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THOMAS A. TWEED

CROSSING AND DWELLING

A Theory of Religion

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The Greek term *theorin*: a practice of travel and observation, a man sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony. "Theory" is a product of displacement, comprising a certain distance. To theorize, one leaves home.

James Clifford, "Notes on Travel and Theory"

This "theory of religion" outlines what a finished work would be: I have tried to express a mobile thought, without seeking its definitive state.

Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*

ITINERARIES

Locating Theory and Theorists

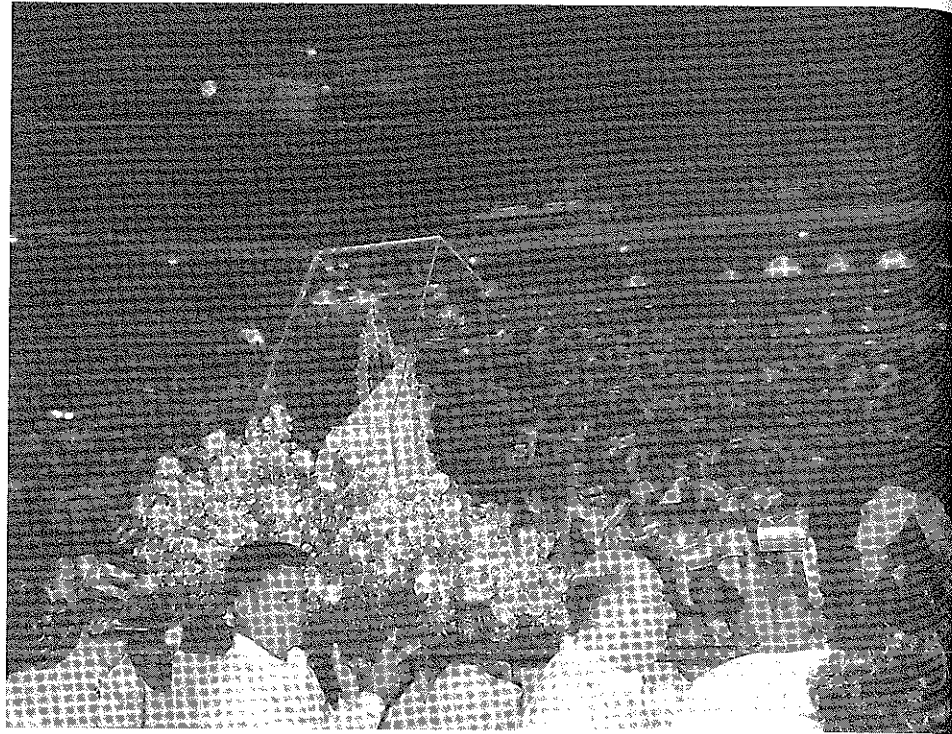
Books don't spring into existence, but, although I didn't realize it at the time, I now can mark the moment that I began the reflections that led to this book. It was a warm September night in Miami, Florida. There was nothing unusual about the weather or the place. Almost all September nights are warm in that subtropical city, where I lived and worked for five years. Yet that night in 1993 was significant because it was September 8, the feast day of Our Lady of Charity, the national patroness of Cuba. She was a shared symbol for hundreds of thousands of Cuban Catholic exiles who had transformed the cultural landscape of Miami in the years after Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959. It was the third feast-day celebration I had attended in Miami, and I had been doing fieldwork among Cubans at the Virgin's shrine in Miami for two years. So much was familiar that night in Dinner Key Auditorium, where the

annual rite was held after Hurricane Andrew displaced devotees from their usual site on Key Biscayne. I recognized the melody and lyrics of the hymn that links Our Lady of Charity with those who fought for Cuban independence in the nineteenth century, “La Virgen Mambisa,” which the crowd sang as the diminutive statue of the Virgin entered the auditorium (Figure 1). I knew the bishop on stage presiding over the mass, and I had interviewed the priest who coordinated the liturgy. I had been doing archival research about the history of Cuban and Cuban American religion. I had observed masses, rosaries, *romerías* (annual provincial pilgrimages that involve eating as well as praying), and other rituals at the shrine, and I had talked with pilgrims and listened to their sad stories about exile. I remembered that many Cuban Catholics told me that the annual festival was the most important of their rituals. A fifty-seven-year-old woman who had arrived in 1966 explained, “For me it is a way of celebrating the Virgin’s day united with all to ask for the liberty of Cuba.” Yet I still didn’t have a theory of religion that made much sense of all that I observed as the Cuban Virgin processed into the arena for the collective ritual—or when I wrote about the event later in my ethnography of devotion at the Miami shrine:

At 8:30 on a Wednesday night in 1993 several Cuban-born men from the confraternity, dressed in traditional white *guayabera* shirts, carried the statue of Our Lady of Charity into an auditorium in Miami for her annual feastday mass. Recently arrived by boat from her short journey from the shrine, the Virgin was welcomed by thousands of devotees. She made her way through a sea of fluttering white, red, and blue as followers waved white handkerchiefs and Cuban flags. Fathers lifted children onto their shoulders for a better view. Flashbulbs ignited. Some in the crowd pushed toward her. From my vantage point a few rows from the altar, I noticed that some elderly women and men nearby were weeping. One woman sobbed aloud, “May she save Cuba. We need her to save Cuba.” Many others smiled widely as they waved to their national patroness. As the Virgin weaved her way down the aisles of folding chairs

toward the temporary altar, a local Cuban priest led the crowd in a series of chants. “¡Viva la Virgen de Caridad!” he boomed in a microphone to be heard above the shouting and singing. “*Salva a Cuba*” (Save Cuba), the crowd responded again and again. The men from the confraternity lifted her onto the left side of the stage, where she stood in front of a twelve-foot triangular background. Arched across the top a prediction was inscribed in yellow flowers: “*Libre ’94*,” signaling the people’s hopes that the homeland would be “liberated” from communism during the coming year. Finally, Our Lady of Charity rested triumphantly on the altar, where she would preside over the rest of the ceremony, as the clergy positioned themselves on the altar to begin the mass and the crowd boisterously sang the Cuban national anthem.¹

What sort of theory, I wondered, would make sense of this Cuban Catholic ritual? Trained in religious studies in graduate school, I had researched the history of Western thinking about the term *religion*, and I had taught an undergraduate course on the topic. I had read many accounts of the nature and function of religion, and almost all of them illuminated something of what I observed that night. From the altar and the folding chairs, Cuban participants expressed “belief in spiritual beings,” in E. B. Tylor’s classic definition, and it is possible to interpret the rosary and mass as an “experience of the Holy,” as Rudolf Otto’s theory might suggest. Paul Tillich’s notion of religion as one’s “ultimate concern” offered useful language to talk about Cuban nationalism, and not just Roman Catholicism, as religious. Melford E. Spiro’s definition of religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” accounted for the formalized ritual actions and the venerated “superhuman being” (Mary) and also called attention to the role of “institutions” such as the Archdiocese of Miami and the Confraternity of Our Lady of Charity. Clifford Geertz’s popular definition of religion as a “system of symbols” pointed to the image of the Virgin, and maybe the Cuban flag, and—like Friedrich Schleiermacher’s and William James’s highlighting of “feel-



1. Devotees wave Cuban flags and white handkerchiefs as Our Lady of Charity enters the feast-day celebration in 2001. American Airlines Arena, Miami, Florida.

ings”—provided an idiom for talking about the Cuban devotees’ “sobbing” and “smiling” as it acknowledged religion’s role in establishing “moods and motivations.”²

I will return to these and other definitions in Chapter 2—and offer my own in Chapter 3—but here I want to note only that my account of religion originated with my observations in Miami and my dissatisfaction with available theories. Other theories illumined some of what I encountered, but I had a sense—at first, poorly articulated—that there seemed to be more to say than other theoretical lexicons allowed me

to say. It was not only that few theories were inclusive enough to consider beliefs, values, rituals, institutions, *and* feelings or that almost all seemed to overlook or minimize some religious expressions—for example, artifacts like the *guayabera* shirts and handkerchiefs or sounds like the shouting and singing. As I tried to name and ease my disquiet I came to the conclusion that I was looking for a theory of religion that made sense of the religious life of transnational migrants and addressed three themes—*movement, relation, and position*.

First, the entrance of the Virgin, and a great deal of the religious life of Cuban Catholics at the Miami shrine, is about movement, although most theories offer little help in talking about religion’s dynamics. There were movements—waving handkerchiefs and lifting children—and there was movement. The men from the confraternity, who carried the Virgin through the crowd, were on the move. So was Our Lady of Charity, whom (devotees believe) three men found floating in the sea off the Cuban coast in 1611. She also traveled across the water that September night, when she came to the ritual by boat, and she returned to the shrine in the back of a Ford pickup truck. The statue that the confraternity members carried through the crowd had been smuggled out of Cuba in 1961 and driven to a baseball stadium in Miami, where 25,000 exiles greeted her with tears, applause, and singing at the second festival mass in South Florida. So Our Lady of Charity was an exile who had been forced from her homeland—like almost all of the thousands of devotees in the audience and on the altar that evening in 1993. The Reverend Pedro Luís Pérez, who led the rosary and the chants of “Salva a Cuba,” had been exiled from the island in the early 1960s, and most of the laity who responded so vigorously to his shouts from the altar were transnational migrants too. The ritual moved participants back and forth between the homeland and the new land as they sang the Cuban national anthem and prayed to the Virgin of Charity, whom the pope had declared the patroness of their island nation in 1916. And the ritual moved them across time. Their religion was retrospective and prospective. It was about the Cuba of memory and desire. The elderly

women near me wept as they recalled the homeland, and the people they left behind. The chants from the crowd of "Salva a Cuba" and the floral message "Libre '94" looked toward the future and expressed a hope—that the national patroness would bring democracy and capitalism to Cuba.

Second, my observations in Miami led me to seek a theory that was not only dynamic but relational. Standing amid the fluttering of Cuban flags and white handkerchiefs that greeted the Virgin that night, I found myself wanting to make sense of all sorts of relations: the interdependence of religion and politics; the pathways between here and there, Havana and Miami; the links between the nineteenth-century wars for independence and the contemporary struggles for the "liberation" of Castro's Cuba; the bonds and tensions among the generations; and the contacts and exchanges among religious traditions, especially as those found expression in the continuities and discontinuities between the domestic piety that combined Afro-Cuban and Roman Catholic practices and the public religion that negotiated meaning and power in relation to diocesan clergy who condemned that "syncretism."

Consider two examples from the feast-day ritual in Miami that point to interreligious and intergenerational relations. Some of those waving white handkerchiefs at the Virgin as she arrived that night greeted her as *Ọsun*, the West African *òrìṣà* of the river, and not only as Mary, the Catholic saint. Most theories of religions are silent about all this, and they fail to provide language that highlights the historical relations among complex and changing religious traditions—in this case Afro-Cuban and Roman Catholic traditions in Cuba. Yet Cuban American Catholicism as practiced that warm Miami night—though not as prescribed by the clergy—was hybrid, a product of long processes of contact and exchange. The ritual also foregrounds other relations among diverse peoples at the celebration—not only between clergy and laity, black and white, women and men, but also young and old. And familial relations are very important in this rite: "fathers lifted children" to get a better view and children gazed up at parents and grandparents who

wept at the singing of "La Virgen Mambisa." The children didn't know much about the Cuban wars for independence alluded to in that hymn. Most didn't remember the homeland their older relatives mourned, and their immersion in U.S. popular culture and public education increased the intergenerational tensions. But any account of this ritual that obscured family relations in Miami and the links with relatives still on the island, devotees told me, would miss a great deal.³

To make sense of these myriad relations and movements, in Chapter 3 I argue that religions involve two spatial practices—dwelling and crossing—but as I reflected on religion as I encountered it at the 1993 festival and found it interpreted in the most influential theories, I also felt a need to acknowledge my own shifting position as interpreter: "*From my vantage point* a few rows from the altar . . ."—and from my vantage point as a white, male, middle-class professor of religious studies. Theorists often have obscured their own position, and pretended that they enjoy a view from everywhere-at-once or nowhere-in-particular. I felt a need to consider the position of the theory and the theorist. I deal with the two other themes—movement and relation—in the rest of the book, but in this chapter I consider *positionality*. I try to locate my theory. This entails, first, saying more about what theory is and what theory is not.⁴

THEORIES AS ITINERARIES

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have understood theory in a variety of ways, and one helpful overview lists five primary notions of what theory is and how it functions: (1) the *deductive-nomological view*, which understands theories as systems of universal laws deduced from axioms and corresponding to mind-independent external reality; (2) the *law-oriented view*, which trumpets the same ideal but suggests we cannot identify universal laws but only "law-like regularities"; (3) the *idealizing notion of theory*, which further refines the deductive-nomological view by suggesting that the regularities—not laws—

should be understood as “ideal types,” or the scholar’s idealizations of human motives; (4) the *constructivist view of theory*, which goes further still in rejecting the ideal of attaining universal laws as it challenges correspondence theories of truth and proposes that theory offers only “contextual understanding of interacting motives”; and (5) *critical theory*, which agrees with constructivists in their criticism of the deductive-nomological approach but emphasizes power relations and ethical issues.⁵

I will leave it to philosophers of science, and natural scientists working in the laboratory or the field, to decide whether the deductive-nomological view (with its concern for laws, hypotheses, explanations, control, and predication) makes sense of interpretations of the natural world, but this approach presents an unrealizable goal for those who try to understand cultural processes, including religion. Religion’s interpreters might offer more or less useful accounts from within culturally and professionally constructed categorical schemes that highlight patterns that are not wholly bound to a time or place, but they cannot discover, or construct, cross-cultural and timeless spiritual “laws.” My own view of theorizing takes seriously critical theory’s highlighting of power relations while it also resonates with some moderate versions of the constructivist view. As I will explain more fully later, my perspective might be understood as pragmatic or nonrepresentational realism or, to use the philosopher Hilary Putnam’s phrase, “realism with a small r”—as opposed to “metaphysical Realism,” which champions a “view from nowhere” and aspires to link concepts with mind-independent realities.⁶

But my understanding of theory departs from all five types, since I reject a presupposition they all share, even the constructivists’ theory building and the critical theorists’ power analysis—that the theorist and the theorized are static. To highlight the shifting position of the theorist, while also acknowledging the movements and relations I found among transnational migrants in Miami, I endorse James Clifford’s suggestion that we turn to the metaphor of travel. More precisely, I reimagine theories as itineraries. Drawing on the three primary meanings of the term

itinerary in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I suggest that theories are embodied travels (“a line or course of travel; a route”), positioned representations (“a record or journal of travel, an account of a journey”), and proposed routes (“a sketch of a proposed route; a plan or scheme of travel”). Theories are simultaneously proposals for a journey, representations of a journey, and the journey itself. I focus here on the last two meanings of the term.⁷

→ Embodied Travels

Theories, in the first sense of the word, are travels. Just as theorists walk the library stacks, shift from idea to idea at their desks, or leap from citation to citation in online card catalogs, theories move too. They are journeys propelled by concepts and tropes that follow lines of argument and narration. But there is not much linear progression. In the imagining and writing—and even in the reader’s tracing of the argument on the printed page—there is crisscrossing, stepping down, and circling back.⁸

By imagining theory as movements across space (and time), I employ spatial metaphors, which have been so prominent in recent cultural theory. Yet we should interpret images about movement in ways that retain the dynamism of the process. This means critically and cautiously appropriating the recent “spatial turn” in cultural theory. Michel Foucault noted, “The great obsession of the nineteenth century was . . . history,” and that theoretical legacy continued into the late twentieth century. Foucault went on to suggest in that 1986 interview, however, that “the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.” Taking off from Foucault’s comment and extending the insights of others (including Henri Lefebvre, Fredric Jameson, Anthony Giddens, and David Harvey), geographer Edward W. Soja argued in his book *Postmodern Geographies* that we should “reassert” space in contemporary social theory. And a number of theorists have employed spatial images—often toward very different ends—as Bruno Bosteels’s survey of the shift “from text to territory” documents. “Anyone even remotely familiar

with recent titles, if nothing else, in the humanities must in this regard have been struck by the astonishing appeal of topological and specifically cartographic images." Although I use spatial images throughout this book, we should be careful that our metaphors, especially *map* and *territory*, do not carry implications we might want to avoid. As cultural studies scholar Iain Chambers has argued, "the very idea of a map, with its implicit dependence upon the survey of a stable terrain, fixed referents and measurement, seems to contradict the palpable flux and fluidity of metropolitan life and cosmopolitan movements." In a similar way, religious studies specialist Sam Gill has suggested that "the map-territory metaphor, as powerful and effective as it has been, tends to support the comprehension of territory as static, as stable, as mappable, as graspable from some view." Whether interpreting contemporary "metropolitan life" or ancient religious practices, theorists go astray when they take spatial images, especially mapping metaphors, in ways that understand representations as universal and theorists as static.⁹

In other words, theory as embodied travel resembles the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō's wanderings as recorded in his travel account *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* more than the Greek writer Ptolemy's second-century "geography," the product of sedentary observations that claim an omniscient "view of the whole." Ptolemy was challenging another influential interpretation of geography's task—Strabo's "chorography," the oldest tradition of Western geographical inquiry, which aimed to offer only a view of a region. "Now my first and most important concern," Strabo told his readers, "is to try to give, in the simplest possible way, the shape and size of that part of the earth which falls within our map." Strabo suggested that "to give an accurate account of the whole earth and the whole 'spinning whorl'" is not the discipline's function. Both universal geography and regional chorography can be distinguished from local "topography," the representation of a particular city or town: for example, *las pinturas*, the sketches that Amerindian cartographers drew between 1578 and 1584 at

the request of Spanish colonial officials in Mexico. Yet even if those *pinturas*, and Native American partial and temporary mappings etched in bark or dirt, challenge the universalistic aspirations of Ptolemy's geography and acknowledge cartography's limited view, to employ mapping metaphors without qualification can still obscure theory's dynamics. Theory as embodied travel is not a stationary view of static terrain. It is not geography or chorography—or even the localized topography of indigenous mapmakers. It is more like "dynography," a term used in medicine to describe the computer-generated representations of blood flow through arteries or of the bodily movements of children with spastic cerebral palsy. But even in that analogy the theorists themselves are still static as their stationary instruments "map" the pathways of fluids or the trajectories of gestures.¹⁰

That is why, I suggest, it is useful to understand theory as travel—but not as the displacements of voluntary migrants who seek settlement, tourists who chase pleasure on round-trip journeys, or pilgrims who depart only to return home after venerating a sacred site. Theory is purposeful wandering, and, as interpreters of the Japanese poet and diarist have argued, Bashō is an exemplar of wandering (Figure 2). It is not just that there is a "predominance of wayfaring imagery" in his poems and narratives, although there is. Bashō imagined his writing and his life as wayfaring. The seventeenth-century Japanese writer made that point in his first journal, *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*: "I set out on a journey of a thousand leagues, packing no provisions. I leaned on the staff of an ancient [the Chinese Buddhist priest Guangwen] who, it is said, entered into nothingness under the midnight moon." As one scholar has noted, a "thousand leagues" is a symbolic number suggesting spatial and temporal immensity, and even though Bashō chose a direction, planned a route, and longed to see this place or that along the way, he understood his treks and his life as wayfaring. Unlike the Japanese writer, theorists might be burdened by *too many* "provisions," and they never step into "nothingness," since neurophysiological processes and culturally patterned modes of perception and affect influ-



2. Baitei Ki (1734–1810),
“Bashō with a Deer,”
Middle Edo Period.
Ink and color on
paper, 48.9 × 119.1 cm.

ence where they “enter” and what they experience. Yet theorists do lean on “staffs” bestowed by others as they set out in one direction on a journey of uncertain duration toward sites unseen and vaguely imagined, and they negotiate the trail by what illumination they can find along the way. As with Bashō’s travel accounts, in which that itinerant included narrative and poems composed on the move about sites along the way, theorists in motion offer partial views of shifting terrain. A theory of religion, as I understand it, is not an omniscient map of the whole offered by a stationary observer. Theory is travel. Here is the image I have in mind. With the peak of Mount Chōkai rising almost 5,000 feet to his right, Bashō walks north from Sakata, traversing the narrow dirt and rock paths that lead to Kisagata, and after “lingering” at that lagoon for several days he sets out again—first on a 130-mile walk to Kaga’s provincial capital and then farther south along the coast, as one purposeful journey leads to the next, until there is only the wandering itself.¹¹

→ Positioned Representations

In a second meaning of the term *itinerary*, theory is not only the wandering but its representation. It is, for example, Bashō’s narrative of his trip to Kisagata, the lagoon northeast of Sakata: “I followed a narrow trail for about ten miles, climbing steep hills, descending to rocky shores, or pushing through sandy beaches.” And it is the poem he composed as he glanced at a tree in the lagoon, a tree that reminded him of a famous Chinese woman who was known for her melancholy beauty:

Kisagata—
in the rain, Xi Shi asleep,
silk tree blossoms.¹²

Theories, then, are *sightings* from sites. They are positioned representations of a changing terrain by an itinerant cartographer. The Greek term *theōria* (*θεωρία*) is a somewhat redundant compound that combines *theā* (seeing, but also that which is seen, therefore a sight or spectacle) and *horān* (the action of seeing, from the Greek verb “to see”).

So the derivative noun *theōria* refers to an observation or sighting. However, as classicist Ian Rutherford points out, the term has nine related meanings. Those meanings, in turn, boil down to four: *theōria* refers to a festival, the traveler to the festival, the travel itself, and the traveler's observations at the festival. To clarify the word's meaning, Rutherford compares it to the Hindi term *darśan*, seeing the gods in a Hindu temple or procession. Yet whether or not we emphasize the term's original religious significance or its intriguing parallels with *darśan*—both as observation at a festival and as philosophical insight—anthropologist James Clifford is right to point out that, at its core, *theōria* refers to the observations of travelers. In that sense, theories are sightings.¹³

It is helpful to understand theories as sightings, I suggest, but only if we keep in mind three cautions. First, as when motorists glance in the rearview mirror, the theorist always has blind spots. Illustrating his point with a passage from Robert Louis Stevenson's story "The Lantern Bearers," William James suggested in a compelling essay that there is "a certain blindness in human beings." Just as the young boys in Stevenson's narrative carried a "tin bull's eye lantern" beneath their topcoats and hidden from the sight of passing pedestrians, so too all humans are unable to notice all that surrounds them. James had in mind "the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and peoples different from ourselves," but the theorist's vision is impaired in other ways too. There are sites in the shifting terrain we cannot see, or can only dimly make out. To return to Bashō's narrative, he recounted this sort of experience as he described his journey toward Kisagata and past Mount Chōkai: "just about the time the dim sun was nearing the horizon, a strong wind rose from the sea, blowing up fine grains of sand, and rain, too, began to spread a gray film of cloud across the sky, so that even Mount Chōkai was made invisible." Bashō tells readers that he "walked in this state of semi-blindness" for some time, but then abandoned all efforts at travel and settled there in the impenetrable cloud of sand and rain for the night. Theorists have it worse: they

can't wait for the boys to reveal the lantern beneath their topcoats or for the "gray film" to pass from the rising peak. Sometimes the obstructions are not temporary. Observing from my folding chair several rows from the altar at the feast-day mass in Miami, or sitting at my desk to analyze religious practices in other times and places, there was always something I could not see. Some paths are not taken, and my theory, like all others, has blind spots. Theorists are neither omnivagant nor omnispersive. They wander only to this place, or that; they see only what that vantage allows. This does not mean, of course, that there is nothing to see from other sites. As Friedrich Nietzsche observed, it is "the immodesty of man" (or woman) to "deny meaning where he sees none."¹⁴

A second caution is necessary as we talk about theory's positioned representations as sightings: visual metaphors, like all others, have limitations, and the term *sightings* as I use it refers to multisensorial, culturally mediated embodied encounters. Richard Rorty reminded readers of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that "ocular metaphors" can be unhelpful because they implicitly or explicitly endorse a correspondence theory of knowledge that presupposes that the "eye of the mind" pairs concepts with mind-independent objects. For that reason, Rorty proposes that we get the visual metaphors "out of our speech altogether." The feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway joins Rorty in warning about the limitations of visual metaphors. She condemns "the god trick"—the illusory presumption that, like a divine being, we can have vision from everywhere and nowhere—and she suggests that visual analogies create the possibility of a disembodied science and philosophy, thereby underemphasizing or overlooking the gritty physicality of human bodies and the artifacts they make. As Rorty's and Haraway's critiques remind us, it was not inevitable that many Western theorists modeled knowledge and representation on seeing. We can imagine the representational or performative tasks of theory as akin to smell, taste, hearing, or touch: we catch the scent of reality, savor morsels of knowledge, hear the universe speak to us, or rub up against things as they are.

In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Bashō engaged all the senses as he wrote about the “cry of the cuckoo,” the bite of “fleas and lice,” and “the faint aroma of snow.” In a similar way, embodied theoretical sightings also evoke all the senses. So Rorty and Haraway are right to note the limitations of visual imagery, but rather than abandon those metaphors I prefer to reimagine them. Theorists’ representations, as I understand them, are bodily and culturally mediated processes that include much more than just seeing.¹⁵

Those representations also are situated, and this is the final caution I want to urge as I propose that we understand theoretical reflections as sightings. To explain what I mean by *situated* let me return to the writings of Hilary Putnam and Donna Haraway. Putnam outlines two fundamental philosophical orientations: externalist and internalist. To highlight spatial motifs, let’s call these supra-locative and locative approaches. The *supra-locative* approach presupposes that the interpreter is everywhere at once or nowhere in particular. It presupposes, as Putnam notes, a “God’s Eye point of view.” However this perspective is framed, it assumes a position beyond any fixed point and outside all categorical schemes. Sometimes called “metaphysical realism,” this view suggests that the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects, and there is one true and complete description of “the way the world is.” Truth involves a correspondence between words and external things. Persuasive interpretation, in this view, means that an account corresponds to “the way things are”—either as they are in themselves or as they appear to participants.¹⁶

The *locative* approach, which I advocate, begins with the assumption that all theorists are situated and all theories emerge from within categorical schemes and social contexts. It only makes sense to talk about reality-for-us, and questions about what’s real or true make sense only *within* a socially constructed cluster of categories and an always-contested set of criteria for assessment. Putnam notes that this view—which is akin to coherence and pragmatic theories of truth—holds that truth does not entail “proof” or “justification”; it aims for—to use John Dewey’s term—“warranted assertability.” Or as Putnam put it in an-

other passage, truth is “some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability—some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system*—and not correspondence with mind-independent ‘states of affairs.’” Both the objects and the signs are internal to categorical schemes, so signs make sense only in a particular context as they are used by particular interpreters. Interpretation, then, is not a matter of matching categories and “independent” realities, and there is no single “correct interpretation.” Interpretation is not, in sociologist Max Weber’s classic rendering, a matter of understanding the mental states or personal experiences of historical or contemporary actors. Theorists do not have access to those “states” or “experiences.” They have only the narratives, artifacts, and practices of religious women and men.¹⁷

In this locative approach there are more or less acceptable interpretations of those narratives, artifacts, and practices, where *acceptable* here means internally coherent and contextually useful. And it means more: a persuasive interpretation is one that would be found plausible by any fair and self-conscious interpreter who engaged in the same sort of research practices—listening, observing, reading, and so on. That, of course, is impossible, so the notion of an acceptable interpretation is always contested and contestable and is always a matter of offering a plausible account *within* an accepted categorical scheme and *within* a particular professional setting, with its scholarly idiom and role-specific obligations. This means that—to borrow Putnam’s phrasing—anything does *not* go. We can give reasons for preferring one interpretation over another—including by appealing to professional obligations and pragmatic criteria—though we cannot claim that our account exhausts all significations or corresponds to “external reality” or “subjective states.” Putnam notes that “to single out a correspondence between two domains one needs some independent access to both domains.” No such “independent access” is possible, since our theoretical sightings are always our account of what we can see—and hear, touch, taste, and smell—from where we stand.¹⁸

So however self-evident this claim might seem to some readers, it

needs to be reaffirmed, because the authorial voice of most academic studies of religion fails to make it clear: as theorists make sense of narratives, artifacts, and practices they are always situated. Further, as Haraway has argued, all reliable knowledge is situated. Extending her analysis, I suggest that self-conscious positioning, not pretenses to universality or detachment, is the condition for making knowledge claims. Both metaphysical realism and cognitive relativism, in different ways, claim to locate the knower everywhere or nowhere. But as I have argued elsewhere, it is precisely because we stand in a particular place that we are able to see, to know, to narrate. Scholars function within a network of social exchange and in a particular geographical location, and in their work they use collectively constructed professional standards. They stand in a built environment, a social network, and a professional community. In this view, theories of religion are sightings from particular geographical and social sites whereby scholars construct meaning, using categories and criteria they inherit, revise, and create.¹⁹

So I am just this particular theorist—a middle-aged, middle-class, Philadelphia-born white guy of Irish Catholic descent—drawing on the idiom and norms of my profession to offer a disciplined construction of what I can see from where I am. As I have noted, I can't see everything. Culturally mediated objects enter and leave my sensorial and conceptual horizon. The horizon shifts as I do. And my position (including my gender, class, and race) obscures some things as it illumines others. But let me be clear: I am not apologizing. Theorists have been more or less self-conscious and their interpretations have been more or less subtle, but there have been no supra-locative accounts of religion. No theorist has hovered; no interpretation has been ungrounded. All theorists stand in a particular place. Every one of them. The difference? Some interpreters have said so.²⁰

Note, for example, that philologist Friedrich Max Müller's theory of religion, which highlighted language and its misunderstanding, took shape at the desk where he translated Sanskrit texts; Karl Marx's analysis of religion as a tool of the economically powerful emerged from his



3. Sigmund Freud's study, with his office desk and patient's couch. Freud Museum, London.

early observations of unemployment and poverty in Trier and his later walks in London's slums; and, surrounded by ancient sculpture and unearthed artifacts from Egypt, Greece, and the Near and Far East, Sigmund Freud excavated the subterranean impulses of the human psyche and framed his theory of religion as neurosis as he sat across from the couch where patients told him stories about fathers, mothers, and unfulfilled desire (Figure 3). So all theory is situated, and offered as an invitation: consider this. All theorists invite readers to see if their ac-

count illumines some regions of the religious world that other theories have obscured. If not, toss it. If so, use it, though always recalling the site from which it emerged and the questions it tried to answer.²¹

→> Locating This Theory

As I have tried to make clear, this theory—the proposed route, the journey itself, and these representations—began as I tried to answer questions about what I found among transnational migrants in Miami at the annual festival and the Virgin's shrine. As Michel de Certeau argued, we cannot theorize culture, or anything else, “without, first of all, recognizing the fact that we are dealing with it from one site, our own . . . An analysis always amounts to a localized practice that produces only a regional discourse.” Not all theorists of culture or religion have agreed with Certeau or tried to self-consciously position themselves. If they address the issue at all, many theorists of religion have followed Morris Jastrow, the important but neglected American scholar of religion, who acknowledged in his 1901 book *The Study of Religion* what he called “the personal equation,” but urged colleagues to “keep it in check and under safe control.” Those influenced by traditions in the phenomenology of religion have taken a slightly different approach that, in the end, amounts to the same thing as they aim to “bracket” the personal and the local.²²

In recent decades, however, a number of intellectual trends have pushed interpreters in the humanities and social sciences to think more about their location or position. Feminists have pondered the social effects of male positions of dominance and self-consciously talked about where they stand. Foucault inspired historical analyses of power relations that took seriously how discourses positioned women and men in social space. Cultural anthropologists celebrated a “reflexive turn” in their field as they extended the methodological self-consciousness already a part of their disciplinary legacy. Several traditions in philosophy—including pragmatism and postmodernism—welcomed a similar move to the local and the personal. Drawing on a gardening metaphor

that Ludwig Wittgenstein used in a famous passage in *Philosophical Investigations*, Putnam, who has noted his debt to Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis as well as to the pragmatist tradition, acknowledged the interpreter's situatedness while also reminding us that spatial and temporal positions shift: “Recognizing that there are certain places where one's spade is turned; recognizing, with Wittgenstein, that there are places where our explanations run out, isn't saying that any particular place is *permanently* fated to be one of those places, or that any particular belief is forever immune from criticism. This is where my spade is turned *now*. This is where my justifications stop *now*.” On very different grounds, confessional and narrative Christian theologians also have found themselves aligned with pragmatists, postmodernists, and others on this issue as they proclaim their own position from within an ecclesiastical community.²³

Yet situating oneself and one's theory is more difficult than most interpreters have acknowledged. In my ethnography of devotion at the Miami shrine, I tried to say what I could about where I stood, but, as I acknowledged, first-person positionings introduce as many epistemological and moral problems as they resolve. They claim authority just as they seem to challenge it. They do so “by implying that the author has privileged information about his or her own motives and location, persuading the reader that the writer has come clean . . . But what have I not told the reader? What is inaccessible to me? No matter how forthright and vulnerable authors might appear in such confessional passages, more always remains hidden to author and reader.” With the geographer Gillian Rose, I challenge the widespread commitment to “transparent reflexivity,” the notion that the theorist's position can be easily identified and acknowledged. To return to an image I introduced earlier, theorists always have blind spots—including a certain blindness about where they stand. There is no omnilateral position. So there is no omnispexion, and certainly not as we turn the gaze back on ourselves. Our sightings of our own shifting position are always partial. A cloud of sand and rain blows up and obscures our view.²⁴

Attempts to locate ourselves, however, are still worth the effort, even if self-conscious positioning will always remain a partially fulfilled ideal. We know more, not less, when theorists eschew pretenses to having “a view from nowhere,” when they do what they can to locate the site of their sightings. Theorists owe it to readers to say as much as seems directly relevant—even if blind spots (and unwitting or principled resistance) will mean it will always be too much and not enough.

My theory of religion, which highlights movement and relation and emphasizes the tropes of dwelling and crossing, is positioned in several ways. First, it is culturally located. As observers of all sorts have claimed, the present age seems to be characterized by accelerated movements across time and space. Business leaders talk about instant exchanges in the global economy. Politicians emphasize that nation-states are increasingly interconnected. Communications experts talk about the rapid transnational transfer of media: film, Web sites, electronic mail, and television. Demographers point to the movements of peoples. Artists have traced the same processes: Mộng-Lan, the Vietnamese American painter and poet, has suggested in her poem “Trail” that this is an “era of exile.” So as Arjun Appadurai notes, “it has now become something of a truism that we are functioning in a world fundamentally characterized by objects in motion. These objects include ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques. This is a world of flows.” All theories are culturally situated, and this theory, which emphasizes crossing, emerges from a cultural moment in which movement and relation seem important—at least to those with the leisure to reflect on such things and to those who don’t find their crossings constrained by racism, sexism, or poverty.²⁵

This theory is personally and professionally located too. If it began with observations among transnational migrants in Miami, where I lived and worked, I was not an aging Cuban exile who fled Castro’s Cuba in the 1960s or a twenty-something *balsero* who made the perilous journey by raft in the 1990s. I did not grow up speaking Spanish, and I did not share the same ethnic or national heritage. I was raised as a Ro-

man Catholic, so I knew a good deal about the practices I observed, even on my first visit, but I did not attend the rituals because of an enduring personal devotion. I came to the shrine with a notebook and tape recorder. I came from a nearby university as an untenured scholar who was paid to write and teach about religion in the Americas. Even if my social location has changed over time—when I went off to college, our family income was below the federal poverty line—by the time I started the research for my ethnography I was comfortably middle class. My life then, and since, has been briefcases, neckties, department meetings, PTA book sales, and soccer carpools. And that book about Miami’s Cubans helped me to get tenure—and a promotion and raise. Even if I chose the shrine as a site for research because the devotions fascinated me, my work there—and it was work—had professional, economic, and social consequences for me, just as this book will. At the shrine and at my desk, I have been fulfilling professional obligations, even if the tasks have given me great joy.

And my professional location mediated my observations in Miami as it has shaped this book on theory. I was not displaced from my homeland, but since age eighteen I have moved more than most of the Cuban exiles I met as I followed programs of study and job opportunities—from Philadelphia to State College to Cambridge to Boca Raton to Palo Alto to Cambridge to Miami to Chapel Hill. Migration, or crossing, was not foreign to me, even if mine was the voluntary displacement of the privileged. When I researched and wrote, I also thought a great deal about travel, since I studied Cuban exiles and Vietnamese refugees. So it is not surprising that I would focus on crossing as a theme. Nor is it surprising that just as Indologist Max Müller alluded to Indian religious traditions as he theorized, many of the examples in this book are drawn from the religions (Christianity and Buddhism), periods (since the eighteenth century), and places (North America and Japan) I know best.

This theoretical sighting emerges from my professional context in other ways. I have listened in on conversations in cultural anthropology

about culture and reflexivity, exchanges in philosophy about language and epistemology, and discussions in human geography about space and place, but my graduate training and university appointment is in religious studies. Even if I hope to attract readers with diverse backgrounds and interests, I have inherited questions, categories, and interlocutors from lineages in the academic study of religion and have tried to contribute to an ongoing conversation in my field. Not all scholars of religion offer a theory of religion, but it should not be surprising when one—even a scholar who isn't a philosopher or theorist—is foolish enough to try.

If my observations at the shrine, my academic itinerancy, and my scholarly focus on Latino and Asian transnational migrants made me more attentive to the issues of movement and relation—and the themes of crossing and dwelling—my reading in cultural anthropology, feminist philosophy, and cultural studies nudged me to think about power and position. And the importance of power and position became clearer to me at the start of this theoretical project, as I reflected on the built environment where I do my work. One Wednesday morning in 1999 I walked up the steps to Saunders Hall, where I have my religious studies office. I noticed a man in a blue uniform perched on a ladder near the entrance. Fixing something or other, I thought to myself as I pushed open the door. I had a nine o'clock class that morning, and I was preoccupied with thinking through the assigned reading. But as I walked down the hall, an administrative assistant from our office rushed toward me.²⁶

"There's KKK banners all around the building," she said. "I called maintenance to take them down. It's so upsetting. There are even nooses."

Before I went outside to take a look, anger rose in me. Then resolve. We should do something. Hold a forum, get a petition, write an editorial. Something.

But then I learned that it wasn't Ku Klux Klan supporters who had hung the banners and strung the nooses, symbols of the horrors of

lynching. We started reading the banners and learned that someone was protesting, not advocating, racial hatred. Someone was angry, we then surmised, that the 1922 building was named for William Laurence Saunders (1835–1891), who in 1871 had been compelled to testify before a congressional committee investigating the KKK. Saunders, who was appointed to the University of North Carolina's Board of Trustees four years later, refused to answer each of the more than one hundred questions posed by members of the Joint Select Committee. To each he replied only, "I decline to answer," a phrase inscribed on his tombstone. And the remaining archival records do not provide incontrovertible answers about his involvement either. Not all the relevant material survived—a newspaper story claimed Saunders ordered a servant to burn a trunk of old papers at his death—but there is enough evidence to conclude that he was a KKK sympathizer. And he might have been, as one historian suggested in 1914, "at the head of the Invisible Empire in North Carolina," even though he probably "never took the oath of membership and hence was, strictly speaking, not a member."²⁷

I had learned about Saunders and the accusations of racism in 1994, soon after I left Miami to teach at Carolina. Initially I was stunned, and infuriated. How could they name a building for him? Why didn't someone change that? Does anyone else know? I went to a senior colleague down the hall to learn more.

"Yeah," he told me, "every few years students protest. And then it fades away again."

Well, it shouldn't fade away, I thought. But it did—until the morning of October 6, when I went outside a second time and saw those nooses dangling above the door. At first I agreed with the spokeswoman for the group that hung them (Students Seeking Historical Truth), who told reporters that she organized the protest to change the building's name. Naming it for that KKK sympathizer, she said, "diminishes the importance of Black students. It's like saying what Saunders did is OK." But then as I was walking to Saunders Hall the next week it hit me: I work in this building. I write here. I had argued in print that we should be self-

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consciously positioned interpreters, but I had forgotten the history of contact inscribed on the landscape, my landscape, this particular place: a university that, like most others I know, has a morally ambivalent past. It was segregated and sexist throughout much of its history. It was home to some leaders who spoke out against social injustice, yet more than half of the students now enrolled—women and people of color—would not have been welcome on campus earlier in the twentieth century. Then I thought of the title of a book I had been reading at the time, a study of the Western Apache Indians: *Wisdom Sits in Places*. That's right, I thought. And that situated wisdom comes not only from cultivating authorial reflexivity but also from excavating the landscape's moral history. We need to know that this is where a slaveholder stood. Women weren't welcome in this classroom. Here—in this very spot—injustice's residue rests. But we should not erase it but mark it, I decided. Agitate for memory. Don't take the name off the building. Instead, enlarge the bronze plaque beside the entrance. Maybe add floodlights. Or two lime neon arrows flashing downward toward the illuminated historical marker, so it could serve to remind that, for good or ill, here is where I stand, where we stand, all of us.²⁸

So the nooses dangling from the door reminded me again—and apparently I need reminding—that interpreters are situated, and where we stand is morally ambivalent. Further, the theoretical sightings we offer from where we stand negotiate public power, and enact moral principles, just as they construct meaning. Like some other theorists of religion, I leave it to theologians and ethicists, adherents writing within and for religious communities, to adjudicate disputes among traditions' competing moral or metaphysical claims. I am not interested in determining, for example, whether a Hopi picture of the multi-tiered cosmos is right or whether Buddhist moral precepts are adequate. I will leave those tasks to others. Instead, I set out to find a new language that might make more sense of the movement, relation, and positionality I noticed at the annual festival in Miami. I did not try to construct a theoretical platform from which to criticize or celebrate the beliefs, values, or prac-

tices of those Cuban Catholics, although I think that my understanding of theories as itineraries, as positioned sightings, might help those who do want to make normative judgments. At the same time, I have come to realize that I cannot pretend that this theory, or any theory, is “morally neutral.” My own epistemic and moral values are evident in several passages of this book—for example, as I note the “role-specific obligations” of scholars in Chapter 2, analyze the “compelled crossings” of slaves and the “constrained crossings” of women in Chapter 5, and affirm “pragmatic” criteria for the assessment of theories in the Conclusion. This inscription of values in a theory of religion is not surprising, however, since scholarly interpretations reflect and shape the social, political, and economic order. Theories situate interpreters and readers in social space and tell us who we are. Excavating the moral history of the local landscape brought this home to me again, and in a new way: power, not just meaning, is at stake when we do our theoretical work.²⁹

THE PATH TO KISAGATA: BEYOND OMNINAVIGATION AND OMNISPECTION

So the theorist's built environment, personal location, social status, and professional community all shape theoretical work, and theories are sightings from these shifting sites that answer questions about what the itinerant theorist sees along the way. Yet some critics who affirm a deductive-nomological view and remain captured by a picture of theory as an omniscient mirroring of fixed terrain might challenge the view I have proposed here. They may suggest that I have fallen into an uncritical cognitive relativism that offers little help to those trying to understand religion in multiple historical and geographical contexts. But to acknowledge that I stand *here* is not to imply that what I see from that vantage cannot illumine what can be seen in other times and places, even if theory cannot identify universal laws. This theory, like others, asks only: does this provide an illuminating angle of vision as you try to interpret religions in other eras and regions? To acknowledge that sight-

ings negotiate power as well as meaning is to give up any notion of morally neutral or socially disinterested accounts, but it does not mean that self-consciously positioned theories cannot be useful. To say that a cloud of sand blows up as we traverse the path is not to say we are not on the move and cannot offer representations along the way. To say we cannot have a God's-eye view, and to acknowledge blind spots, is not to say we can see nothing at all. It's to say only what all theorists of religion should have said—that we are positioned.

In Chapter 3, I offer a positioned representation that proposes a route—and continues to move toward a dynamic and relational theory of religion. But as most theoretical itinerants do, I first pause to mark the boundaries of the terrain. In Chapter 2, I consider the arguments about whether and how to define religion.³⁰

Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life.

Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*

When everyone around you is demonstrating that no one can walk, it's a good time to get up quickly and start running.

Michel Serres to Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*

BOUNDARIES

Constitutive Terms, Orienting Tropes, and Exegetical Fussiness

Despite warnings about the futility of efforts to define religion, many scholars still choose to “get up and start running.”¹ In this chapter I warm up for the sprint by discussing constitutive terms and arguing for scholars' role-specific obligation to define them. Meeting that obligation, I suggest, means being clear about the type of definition offered and attending carefully to the choice of orienting trope, since definitions imply theories and employ tropes. Interpreters of religion have relied on a wide range of orienting metaphors, and I consider some of the most influential ones as I point to the implications of those choices.

For good reasons, nonspecialists start to doze when definitions come up; scholars of religion, who've heard it all before, exhale a knowing