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Religion, Activism, & Social Change

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For more information:
Journal of Religion and Culture
Department of Religions and Cultures (FA-101)
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve O.,
Montreal, Quebec
H3G 1M8

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Content

- 9 *Change and Transition: An Introduction by the Editor*
Joseph E. Brito

Articles

- 15 *Religion in the Art of Colonial Resistance: Hinduism
and the Struggle for Indian Sovereignty, 1870-1920*
Katja Rieck
- 50 *Twenty-First-Century Looting, Academic Ethics,
and The Antiquities Market in Egypt*
Chance Bonar
- 81 *Take it Like A Man: The Marriage Commissioners Reference,
Masculinity, and Law's Private/Public Parts*
Connor Steele

In Conversation

- 105 *Emily Suzanne Johnson, Ball State University*
By Lindsey Jackson

Book Reviews

- 113 *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings,
Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture*
Alexander Nachaj, reviewer.
- 116 *Practices of Selfhood*
Elliot Mason, reviewer.

Content

Articles

- 123 « *Se changer soi pour changer le monde* », *entre spiritualité et innovations sociales: Le cas des créatifs culturels*
Julia Itel
- 139 *Black Femmes Black Gods: Magic as Justice*
Marcelitte Failla
- 156 *Monster Theory and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*
Tyler Smith

In Conversation

- 178 *Melissa M. Wilcox, University of California*
Laurel Andrew

Book Reviews

- 186 *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*
Lindsey Jackson, reviewer.
- 189 *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*
Joseph E. Brito, reviewer.

In Conversation

Melissa M. Wilcox, *University of California*

In March of this year the *Women and Gender Studies Seminar*, organized by the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University, invited Professor Melissa M. Wilcox from the University of California, Riverside to come to Montreal to discuss her recent publication *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody* (New York University Press, 2018).

Professor Wilcox's work often analyzes intersections and relationships among the disciplines of religious studies and gender studies. For example, *Queer Nuns* is the result of over four years of research with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an activist group of queer nuns consisting predominantly of gay cisgender and genderqueer males. The Sisters identify as nuns primarily through their community outreach work, which largely promotes education and awareness around sexual health. However, the Sisters also play with popular conceptions of what nuns ought to look like and how nuns ought to act through their dress, their sexual health agenda, and the performative elements integral to their identity and activist work. In *Queer Nuns* Professor Wilcox labels this activist strategy of both sincere identification with and parody of a cultural institution "serious parody" and examines how this form of activism can be a useful tool for various queer communities, including the Sisters.

Following her visit to Montreal, Professor Wilcox sat down with Concordia PhD student Laurel Andrew, on behalf of the JRC, to discuss doing activist work in the academy, her book *Queer Nuns*, and sustaining activism long-term.

Participants: Melissa M. Wilcox (University of California)
Laurel Andrew (Concordia University)

LA: *You mentioned during your visit to Concordia that you primarily decided on a career in teaching as a way to express your activism. What has been your experience approaching academia with this goal in mind?*

MW: I mean, if I have to put it in a word, it would be “complicity.” I’m of the opinion that we all choose our complicities. I think we can come to be frustrated with what feels like an activist purism, searching for the perfect way to do our life’s work that doesn’t involve any kind of complicity in anything. That may exist. I’ve never found it, I don’t know what it looks like. And so - this probably isn’t the best wording because it sounds kind of naïve - but all of us who are seeking to make the world a better place in one way or another have to decide what costs we’re willing to pay to do that. Academia has its problems - and a lot of them - but I was raised in a family of teachers and so I really believe in the power of education. I think education is powerful for everyone. But what I really have always felt the most strongly about is working with students who are first generation, students of colour, working with people from underrepresented groups in the academy more broadly, so that also means queer and trans folks, that also means supporting women, whether cis or trans or genderqueer female-bodied people or whatever else. Because I have both the training to present them with a different world, and with the possibilities for a different world, and with the tools for understanding the world that they’re in so that they’re not so much just looking at it and saying, “Aw well, I guess this is how things are,” or “I guess I must’ve done something to deserve this,” or whatever else... that no, actually people have been writing about this kind of stuff for well over a century. There are all these ways to think about it critically, and if you can think about it critically you can also envision a way to undo it. As my friend Andy Smith would say, academia is one route to dismantling white-cis-capitalist-hetero-patriarchy, and I’m all over that.

LA: *There is a paragraph in the introduction of *Queer Nuns* where you discuss which pronouns you use when talking about the Sisters and why. This paragraph is a helpful introduction to pronoun use*

that expands beyond the context of the book to a wider conversation about gender and pronouns. How do you decide when to include such moments of explanation or introductory theory in your work when you are navigating the language of your research subjects, the academy, as well as a potentially diverse readership?

MW: When I am thinking carefully about this, there's balancing that needs to happen that is really similar to the balancing I do in the classroom. I don't want to be teaching or writing for the sole purpose of the dominant group. In any regard. White people, cis people, straight people, men, fully-abled people, traditionally-aged college students, students that haven't been in the military—I can keep going. I'm very powerfully affected by a passage in Adrienne Rich's essay, "Invisibility in Academe." And, although I love this quote, I'm going to have to paraphrase it. She said something to the effect of, "When a figure of authority, a teacher, describes the world and you're not in it, it's as though you looked into a mirror and found nothing." And there are ways in which I experienced that in college just as a queer person—I didn't identify as genderqueer then. There are ways in which I experienced that in grad school. There are plenty of ways in which I've experienced that throughout in the academy. Even though I'm white, even though I come from an upper-middle class background, I would say, academia is still not made for me. It's not made for me because I'm female-bodied, because I was gendered feminine growing up, it's not made for me because I'm queer, it's not made for me because I'm genderqueer. It's a little bit more made for me because I'm genderqueer and masculine-presenting than if I were cis and feminine-presenting or genderqueer and feminine-presenting.

On the one hand, my fellowship is for all of those people who are marginalized and silenced. My syllabus design, the way I talk about things in the classroom is all about decentering the dominant group. Not letting them have the narrative. But at the same time, there is a sort of clunky way of decentering that also alienates people in the dominant group. And honestly, part of how I know about that is that I was totally one of those kids who came from an almost all-white

high school, came from a liberal family, was, like, “I get racism, I’m not racist,” and was sort of faced with the idea that, no, racism is in the air we breathe and the water we drink. We live in a racist society. Everybody’s racist. And I was like, “No I’m not.” I didn’t even know what to do with it. Had no idea. Shut it out for several years, and then the opportunity to learn more persistently came back in my first years of grad school, and I took it on. And, sure, I didn’t always learn it well, and, sure, I made my professors of colour want to pull their hair out sometimes, but they stuck with me, and so they modelled with me how to stick with somebody when they’re doing that kind of learning. So, both in the classroom and in my writing, I’m trying to do that balance.

I don’t want to pander to the dominant group. I don’t want to be, like, “Let’s teach all you white people gently and carefully about white privilege.” But, I also don’t just want to be, like, “Yeah, y’all are racists.” Or sexist, or homophobic, or, whatever. White people can hear me better about racism than men can hear me about sexism, or straight people can hear me about homophobia, because it’s often easier to hear from people that you share that dominant status with. So, when I’m writing with that kind of background, really what I’m doing is thinking, “How do I get my readers on board?” I don’t want to get them on board in a way that makes it look like I’m writing for straight people, for cis people. But there’s plenty of queer people that don’t do gender theory. So, it’s sort of needing to get people on board with the underlying concepts so that they can understand the choices that I’m making. But at the same time, I’m also not going to—I’ve started liking this word, I don’t know if I need to credit someone, I don’t know if it’s my word or not—I’m not going to ‘cis-ify’ the Sisters just for a straight audience when I’ve been asked to do that kind of thing repeatedly throughout my career. I will not marginalize my participants. I will not silence them. I will not marginalize those that are already marginalized or pull them out or make them palatable for a dominant group audience. I absolutely, categorically refuse to do that. But, I can help a dominant group audience understand them, and I think that that’s part of the justice work.

LA: *There are some significant new ideas in Queer Nuns that I want to draw attention to. One of them is your idea of religionfuck. You mention in the text that you coined this term in relation to the pre-existing gender studies term genderfuck, which means fucking with or playing with gender. An example of genderfuck that you provide is the way the Sisters wear dresses but keep their beards, mixing gender markers. How did you come up with the term religionfuck, and do you think that it is still a productive way of conceptualizing what the Sisters are doing?*

MW: True confessions, that so many people will have figured out about me already, I tend to like being a bit provocative because otherwise people don't generally pay attention. I'm not being provocative to draw attention to myself... I'm being provocative because I'm tired of my community being ignored. Or dismissed. Or studied through what straight and cis people think of us. I'm just tired of it. I've had to deal with it my entire career and for a while I went along with, "Oh these are the rules of the academy I guess I'll have to justify studying my own community in terms of how it benefits cis and straight people." And then I realized that that's not okay in college admissions and in faculty hiring, so why is it okay in research? But also I actually think that the term religionfuck is useful.

I am repeatedly stunned, perhaps naively, that religious studies and gender studies don't get that they are doing exactly the same thing with two different human phenomena: one's called "gender" one's called "religion," but they're both invented, they're both socially constructed, they're both fascinating to study. So why on earth aren't we talking about them together more? That also means that a lot of the insights in both fields can potentially inform the other.

I didn't have to work to come up with the term religionfuck. I was trying to work out what all was going on with religion and the Sisters. I went into it with a very simplistic idea about "Oh, some of these people see the Sisters as their source of spiritual expression so I can study that, that's religion." But in fact what ended up being the most interesting to me about religion and the Sisters was what

was happening performatively and the ways that other people were reacting and what that meant about what was happening in the order.

I think religionfuck was also an early way of conceptually dealing with the question of, “What do you do with people who say that they’re nuns but nobody else is willing to acknowledge that they are?” If the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence understand themselves to be nuns, then isn’t it our call as scholars of religion to say, “Oh, okay, they’re nuns. What do we learn about nuns by doing that?” And yet, I think because they’re queer, somehow that gets foreclosed. So, as I was starting to ask those early questions, which have shifted into my one sentence elevator speech provocation of, “Why don’t we take cock worship seriously as worship and think about what that means for the study of religion?” That was all kind of coming into... the Sisters are messing with religion. And they’re messing with religion in a way that challenges our understanding of who is religious and who isn’t. What the contours of religion are. And it was obvious to me because I was living with my head in queer and gender theory so much. It was pretty obvious pretty quickly that what the Sisters were doing with religion was really similar to what they were doing with gender.

Of course, there’s a part of me that absolutely is like, “Open your world a little bit, come on!” When you read in sexuality studies, people talk about fucking because it’s a different thing from sexual intercourse or making love. That’s a specific discourse, it’s the language people use and why do I have to change the language of my community to talk to my community of scholars? Again, I feel like that’s silencing my community, like that’s straightening and cis-gendering my community and I’m tired of it.

LA: In your public lecture at Concordia you mentioned that the impetus for activism is often anger and rage. But you also mentioned that that’s not sustainable if you’re living a life of activism because if you’ve made this long-term commitment to social change you also have to be able to find joy. Where do you find your joy in your activism?

MW: The Sisters have really been some of that. I think, like any

Sister, I wouldn't necessarily get along with every house or with every individual in the order, but I really like the humour and the joy and the playfulness that the Sisters bring. I think I find it in little ways too. I like bringing humour into my teaching. When I'm at my best (which I'm not always!) I can find a lot of humour and joy in little things.

I'm also one of these people that have to balance. There are people that don't. There are people that can do activism 24/7 - I don't know how they do it, I don't know if they find it sustainable. And it's probably worth saying that what I said about anger and rage is that I've talked to a lot of people in the Sisters who found that anger and rage are not sustainable long-term. They're the people that left ACT UP and came to the Sisters. But there are probably also people who didn't. There may be people who find that the anger and rage are the only thing that keep them going. It's really important for me to honour anger and rage. I think that activist communities too often even, try to silence them because there's this sense that it doesn't make us look good as activists - we have to be rational. As though anger is irrational, as though rage is irrational when your world has been destroyed and when the people around you are dying.

I think that sexism and certainly racism - I cannot talk about rage without talking about the ways in which racism silences the rage of people of colour, and especially women of colour - I think it's really important to honour that rage. I've read activist stuff that says you can't be angry and I'm like, "How can you not be angry?" It's like that bumper sticker - if you're not outraged you're not paying attention. And there are really generative ways of channeling rage and anger, because they have so much force behind them, into really powerful activism. I never ever want to deny that. But I think it's interesting - and I feel like I have found in my own life, so it resonates with me too, that there are people in the Sisters who have found that their rage can't be sustained. And it's not that there isn't space for rage in the Sisters, but the joy is what people find sustainable and that's why I really like that quote from Sister Merry Peter ... that I'm going to paraphrase, but she says that's why we talk about joy and

not happiness. Happiness is a good cup of coffee or a quick fuck, joy is what's left when you take all the pain and all the rage and all the anger and all the suffering and you put it all together and burn it at a high temperature for five hours and what comes out is the luster of joy. I find that really profound. It may not move everybody, but I think that's important and I think sometimes you have to have other people around you to help you find the joy and I think that's one of the things that the Sisters do for each other and it's certainly something that they've done for me.

LA: Do you have any advice for graduate students who want to follow a similar path as you did, in terms of allyship and activism in academia?

MW: I'm a white upper-middle class person and so the ally work that I do around both race and class is similar. I was taught many, many years ago from reading the history of feminism to educate myself, not to assume that it was the job of an oppressed group or person to educate me. I was taught to support from behind or from alongside, not to ever try to take the lead but to say, "How can I help, what do you need?" I was taught that there are times when it is appropriate for somebody in the dominant group to speak up. So, when a bunch of white people are asking - often unintentionally - racist questions about something, that may be the time for the white faculty member on the panel to say, "So actually that's racist, and let's talk about why, and let's think about critical whiteness."

It's about thinking about our position in the dynamics of power and then engaging in the struggle for justice with a keen awareness of what's going on with the power dynamics. It's, I think, really easy for allies to get so worried about doing it wrong that...we don't do anything. It also means being willing to be called out. Obviously, it's not the oppressed group's job to call us out, but it means being willing to be called out, being willing to think carefully about what the other person is trying to tell you, being willing to hear it even if it comes through the anger that often overlays hurt and years of micro-aggressions and things like that.