborative that challenged the precedent taken by the presumably aracial Second-Wave Feminist movement ([1977] 2017: 19). Because discourses of identity built upon being better than or for an other can justify oppressive acts done under the veil of ignorance, the Collective set out to conscientiously develop an identity politics attentive to its own self-interests by realizing and limiting them. Far from the objectivist claims of Ayn Rand or the myopia of subjectivity, this is a framework that considers the human propensity for stratification and dares to construct a limit on the self. In the words of their 1977 “Statement,” “We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough” (19). They rejected “biological determinism” as “a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic” (21). Among their other pronouncements, they suggested that all politics are identity politics and defined power as the extent to which the unnamed dictates the discourse of naming.

Theorizing about the ramifications of identity politics in this way requires an intersectional sensitivity attuned to the complex and compounding ways differences shape one’s potential for being read as human. This is not the “intersectionality” of the headline-skimming, newsfeed scrolling pundit, but that of an astute observer of social struggle. Legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw posits that part of the reason why identity politics falls or resorts to oppressive actions is because of structures that occlude mechanisms of enforcement.

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<sup>3</sup> “Whiteness” is a term that has been signified in a variety of ways, a history that has led to its allure, ephemerality, and connotation of power (Driscoll 2015). Foley (1999), Jacobson (2008), and Baker (2011) provide histories of the changing parameters of Whiteness within North America.

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences...this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities... Moreover, ignoring differences within groups frequently contributes to tension among groups (Crenshaw 1991: 1242).

Intersectionality is not simply a quality of the various identity markers one finds worthwhile, like the school boy errand of Stephen Dedalus recounting his place in the world for homework in Joyce's *A*

*Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*:

*Stephen Dedalus*  
*Class of Elements*  
*Clongowes Wood College*  
*Sallins*  
*County Kildare*  
*Ireland*  
*Europe*  
*The World*  
*The Universe*

That was in his writing; and Fleming one night for a cod had written on the opposite page:

Stephen Dedalus is my name,  
Ireland is my nation.  
Clongowes is my dwelling place.  
And heaven my expectation (Joyce 1916: 11-12).

It is signifying the exponential rather than arithmetic costs and benefits accrued from deriving value from the integral of difference.

One need not identify with the ends of Haraway, the Combahee River Collective, or Crenshaw to appreciate their significations on race. After all, when compared, they disagree on the significance of the discourse itself. But their work is an admission—if not, concurrence—of the disorienting nature of theorizing about race. What I find commendable is that they still commit to mapping the axes of social difference that it represents. And whereas Borges imagined the religion scholar as having something worthwhile to say about human conditioning, I think a riddling silence on social difference is taking precedence in our field.

## Signifying Theory and Excess in Society

The field of Religious Studies is in a moment in which neither budding nor seasoned scholar need to search for precedent in order to bandy oneself as “theorist.” In fact, the importance—and even self-importance—of theory has taken precedent to the extent that one can find no shortage of applications of the term. In a “time of excess,” the question is no longer whether one is a theorist but the right kind of theorist (Hughes 2017: 2; Hermann 2018: 8-9). This need to align oneself with job ads and department goals and guild partisanry is what leads Michael J. Altman to opine that, “It’s hard out here for a theorist” (Altman 2017: 32). Altman’s declaration suggests that there is a social complexity behind the glitz of the title worthy of exploration. One way of further exploring these complexities is to signify the wordplay further.

In the tradition of African American thought, “signifying” or “signifyin’” plays with the boundaries of a discursive form by bending a literal expression to speak about the context and assumptions that give it shape. It is to watch how, as anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston did of Eatonville, Florida’s “Negro” population (1942: 11), people can “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick,” or Susan E. Meisenhelder elaborates in her study of Hurston, “assess power relations” from those who had to learn “when to fight and when to negotiate or dissemble, when to specify and when to signify, when to be a ‘tiger’ and when to be a trickster” (Meisenhelder 1999: 143)

So were we to continue the wordplay begun by Altman’s allusion to the Three 6 Mafia and Cedric Coleman’s 2005 rap lyric and song title, “It’s hard out here for a pimp” we could further characterize the social politics of theorizing in the field of religious studies. In the domain of the song, the referent sign of “pimp,” as a figure of repute who sexually exploits the bodies of others for economic gain, is also revered in light of the prestige that comes with power over others—whether demonstrated physically (e.g. “the pimp hand” used to regulate the behavior of his prostitute) or economically (e.g. the “bling” or other capital used to showcase his status over poorer persons in a

shared scenario). And while I shutter to think anyone would want to extend the comparison to this length, does it not reveal a critical reality, regardless of our willingness to face it? Among the most convenient ways for a theorist to present their bona fides is through their dejecting of another theorist.

For those more familiar with the argot of so-called “classical” rhetoric, the *ad hominem* attack, is a serviceable example. At some point, a critique becomes so conventional that it pierces through an already torn argument and into the strawperson thought to hold it.<sup>4</sup> We only care to repent of this dark sin when we acknowledge that the holder is akin to us. One would think that recognizing someone like ourselves would be easy enough, but to quote the musical lyricist Ira Gershwin’s own signifyin’, “It ain’t necessarily so.” I maintain that the critical turn in Religious Studies has yet to complete a revolution toward the self-aware or self-reflective critique frequently decried as navel-gazing (Newton 2017b: 37). On the issue of race, the field appears satisfied with distancing ourselves 180 degrees from unsavory pasts, unfavorable rhetorics, and unseemly totems.

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<sup>4</sup> Rather than thinking about *ad hominem* in terms of volition, the Combahee River Collective might have us read the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* as a domain that benefits off the impasse of contentious signs. For example, see the debate over the concept of “justice” in which Kavka and McCutcheon (2017) and Esack and Mahomed (2017). On one level it is an exchange over how a sign such as “justice” should be signified in scholarship (the former, as an object of study rigorously interrogated; the latter, a telos to be painstakingly perfected); on another, the parameters of Religious Studies and the laborers in the field of religion. I would not characterize the conversation as resorting to *ad hominem*, however were the exchange to continue further in the volume, one could likely read where contributors understood themselves to be misread and even attacked by the other side. My interest here, however, is not to the authors but to the journal as a document of ambivalence. Who ultimately benefits from the contest over amorphous terms? If the debate over our field’s operational terms does not matter that much, how do we appraise our work, those who come before us, and those who come after us? Put differently, what would we make of the Religious Studies scholar were we to read the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* as a “a Garden of Forking Paths” or a Gospel of Judas? The Combahee River Collective’s affirmation of the value of limits might be a way forward and the tragic body count in Borges’ work, a cautionary tale. My sense is that there is much to learn by reading through the field’s “darkness” (cf. Wimbush) to consider the crises being faced (or not faced, as the case may be).

In terms of theorizing in Religious Studies, it is far more convenient to say “das racist” of an other’s theory or to signify a theorist as “Der Rassist” in our intellectual heritage than it is to recognize (1) that our difference is probably less than we may be ready to acknowledge and (2) that such figures might have said something by way of explanation (i.e. as useful commentary) or description (i.e. as data for our further study) to help us map social difference. On this point I appreciate Richard King’s poignant synopsis of one such debate in the field:

To what extent, such diverse thinkers ask, is the modern liberal acceptance of the constructed nature of cultures built upon a much older legacy of historicist thought that derives from the European Enlightenment and its critique of tradition, and which, in the field of the study of religions has been most strongly expressed in terms of naturalistic accounts of religion (European thinkers such as Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Feurbach, Marx and Freud)? To what extent do ‘secularist’ accounts of religion offer an account that is unfairly “reductive” of the object of study (in the case the reputed object “religion”)? An earlier rendition of such concerns about the implications of “naturalist reductionism” precipitated the rise of the phenomenological approach to the study of religion which gained prominence in the late twentieth century (under the leadership in North America of figures such as Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade) and in institutional terms helped spawn the rise of autonomous “Religious Studies” departments in the US and UK in the 1960s and early 1970s (King 2013: 139).

In this short summary, I see a reminder of how the progenitors of many social theorists are connected to a particularist cultural paradigm—that is, the European Enlightenment—and that anti-reductionists as well could be understood as laboring toward a more ethnological (or perhaps “inclusive”) multicultural data set so far as the postulated phenomena in question is globally accessible. Given my own work in the area of social theory, my point is not to advocate a particularist “whataboutism” except to say that the discourses our interlocutors are engaged are more complicated than we often want to acknowledge.

However, today’s scholars of religion, King goes on to write, either “will place themselves (or be placed by their academic peers and readers),” somewhere between these two concerns (139). My concern is that it has become a chore to do so with precision to too many and that we are too often satisfied with signifying our own virtues at the expense of the merits of an argument or the

people arguing them. When this is the case, we scholars have replicated the very politics we might otherwise abhor, but more importantly, have become (or more clearly become) exemplars of the social dynamics that we want to explain. And the latter is only of issue in proportion to the extent that we have become disciplined to accept that state as given rather than curious.

Take for instance the popular concept of cultural appropriation. In recent years, it has become a choice phrase for naming the use of a subaltern group's expressions by representatives of a more powerful group in a manner disapproved or disavowed by members of the subaltern group. Religious Studies scholars are likely no stranger to the proliferation of “yoga” or “meditation” in the “West” and the chasm between everyday contemporary practice and ancient origins.<sup>5</sup> Instances like these are where one might hear evoked “cultural appropriation.”

I am not sure that racism is best imagined in terms of proximity to a set of actions, where one's distance from the epicenter determines whether one is guilty, guilty by association, or innocent. Analytically, I am more intrigued in the way racism is the map, the rule, and the law in a cultural space. What I am calling for here is an investigation into the social conditions and productions that a group uses to signify culture—theirs and others—and the boundaries of propriety—which I have argued elsewhere is routinized and routinized—as significant (Newton [2013] 2018). In Michel DeCerteau's terms, the scholar of Religious Studies is expert in observing many of the ways so-called enlightened and revolutionary groups signify, that activity “that transforms nature by inscribing itself on it.” And we are witnesses, signatories, and even consigners of “that scriptural project” that “produce[s] *a new history (refaire l'histoire)* on the model of what it fabricates (and this will be ‘progress’)” ([1984] 1988: 135).

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<sup>5</sup> See Jain (2014) for alternative explanations regarding the politics of orientalism and appropriation as it pertains to yoga.

Though he and I arrive at this conclusion via different paths, I agree with Malory Nye's conclusion in "Race and Religion: Postcolonial Formations of Power and Whiteness":

Thus, in the end it is not really a matter of determining whether religion is (or is not) different from race, but rather how the categories are distinguished as different, as though the distinction matters. This can be distinguished in terms of creed and skin, belief and attributes, or traditions and geographies. The differences themselves are not the causes of the distinction, they are the means by which the distinctions are policed and enforced. Racialization does particular political work, and so does 'religionization', by attributing difference or similarity on the basis of the category of religion (Nye 2018: 23).

But where I believe Nye is moving on to greener pastures in the theorizing of religion and race, I am inclined to continue with an askew view toward the recesses of the "scholar's study" (Smith 1982: xi), for I think there may still be lessons to learn in the sketchy "workrooms" we have abandoned (44).

Like Yu Tsun fleeing Captain Madden, we can critique *Der Rassist* and the social formations by which we trace his constitution. But how long is it before we realize that for all our progressive "words and things" (cf. Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, published in English as *The Order of Things* [1966] 1994), for all our best intents and purposes, we may have more in common with *die Rassisten* than the resistance in so far as we are subject to the dizzying garden of historical tropes by which we construct our comparisons? Just as American anthropologists must reckon with a heritage of CIA collusion (Price 2016) or American psychologists assisting with "enhanced interrogators" in the War on Terror in the Middle East (Marks 2018), is *Der Rassist* not the name of the albatross worn around the necks of those tilling the field of *Religionwissenschaft*? I take Borges's Nils Runeberg as a lesson for us, that we might dare to continue along the arc of critical reflection toward a picture that better reveals, better names, better maps the work of race—even if its radical gleanings bring to trial our *vitae*.

## Revisiting Old Maps

Religious Studies is nothing if not a disciplined commitment to chart the cultural cartography taking precedent over territories such as land and bodies—nay, our views of lands and bodies.<sup>6</sup> “That is,” Mark Quentin Gardiner and Steven Engler clarify (2011: 11), “the map is a representation of reality but a guide to research.” It is a record of prior observations that have one time taken precedent as a product of social relationships. And on this, maybe we can use the furled maps of our predecessors, discarded somewhere in the recesses of our study. Having just signified on Jonathan Z. Smith’s well known *bon mots*, we might do better to imagine how much he gleaned from finding the scores on which Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* was wanting (1973). Do we not owe it to them—our past and future selves—to ask precisely where lies the fork in the questions we ask and the lesson we can harvest before we cry folly?

As much as we in the field of Religious Studies may decry the ethnological amnesia regarding the Americas, Africa, and the “indigenous” populations the world over (Tsonis 2012; Tsonis 2016), Jaspers’ epochal narrative was also highly critical of the Third Reich and German’s acceptance of

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<sup>6</sup> My interest in bodies and lands is a part of move away from “culture” as a fixed, static entity and toward a study of delineating processes of identification. To quote Kamala Visweswaran’s work in *Un/Common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference*:

Culture is thus not something merely acted upon by globalization, nor is it primarily a bounded set of social interactions constituting social space. Culture as it travels through, but also shapes the world system, is about tracking shifting logics through, but also shapes the world system, is about tracking shifting logics of culturalist explanation across and within multiple sites of circulation that destabilize the distinction between life world and analytic system (Visweswaran 2010: 8).

Given the variety of ways race and ethnicity have been constituted (Sussman 2014), I appreciate Visweswaran’s call for “an affiliative interdisciplinarity” whose focus would be not on ethnic studies versus area studies, but “the potential to read cultural displacements, transpositions, and reversals between community and the state, and between disciplines” (Visweswaran 2010: 14). I see the mutuality and divergences of studies on race (as a focus on signifying the body’s ability to claim, among other things, land) and ethnicity (as centering an anthropology upon land claims) as part and parcel of this work. As I will discuss, the critical thrust work of social theory in Religious Studies is primed to intervene.

that calendaring (Clark 2002).<sup>7</sup> While Friedrich Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* did not exactly decenter Eurocentric philological or historical concerns, it reflected at least a utilitarian awareness of "enlightenment" beyond the West (Masuzawa 2005). Perhaps Tiele's read of certain "religions" as having transcended ethnic boundaries appears too naturally selective, specifically since it assumes those religions to be discrete phenomenon (i.e. traditions) in contrast to the supposedly looser social configurations bound by tribalism (Molendijk 1999: 242). But the idea of a "world religion" as a social aim would not be unwelcome in those fond of the Frankfurt School. All of this to say, to reject these or any other figures as Judas without realizing how they are Jesus for another cause is to leave unnamed and unmapped the axes of social difference humans use to draw power.<sup>8</sup>

My point is that the question of race is one where these Religious Studies tropes such as the Axial Age, the World Religions Paradigm, and the study of scriptures (also known as Sacred Texts and Great Books) can assist us not in signifying the territories of land and bodies, but the maps that have sought do so in an effort to construct and demarcate social difference. To adopt this signifying worldview regarding race is to open oneself up to the historiographic irony that it is in retracing the faux pas of our disciplinary predecessors and not simply our intellectual heroes' journeys, that we have the most to learn.

Sociologist Stephen Sharot models a way forward (or rather, back) in his framing of the Axial Age (2001). For Sharot, the concept's takeaway is its observation of pivotal social actions that

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Tsonis's work argues that "the Axial Age narrative reproduces stereotypes about the intellectual and moral capacities of colonized people" (2016). He calls for the complete rejection of the Axial Age framework by critical scholars of religion. What I hope is clear in my narration of the study of religion and race is not a disagreement, but a laboring of the point that not speaking about out of rote is to overlook a historical trope that we may have not escaped in the way we think we are and a piece of data that can prompt us toward sharper critical reflection on social difference.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of different yet related ways of signifying on religion, see Brent Nongbri's work (2013) on the historicity of the term "religion" in the so-called classical "West" and David Chidester's reading of "religion" as colonial classification in Southern Africa (1996).

shape authorizing and authoritative views of the world. His emphasis is not so much on when religion began but on observing the “social actions” effective for forcing and reinforcing the direction of groups (2001: 4). His analysis counterposes two types of action—change and maintenance—each distinguished further in terms of the theater of discourse (understood emically): “transformative” change and “nomic” maintenance versus “thaumaturgical” change and “extrinsic” maintenance. Sharot’s synthesis of Durkheim (i.e. nomic), Marx (i.e. extrinsic), and Weber (i.e. transformative/thaumaturgical) presents an analytical framework for redescribing “patterns” of behavior on comparative terms (2001: 4).

These patterns take place in three observable “environments.” Sharot argues that social actions effect a group’s values, organization, and socioeconomic & political concerns. And all of these significations are informed by ideological orientations characterized as rationalization or disenchantment; concerns for transcendence or the supramundane; and most notably, universalization (8-9). Sharot attempts to hold in analytical tension the diversity of discourses and the social boundaries in flux.

In his ethnological study of “religious action in the world religions” he focuses on the volatile power dynamics between the stratification of persons, which he delineates as elites (both virtuosi and hierocrats) and the popular masses. Perhaps his greatest contribution to sharpening the Axial Age conversation is that rejection of the complexity thesis, that is, the idea that elites of a community practice a pure, complex form of religious action that is diffused into syncretic, simpler, and often passive concessions on the part of the popular class. In regard to economic archetypes—or tropes, as I prefer—he writes “the extent to which the religion of the elites and the religion of peasants overlap, differ, and conflict, and the extent to which these dimensions vary from society to society, are subject to empirical investigation, comparisons, and explanations” (14). The scholar’s task becomes narrating the levels of complexity at work in a historical moment (19).

Religious Studies theorists who have read Sharot's work will probably have no problem finding points of contention. Grand histories (or sociology) are fodder for any number of specialist critiques. Sharot readily responds to Timothy Fitzgerald's critique of the World Religions Paradigm, agreeing that "that a world religion is not an abstraction contained in its texts or an essential entity that is only contingently associated with particular social group" (10). Nevertheless, he insists, for instance, that the difference between "a societal-bound religion" and a "world religion" is not that the world religion is an empirical object of study that transcends social groups but rather that group carriers of a world religion espouse a tradition that they claim is available to people who belong to societies and cultures other than their own" (10). While I suspect that I am not alone in finding this response wanting (Cotter and Robertson 2016: 1-20), I think Sharot's rejoinder discussion has analytical use when the sign "carriers" is subordinate to the signification that is espousal, or as said previously, when we examine the social configurations where people are so bold or unassuming as to take precedence over and above and underneath some other.<sup>9</sup>

After all Sharot acknowledges Religious Studies scholars' dismissal of much of this vocabulary given its fraught history of valorizing or essentializing "world religions," but the sociologist is also quick to reiterate that his focus is on the social features that foster domination rather than the actual rightness or morality of a group (7). In studying the interactions between the cast of actors, one can note appeals to orthodoxy and authenticity—that is to say, the claim to being exemplars of the "great," whole, or essence of a group in contrast to a "little" variety, sect or denomination. Relatedly, Sharot gives heed to popular negotiations or unofficial practices that elites

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Lincoln's distinction between maximalist and minimalist discourses is a more promising Weberian dialectic than the notion of great and little except to reiterate the axial presumption being made (i.e. Sharot's "change") or reinforced (i.e. Sharot's "maintenance") in a historical moment (Lincoln 2006: 58-59). In light of Sharot's interest in "the ends, means, and conditions" of social actions (Sharot 2001: 21), Lincoln's heuristic on the intended extent of discursive claims avoids a scenario of explanatory *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

tolerate for the sake of social cohesion. All of this—the social action, the environments, and the orientations—he constitutes as the site of culture formation. I am not sure whether such an argument can help us enumerate how groups left Plato’s cave, entered enlightenment, and found religion. But it gives us clues as to how people convince others they are in the dark.

Traditionally, the study of religion has done the former by ranking the sophistication and literacy of groups. And for Sharot, this is understandable given that “the development of literacy was integrally linked to the spread of world religions; in contrast with nonliterate religions, whose boundaries are identical with the boundaries of the societies in which they are embedded, the written word can be said to have created and defined boundaries of literate religions.” (Sharot 2001: 16). But this is all the more reason that we are careful that we do not confuse the map for the territory.

Sharot’s project spurs my attention toward the myriad ways groups bureaucratize and restrict charisms like literacy that they insist defines difference. So where he rightly acknowledges literacy as “an important locus of inequality in agrarian societies,” we should remember that the impact and complexity of canonical engagement in less bureaucratized or non-literate societies should not surprise us (lest we be like the various *authorities* in Borges’s *Garden*). In redescribing canons as cultural productions, J.Z. Smith says that “the necessary concomitant of exegetical ingenuity which ought to prevent our applying terms such as ‘closed,’ ‘static,’ or ‘cool,’ to societies which possess canons—even those we classify as non-literate.” (Smith 1982: 44) I agree with Sharot that “the written word can be said to have created and defined the boundaries of literate religions.” (Sharot 2001: 16) However, “the process of arbitrary limitation and of overcoming limitation through ingenuity recurs” regardless of the signs used. (Smith 1982: 50).

For scholars of religion, the distinction frees us to both avoid repeating the mistake of measuring sophistication in zero-sum terms (i.e. civilization v. primitivity) while daring us to present redescrptions attuned to the creativity groups use in their exploits of signification, especially human

differentiation. So Jared Diamond's daring historical explanation aside, the power of social difference is not just identifying who has "guns, germs, and steel" (1977). It is, as the historian of religion Charles H. Long examined of African Americans and others, the ambi-valent, transcendent, and transgressive signification of signs through which we come to know our "historical beginnings" and are reminded of our "involuntary presence" often against the backdrop of some place (Long [1986] 1995: 190). There we will see people reading—and being read—their titles clear. And it is between those coordinates that the scholar's work is to be done.

## **Conclusion**

The study of religion is an exercise in comparison, but it does not have to be one in Fanon's *comparaison*. As we look forward for what is next in the study of religion and race, I hope we can side step the trope of asserting that "race" does not historically exist in this or that data domain. In signifying *Der Rassist*, I hope to have pivoted our inquiry toward how social difference is configured within a framework of social actions, environments and ideologies. Who is so bold as to impress their reading of the terrain upon others? And what are the processes by which shared perspectives become map legends, master texts, and cultural canons? *Religionwissenschaft* has something to say not because it has always given a straight account of human history, but because historically its laborers are not in the dark on how to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick. It is all we have ever done.

We know that race does not exist at the level of essence but discourse. It is a categorization of similarity and difference, inflected through any number of signs—though I have suggested that claims on bodies and lands as two noteworthy sites for of observation. Thinking with Sharot, we are prepared to watch for social actions—significations—that result in change and maintenance. These dynamics are at play in personal evaluation, the varied level of community organization, and the socio-politics and economics of a broader system. And Sharot's work helps us highlight some of the tensions of signification. The need to make intelligible (i.e. rationalization/disenchantment) cultural

assumptions is tempered by appeals to abstraction (i.e. notions of transcendence/supramundane). And in efforts of expansion—even, universalization—that we see conspicuous significations, not only in the form of literacy, but in renderings of all manner of signs, including people. Race is a symbol system.

Again, one need not subscribe to Axial Age histories, sign off on the World Religions Paradigm, or devote study to the philological complexity of civilizations to find utility in Sharot's work. In fact, it is at this fork where my own interests in race and ethnicity diverge. For I think in examining the allegiances and negotiations between elites and the popular folk, maximalist and minimalist claims, and official prescriptions and tolerated variations, the question of human origins becomes moot. What is at stake in these formations are the very terms by which people are signified as at home, out of place, and even members of the human race.

What more might we say about religion and race? Quite a bit, I hope. For now, I will proffer that the meaning of such work will yield in proportion to our willingness to reckon with the visage and vestiges of *Der Rassist aus der Religionswissenschaft*. Borges, in his own signifyin' way, maps a path for us to learn a valuable lesson from those who came before us in the field: to remain complacently riddled by religion and race is a luxury some cannot afford.

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