

The Future Belongs to the Brave: Some Thoughts on the Fate of Decolonization in Religious
Studies

Joseph Mario Burkley Alejandro

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Advised by: Guangtian Ha

Department of Religion

Haverford College

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Abstract

This senior thesis project contributes to the ongoing conversation surrounding decolonization efforts in the field of religious studies. I argue that scholars, having already devoted much focus to understanding the colonial origins of the discipline, now must shift to concentrating on continued decolonization in practice. Linking decolonization explicitly to means of representation, this thesis in particular explores some of the ways that scholars have both theorized about and chosen in practice to represent both themselves and the interlocutors present in their projects. I first explore the recent debate between two scholars of religious studies, Robert Orsi and Stephen Prothero, about the place of the scholar in ethnographic research. Framing the representation of the scholar around their debate, I claim that Orsi's call for the suspension of the self in ethnographic research lends itself to decolonizing efforts moreso than Prothero's call for temporary bracketing. I then turn to two texts, Leela Prasad's *Poetics of Conduct* and Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola*, to explore the ways that two prominent scholars have made innovative choices in representing interlocutors. I see both of their approaches, although distinct from one another, as successful examples for scholars seeking to further the process of decolonization to follow. Finally, I explore the possibilities for decolonization through visual representation, using the recently published *Lissa* as an example of work that religious studies scholars could potentially produce in the future.

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Introduction: What does Decolonization Look Like in Religious Studies?

As all scholarly fields move chronologically further from their colonial pasts, many look for ways to engage in processes of decolonization, widely understood as ways to right the wrongs committed by the academic world over the last few centuries. The field of religious studies is no exception. The work of many scholars, some recent, and others earlier in the 20th century, has already done a great deal to change how we think about “religion” itself. In this thesis, I argue however that future progress towards the decolonization of religious studies as a scholarly field depends not on continuing to acknowledge the disciplines colonial past, but on scholars creating innovative ways to represent those who they study. This applies most directly to ethnographic research, which continues to be one of the primary ways that religious studies scholars do their work. In what follows, I explore some of the ways that scholars have already made progressive choices in representation as well as new, unexplored possibilities for representation in the field of religious studies.

Before I proceed further, it is necessary that I clarify what I mean by “decolonization.” Drawing from the work of Faye V. Harrison, I define decolonization as a sort of methodology of study that draws from several crucial elements. In the context of the field of religious studies, I find that three of points that Harrison raises are especially compelling. First, Harrison notes that the decolonization of a field is grounded in “experiments in interpretive and reflexive ethnographic analysis.”¹ She sees creating and then using radical means of understanding as crucial for the decolonization of a field. Vague in her initial statement, Harrison leaves space for scholars to do the experimenting themselves. That said, such novel methodologies and projects must understand that in order to engage with the larger decolonial project, they need to do the

work of ethnography differently, creating new possibilities for representation of not only interlocutors but scholars themselves.

Continuing, Harrison states that the project of decolonization must contain “a feminism which underscores the impact race and class have upon gender.”² Here, she sees it as crucial that scholars seeking to embrace decolonization understand their work as deeply embedded in the patriarchal power structures that have shaped the world as we know it today. The exploration of gender, race, and class intersectionally is needed in a project seeks to undo a disciplines colonial past. Finally, decolonization rests on engaging with “traditions of radical Black and (other) Third World scholarship, that acknowledge the interplay between race and other forms of invidious difference, notably class and gender.”³ Echoing her previous point, Harrison again sees the project of decolonization as resting on the acknowledgment of intersecting factors, including race, class, and gender, which she names. How scholars choose to represent this interplay in their work is left open to some interpretation, but Harrison suggests that they work with the traditions laid by those who have been marginalized and left on the edges of western scholarship.

At its core the model for decolonization laid out here is a challenge to the ways that scholars represent not only their interlocutors in their work, but also in how they represent themselves and their own voices. It is a call for voices of those who have been marginalized by factors of race, class, and gender to be depicted truthfully and with force. In order to continue the ongoing processes of decolonization in any field, it is necessary that these issues of who is represented and how continue to be probed and that existing methods be reimaged. As such an interdisciplinary field, religious studies is positioned to take on such a model for decolonization. Scholars in the discipline so often use anthropological methods and tools in their ethnographic

research, and as such must remain in conversation with movements in anthropology, including the larger turn towards decolonization.

Applying the model for decolonization laid out above to religious studies, the same issue of representation clearly shines through. As scholars in the field conduct their work with individuals and groups affected by the same structures of race, class, and gender, it is necessary that their interlocutors are able to represent themselves and be represented by researchers in ways that acknowledge the interplay of these factors. This must extend beyond how “religion” itself is defined and understood, as enough work as already been done by scholars in this area. The decolonization of religious studies need now shift to an introspective look at the ethnographic practices of the field, rather than the invention of the field itself.

Literature Review: How have Religious Studies Scholars Thought of Decolonization?

Scholars have already done much to decolonize the term “religion” itself. These efforts, focused largely on bringing “religion” and the way that the word is interpreted, away from its Western, Christian origins has been influential in changing how religion is thought about both practically and conceptually in academic works. Illustrating this trend, I turn to the work of three scholars who have chosen to take on this task. Two, Talal Asad and Jonathan Z. Smith, have been some of the most influential anthropological and religious studies scholars of the past century. The third, Brent Nongbri, writes more recently, and is perhaps less influential, but continues the trend that Asad and Smith started before him.

Asad’s piece, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” written in 1981, argues for a more complicated understanding of what religion should be understood as. Writing against the definition of religion put forth by famed anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Asad

complicates how we ought to understand religion in a modern world. Geertz, understanding religion as “(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic,” directly ties the concept of religion to the meanings placed upon “symbols.”⁴ These symbols, defined as “any object, act, event, quality, or relation,” function as vessels of significance, inviting those “in the know” to see them with additional meaning.⁵ To Geertz’s definition, Asad takes particular issue.

Understanding that the systems of meaning described by Geertz are rooted in the same structures that have come to define the ways that religion is understood colloquially and academically, Asad writes, “let us begin [to understand religion] by asking what are the historical conditions (movements, classes, institutions, ideologies) necessary for the existence of particular religious practices and discourses.”⁶ Continuing, Asad claims that we should ask how relationships predicated on power create religion, which he sees as necessary in the process of uncovering the ways that religion has been constructed by human interests.⁷ These questions, of how symbols and the structures replicated in such systems of meaning are perpetuated in scholarly practice, are left unanswered by Geertz. Adding his own voice to the discussion of how religion ought to be understood, Asad’s understanding of representations of religion as dependent on the power structures (defined largely by factors including race, class, and gender) that define the word is decolonial. His call to historicize how we think and understand religion, in the context of the historical colonial enterprise, is a powerful example of how religious studies (and those who theorize about religion outside of the field) have already embraced decolonial understandings of what “religion” is. Using Geertz as his point of analysis, Asad, took crucial

steps towards changing how scholars have thought about religion and religious studies as a field of study, pointing out the power-steeped origins of what we know as “religion.”

Writing a bit later, Smith’s article, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” does much of the same decolonial work as Asad’s piece. In his work, Smith makes clear an acknowledgement that religion is an invented term, and as such is implicitly influenced by the scholars who create it as well as the power structures they are, as individuals, embedded in. Arguing against an explicit definition of “religion,” Smith points out that “religion is not a “natural” term: it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and is thus theirs to define.”⁸ Smith parallels the creation of “religion” with terms such as “language” and “culture” that were invented in the fields of linguistics and anthropology respectively. He does much to trace the origins of the word and its usage over time, noting for instance the binary categories of “theirs” and “ours” that have been used historically to differentiate religions from one another. Smith writes of the Christian origins of this dichotomy, “by the time of the fourth-century Christian Latin apologists, a strong dual vocabulary [of “our religion” vs. “their religion”] was in place and could be deployed... through generic terms such as “heathenism,” “paganism,” or “idolatry.””⁹ Continuing, Smith notes that these terms were largely used to by the Protestant Church to other groups thought to be dangerously different, including the Roman Catholic Church at the time. Claiming that this initial dichotomy of “us” vs. “them” ultimately led to the damaging binary of “natural” vs. “primitive” religion, which has been used throughout colonial history to justify the subjugation of entire populations.¹⁰

Smith’s understanding of “religion” as an invented term has further opened it up to critique and skepticism, both necessary for the continuation of decolonial process. Especially pertinent to the European colonial histories which have come to dominate how religion is

understood, “Religion. Religions, Religious” has powerfully countered the conception of religion as a non-divisive, blanket term. Rather in fact, as Smith establishes, it has been used to marginalize and subjugate others who have been labeled as “different.” Smith’s work implores religious studies scholars to step back and understand their discipline as shaped by powerful, damaging forces. His acknowledgement of these forces, and subsequent call for their acknowledgement by others, is a step in the direction of decolonization in religious studies. His ask, that religious studies scholars understand the ways that “religion” has been shaped by colonial forces, has been, like Asad’s work before him, a decolonial enterprise.

Brent Nongbri’s recent 2013 book, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, takes the ideas found in Asad and Smith’s writing even further. In his work, Nongbri provides an in depth historical analysis of how the term “religion” came to be, grounding his discussion in a deep analysis of historical roots of the term. The ultimate conclusion of his book, similarl to Smith’s, is that the concept of religion as known not only by laypeople but by scholars themselves is an invented one.¹¹ Nongbri writes that religion was, “born out of a mix of Christian disputes about truth, European colonial exploits, and the formation of nation-states.”¹² Like Smith before him, Nongbri brings to attention the role that colonial forces have had in defining our understanding of religion as a first a concept, then as a discipline. However, given that he devotes an entire book to the question, he is able to dive considerably more in depth than Smith in his article. In *Before Religion*, Nongbri also points out that the field of religious studies has rested largely on the notion that religion is a “fact of human life and always has been.”¹³ Working to counter this assumption, Nongbri brings to the table an account of the formation of the field that holds scholars accountable for the ways that they think about religion, requiring an acknowledgment of the discipline’s historical background. Grounded in the colonial enterprise,

this background and the reverberations that continue to resonate in both academic and public spaces has perhaps irreparably altered how religion is understood. However, his project of revealing this dark history, as a continuation of Asad and Smith before him, is again one of the many examples of projects in which scholars have thought about the academic endeavors of religious studies, taking to task the ways that we understand how to study religion today.

The work that scholars have already done to decolonize the field of religious studies had been largely productive so far. It is now time however to turn to ways that scholars understand and represent not only their interlocutors but themselves as well in their ethnographic research. For the field of religious studies to continue to engage with practices of decolonization in an ever changing landscape of religiosity, this is a necessary change to make. The fact of the matter is that scholars have already done enough to understand the ways that the colonial origins of religious studies, and perhaps all academic fields, have influenced the way that religion is conceptualized. Asad, Smith, and Nongbri, even given the importance of their respective works, are only a fraction of the authors who have dealt with such topics. Scholars of religious studies (or at least the vast majority of them) know where the field rose from.¹⁴ The focus of religious studies must shift from knowing about the problem to *doing* something about it. Over the rest of this thesis, I explore some of the ways that a few scholars have thought about decolonizing the field of religious studies in practice, with a focus on the ways that these specific scholars have chosen to represent not only themselves as authors but their interlocutors as well. Finally, I briefly explore a new possibility for representation that has not yet made its way into the discipline. Because, as religious studies advances further in its quest for decolonization, scholars must continue to engage with new and innovative ways to present their work.

Representation of the Scholar in Religious Studies: A Recent Theoretical Debate

In recent years, much debate in the field of religious studies has surrounded the place of the scholar in their own work. Questions regarding what position the scholar should take, how they should acknowledge that position, and what they should say *from* that position have been at the forefront of discussions. The origins of this debate began largely when Robert Orsi and Stephen Prothero, two prominent scholars of religion, began to argue over the place of the scholars in their own texts. In this section, I explore their debate and ultimately I claim that Orsi's position works to further the decolonization of the religious studies field while Prothero's does not.

Orsi began his theorizing on the role of the scholar in a piece titled "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth." Responding to the controversial *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*, Orsi found it necessary to write about the way that "radical religious otherness" need be understood and written about by scholars.¹⁵ *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, written by journalist Robert Covington, tells the story of the reporter's experience living among and worshipping with the snake-handling community in Southern Appalachia. Throughout the book, Covington works to establish a close relationship with the men and women of that community, going as far as to even testify and preach in front of one of the snake-handling congregations.¹⁶ It is in this moment of preaching however, that the tone of his work takes a sudden change, as the close relationship he cultivated with the snake handlers began to crack and finally shatter. After testifying and being subsequently rebuked for his statements about the role of women in snake-handling services, Covington begins to describe the snake-handlers, specifically one of the preachers called Punkin Brown, in a different light. He writes of the man, who, in response to Covington's comments in

favor of gender equality, preached to reestablish the gendered hierarchy of the snake-handlers, “It was odd for me to see Punkin this way, so grotesque and funny looking, with his shirttail out and big rattlesnake over his shoulder. He was just a child, I [Covington] thought, an overgrown snake boy like myself.”¹⁷ In this moment, Covington, who had so carefully built his relationship with the other, in his case the snake-handlers, pulled away and harshly applied his own moral and personal judgements to Punkin Brown and the congregation. It is to this act, perpetrated perhaps in ignorance, that Orsi takes issue to in “Snakes Alive.”¹⁸

Noting that religious studies scholars often work among distinct others, Orsi asks how scholars ought to best understand the worlds made by those so far from their own experiences. Ingrained in asking his question is an understanding of the historical, political, and social implications that such attempts at understanding can have. Orsi makes this association clear, as he notes that, “critical scholarship on something called “religion”... first appeared in the early modern era in the West amid the ruins of religious wars between Protestants and Catholics and just when Europeans were encountering the ancient religious cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Americas.”¹⁹ Here, like Asad, Smith, and Nongbri, he makes clear the historical connotations of the religious studies field. Such a decision is decolonizing in the same manner as the three aforementioned authors, yet Orsi then takes his focus in a different direction, instead looking to how scholars should best represent themselves in their work.

Orsi concludes that given the historical and political origins of the field, religious studies scholars often, perhaps inadvertently, orient their work around a particular set of moral assumptions and judgments about what “religion” can and should be.²⁰ Understanding that these moral assumptions exist, Orsi’s jump to working to understand how scholars now need to represent themselves in the context of these assumptions is a logical one. This is the step that

Asad, Smith, and Nongbri did not quite make, as their work was more focused on first identifying the issue rather than rectifying it. This is of course not to say that the work of scholars such as Asad, Smith, or Nongbri is not necessary, rather it is to say that it is now necessary for scholars to create ways to realize their conclusions in practice. Speaking to a possible solution to the issue of representation, Orsi argues that scholars need to bring this history to light in their own writing, noting that if they do not disclose the moral and political histories of the discipline, they run the risk of continuing the damaging trends of “unacknowledged assumptions, prejudices, and implications in power.”²¹

Applying this in practice, Orsi suggests that scholars need to take steps to invite what he terms the “suspension of the impulse to locate the other,” while exposing their own preconceived moral assumptions to the possibilities of change.²² He asks scholars to hold themselves and their work in a state of vulnerability, a vulnerability that can only be achieved through experiences of radical otherness. This requires the scholar to, in practice, make a great effort to understand how and why interlocutors understand morality, belief, and practice as they do. This understanding of how to conduct ethnographic practice is again decolonial. It requires the scholar to go beyond understanding the factors at play in the lives of their interlocutors from a distant point, instead asking them to place their own experiences, contexts, and ideas aside in an effort of radical understanding. Through this understanding comes not only the possibility for a truer understanding of the lives of others, the possibility for inclusion into the system of moral judgement implicit in the field of religious studies as we know it. Orsi’s plea for scholars to hold their own understandings in suspension is a powerful tool for the furthering of decolonial processes in religious studies, as well as a moving example of one of the ways that scholars have thought about decolonial aims in the field of religious studies.

However, not all scholars have found Orsi's position to be feasible or applicable at all in academic practice. Responding to "Snakes Alive," Stephen Prothero takes quite a different viewpoint. In "Belief Unbracketed," he makes the claim that, "the endless bracketing that I have always taken as my charge is viable only as long as our work exists in the splendid isolation of the Ivory Tower."²³ In other words, Prothero finds that the suspension of one's own beliefs when conducting ethnographic research is impossible to bring into the setting of the "real world." Grounding his argument in the way that recent events, such as the Jonestown mass suicide or the 9/11 terrorist attacks have painted religion as an enemy in the eyes of many he makes the case for the scholar to let their morals shine through.²⁴ Rather than voluntarily suspending one's beliefs and judgements, Prothero claims that scholars ought to confront the other with their own biases as a sort of shield, creating distance between the self and the other. And, finding it necessary for scholars to judge certain acts seen as perpetrated by transgressive religious groups, Prothero argues for scholars to label religions as "good" or "bad."

That said, he does not disagree with all of Orsi's position. Prothero notes that scholars still ought to suspend the ethical in their work and make great efforts to understand others with empathy.²⁵ However, contrary to Orsi, he sees that scholars need to also break down the "barriers against our own judgements," while arguing for the continuation of religious studies as a moralizing discipline.²⁶ Seeing the practice of suspending one's judgement as a temporary tool to gain access to communities of and individual others, Prothero finds it necessary to leave the distance between scholar and interlocutor intact.

In the realm of theorizing, some of Prothero's criticisms of Orsi's position hold weight. After all, if expert religious studies scholars do not make their voices heard, they leave the space open for others who may not have the same understanding or tact to fill the void. In practice,

however, the position that Prothero chooses to champion potentially retains the colonial roots of the religious studies field. While he may very well understand the colonial roots of the discipline, the way of understanding others laid out in “Belief Unbracketed” does not acknowledge the loaded history of religion and religious studies. The approach he argues for, in which the scholar continues to make their own moralizing judgements allows the colonial history of the discipline to seep into their work, perhaps unnoticed. This history, grounded in colonial notions of gender, class, race, and other factors, does not allow the space for othered voices to be heard. The temporary suspension of judgement is simply not enough when the scholar can continue to bring their own moralizing to the table immediately after growing tired of such bracketing.

Orsi, taking issue with Prothero’s response to “Snakes Alive” continued the debate while further clarifying his own position on the place of the religious studied scholar. In his pointed response to Prothero he makes clear, as I have also done so above, that Prothero’s approach to religious studies is all too similar to the colonial past of the discipline. “Prothero and I differ in our views of the history of religious studies,” writes Orsi. “Where he sees a past dominated by moral bracketing I see a discipline that has embedded and masked its normativities in its very practices of critical knowing,” he continues.²⁷ In short, Orsi recognizes that Prothero does not engage with the colonial past of religious studies with the latter’s call for temporary bracketing, and in doing so contributes to the marginalization of others in the field.

Orsi spells out exactly what is meant by the idea of “suspension.” Rather than meaning a complete denial of the self in one’s work, he writes that the processes of suspension rests on the cultivated regard for the other, grounded in openness and acceptance.²⁸ The self remains in this scenario, yet does so in the background. For scholars of religious studies, the suspension of the self, when engaged in ethnographic research, allows both parties to be present, rather than

placing the voice of the privileged scholar in the dominating position. In fact, the voice of the scholar is perhaps now left on the margins, a piece of Orsi's call for suspension that further amplifies its decolonizing nature. The scholar, who, able to move into, through, and out of the lives of their interlocutors is then, applying Orsi's principle of suspension, left out of the picture. The space is then open for the scholar's interlocutors to represent their own lives without the voice of the scholar dominating the conversation, free from the judgements and moralizing that could potentially await them when such problematic assessments are levied. Although may perhaps be too idealistic of an approach in practice, Orsi here provides a compelling target for scholars to reach for.

Orsi speaks further in his response to the issue of moralizing brought up by Prothero. Recognizing that “, our [Scholars'] moral lives are completely implicated in our research,” along each step of the research process, Orsi believes that reflection on the application of morality onto others is a great challenge in the field of religious studies.¹⁶ As scholars engaged in ethnographic research come so closely into contact with the moral lives of others, Orsi's position here certainly holds weight. Reflection on the ways that moral lives bleed into research is necessary as when different moral lives come into close contact, scholars potentially run the risk of judging or assessing. This is precisely what the call for suspension of belief work to minimize. After all, as Orsi bluntly states, “moralizing doesn't do anybody any good because moralizing is just opinion.”³⁰

The opinions brought through acts of moralizing in religious studies can potentially carry with them the colonial conceptions of “religion” that the aforementioned scholars Asad, Smith, and Nongbri have discussed in their respective works. In making moral judgements, scholars run the risks of applying the moral background of religious studies as a field, which, as Smith has

pointed out for instance, carries with it the embedded power structures of the discipline.³¹ Such acts of moralizing, then, beyond inviting scholars to dominate over the voices of their interlocutors, bring with them damaging histories of colonialism built into the discipline. Even the “little bit of judgement” suggested by Prothero is too much to levy for scholars working towards decolonial goals. Rather, as Orsi suggests, it is imperative that the ethnographic practices of religious studies scholars avoid making judgement at all, and instead remain open to the suspension of their own beliefs. In practice, such a methodology would serve to amplify the voices of interlocutors beyond the “noise” of media and academic discourse, keeping the scholar’s own potentially dangerous opinions in the background. This could be a powerful move towards representational decolonization.

Understanding the place of the religious studies scholar in the production of ethnographic research is only one aspect of representation to be aware of. Scholars interested in furthering decolonial aims must also make new, bold choices when it comes to representing interlocutors in their work. In the section that follows, I explore the way that two prominent members of the religious studies field have made these choices, each choosing distinctly different methods of representation.

Representation of the Other in Religious Studies: Promising Choices from Selected Works

Moving on from the representation of scholars themselves in religious studies, I now turn to a few examples of how scholars have made innovative choices in representing their interlocutors. I explore two works, Leela Prasad’s *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Being in a South Indian Town* and Karen McCarthy Brown’s *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in*

Brooklyn. I find that both Prasad and Brown make choices regarding the way they represent their interlocutors that serve as promising precedents for future religious studies scholars to follow in their efforts for the decolonization of the field. In *Poetics of Conduct*, I explore the ways that Prasad chooses to represent her interlocutors primarily through her choice to include their words and stories as true to their spoken origin as possible. I also see the way that she situates oral narrative of her interlocutors within the larger landscape of academia as a powerful example tool for future decolonizing efforts. Turning to *Mama Lola*, I examine Brown's use of fiction in the work as well as her experience of initiation into the Vodou religion again as examples of possible decolonizing tools for religious studies scholars to use.

Prasad's *Poetics of Conduct*, written in 2007, tells the story of her experiences living among the Sringeri people of northwestern Karnataka.³² Having spent her summer in the small town as a child, the book is in many ways a story of return to a familiar place. Ultimately however, her book searches for the answers to question of how those in the Sringeri village create and assert their personal senses of morality. She asks, "How do people living in the vicinity of a powerful institution... imagine and express their moral worlds? What is normative for whom and what vocabulary defines it?"³³ Continuing, she finally asks how individual people in Sringeri connect understanding and then enacting their morals in the face of multiple sources of what is "right," including religious authorities in the area.³⁴ In her analysis, she focuses on engaging with the stories told to her by those she interacted with in the town, as well as observations and discussion held in her daily life in Sringeri, outside of the narrative form. Prasad hopes for her study to "illustrate the plurality of moral discourse... in a scripturally conscious setting" as well as to raise the greater question of how those faced with multiple codes of conduct situate and create their own senses of morality in the world.³⁵

While undertaking her task of deep analysis, Prasad makes a number of promising representational choices regarding how she depicts the words and experiences of her interlocutors: the Sringeri townsfolk. These choices, acting as models for ways that other scholars could engage with the decolonial process in religious studies, are crucial to her work. First, I explore how Prasad incorporates the words of her interlocutors in her work. She does so in a manner that I find leaves the words of her collaborators as intact as possible, beginning with her process of translation. As she notes in an opening passage of the book, Prasad's process of translation begins with the acknowledgement that translating from narrative spoken in Kannada (the language used by the Sringeri people) to written English is a complicated process.³⁶ She details the intensive process of translating from the spoken Kannada to the English her book is written in, "I usually began by translating fairly literally, making sure that the English meanings of Kannada words were contextually appropriate."³⁷ While this is certainly a common approach to translation from any language, the next translating technique of Prasad employs marks a divergence from the norm.

Given that her analysis focuses largely on oral narrative, Prasad takes great care to maintain the spoken characteristics of her interlocutors' words. She writes of her practice, "I then relistened to tapes many times for linguist and extralinguistic traces, such as emphases, pauses, or elisions so that the printed text could reflect something of the ways of speaking."³⁸ Continuing, Prasad describes the transcription system she uses to mirror the mannerisms of verbal communication, including the punctuation, font choices, and formatting decisions found in *Poetics of Conduct*. Each of these conscious choices that she makes, from setting narrative "stage directions" apart in italics or marking breaks in speaking with gaps in the text, work to accurately depict what her interlocutors say and how they say it.

For instance, Prasad transcribes words spoken by one of her interlocutors, Panduranga Murthy in the following excerpt. The letter P is used to mark the words spoken by Panduranga. In the conversation, Panduranga and Prasad chat about the legitimacy of the *Shastra* versus that of the *Sampradaya*, two different codes of conduct. I have kept the formatting of Panduranga's words as Prasad wrote it, copying the opening of the conversation below:

P: What it comes down to is **rule** versus **act.** The Constitution (of India) – **rules**-- may say one thing, but in procedure, we could *act* differently.

Let's take wearing the kacche sīre in the Iyer community,

There's no **rule** about it, it's a sampradaya.

Or that lunch should be cooked before anyone has eaten anything, say breakfast.

There's no rule about this,

Some family's sampradaya will allow eating before cooking the main meal and some family's sampradaya will not.

But, at some level people are not able to distinguish between **rules** and **acts,** so they say everything is Shastra.³⁹

Note how Prasad uses different punctuation markers in her translation and transliteration of Panduranga's words. In the above passages, she specifically uses asterisks (*) to make words spoken originally in English as well as dashes to mark pauses in conversation.⁴⁰ The conversation between the two is also separate from the rest of the text, and printed in full. Prasad does not break up the passage to select quotes for integration into the larger body of text here.

The attention that Prasad pays to her interlocutors' is a powerful example of a decolonizing tool for future scholars to use in their own work. Decolonial processes must make an effort to represent the voices of those marginalized by western scholarship, which, in the case of religious studies, means those who practice religions outside the Protestant Christian core at the heart of the discipline. Prasad does just this in maintaining the integrity of the words spoken by her interlocutors, the Hindu practicing, Kannada speaking Sringeri. Beyond her translation

process, Prasad's formatting choice of physically setting apart the conversations she had with her Sringeri informants is another way she engages with decolonial principles. When reading *Poetics of Conduct* the long continuous passages of dialogue, in which no spoken word is left unwritten, are set apart as special and significant. By including the *entirety* of the conversations she had with her interlocutors, rather than quoting from portions of her conversations, Prasad again maintains the integrity of what was said. With the whole conversation included in the text, she continues to highlight the non-Western voices of her interlocutors in the face of the Westernized field of religious studies. This powerful inclusion of othered voices is a step in the right direction for the representation of such voices that have been diminished by colonial endeavors. And it is one that is compounded by another representational choice she makes that lies at the core of *Poetics of Conduct*.

Prasad's situation of the importance of oral narrative in her work is in and of itself a decolonizing methodological choice. Her focus on the spoken stories and lives of her interlocutors brings with it a focus on the oral worlds of those who have been silenced. Prasad's focus on orality is noteworthy throughout *Poetics of Conduct*, but for my analysis of her focus on orality I focus on the sixth chapter of her book. In the chapter, titled "Edifying Lives, Discerning Perspectives: Conversational Stories and Moral Being," Prasad even further emphasizes her focus on orality. She provides an analysis of six stories shared by her interlocutors, inviting readers to focus on the way that, for the people of Sringeri, "appropriate conduct is more than accountability, subtlety, discernment, and humility than an explicit engagement with the concept of dharma."

While theoretically framing her claims, Prasad is certainly aware of the significance of oral narrative as a potential area for inquiry. She writes, "As experiences are selected,

synthesized, organized into narratives, and expressed in dialogue, the question of “moral meaning” becomes a zone of exploration for both the narrator and listener(s) in different ways.”⁴¹ Aware of the potential for greater personal understanding present in conversation, Prasad’s focus on oral narrative in chapter six, is certainly fitting. Beyond the possibility for greater understanding between researcher and interlocutor however, her focus on orality provides for other potentially decolonizing possibilities. Prasad is also aware of the exclusive discourse surrounding much of the field of narrative ethics. She notes that studies of narrative ethics (in her case applied in a larger religious studies project) have generally focused on written rather than spoken narrative.⁴² Situating her focus on the oral narrative in contrast to “Anglo-Christian world” that has come to dominate this discussion with its focus on written material, Prasad’s awareness of the colonial background of narrative studies, religious studies, and perhaps academia as a whole, shines through. There is still more however, to Prasad’s focus on the oral narrative.

Understanding the way that the Sringeri people engage with codes of conduct through a lens of orality, Prasad opens her work to many new possibilities. First, Prasad’s focus on orality in practice allows her to bring more voices into the conversation of her work. She is able to bypass the barrier of traditional literacy. Such a barrier works to exclude and marginalize whose stories can be heard in academic discourse, but, by focusing on the oral narrative, Prasad invites her interlocutors to join the conversation and represent themselves when they would otherwise be silenced. They are also able to provide valuable insights as participants in the research project. These insights, in the sixth chapter of *Poetics of Conduct*, and the entire book as a whole, form the basis of Prasad’s inquiry in the way that the Sringeri people construct their moral lives. This understanding, moving beyond the personal understanding created during conversation between

ethnographer and interlocutor, lends itself to a deep, *inclusive* theoretical analysis. Such inclusion is crucial in the work of authors whose choose to engage with the decolonial process, and further invites the participation of voices who have traditionally been marginalized into academic discourse. A focus on oral narrative is one possibility for religious studies scholars seeking to further the decolonization of the field, and Prasad's work with the Sringeri in *Poetics of Conduct* provides a robust example to follow.

Quite different from Prasad's approach, Brown's *Mama Lola* provides scholars with an alternative model to follow. In the book, she details her experiences from years of research interacting with Vodou priestess Alourdes Margaux (also known as the titular Mama Lola) as well as other practitioners of Vodou in New York City and Haiti.

Written in 1991, Brown, in *Mama Lola*, seeks to tell the "rich, textured stories that bring Alourdes and her religion [Vodou] alive."¹⁴ Noting that there are many negative stereotypes around Vodou, Brown, rather than trying to directly speak against them, writes her book in an effort to "create an intimate portrait of three-dimensional people" who as multifaceted individuals complicate the damaging perceptions that many hold about Vodou.⁴⁴ Drawing her interlocutors out of the stereotypical connotations of their religion, Brown's efforts seek to understand Vodou as it exists in the lives of Mama Lola and other practitioners intersectionally alongside other factors including race, class, and gender. However, *Mama Lola* does not explicitly engage in theoretical discussion around these issues, instead, Brown seeks to explore them through rich depictions of the lives of her interlocutors,

Brown makes several choices with these depictions that I again find to be promising for decolonial efforts in the field of religious studies. That said, given the scope of this thesis I

choose to focus on two major decisions that she makes. First, I explore how Brown utilizes fictional passages in her descriptions of Mama Lola's family history. I find that these sections, while at first glance perhaps limiting the voices of those actually in the story, in fact work to further decolonial efforts by including a multitude of voices that would otherwise be forgotten. Second, I analyze the way that Brown represents the "other" in *Mama Lola*, focusing on her own initiation process into Vodou, as well as her choice to organize sections of the book around the very spirits of Vodou themselves.

In *Mama Lola*, Brown embraces the use of fictional writing when discussing Mama Lola's family history. Explaining her reasoning for this choice, she writes that, "Turning Alourdes's [Mama Lola's] family history into fictionalized short stories allows me to tap a reservoir of casual and imagistic knowledge, which all people who have done fieldwork have but do not ordinarily get to use."⁴⁵ For Brown, utilizing techniques of fiction writing in her work allows for the use of language that would otherwise be unavailable. Such embellishing language, often left untapped by scholars, allows Brown to incorporate an atmosphere of emotive sensitivity to her work, bring the experiences of Mama Lola and her family to life, rather than flatly characterizing them on a page. The vivid characterization that accompanies such use of fiction is an aspect of *Mama Lola* that works as a part of the decolonial process. The experiences of those who have been left outside of the colonial history of religious studies because of their non-Western religions, such as Mama Lola's and her Vodou practice, are able to achieve new significance when fiction writing techniques are implemented.

The fiction writing in *Mama Lola* does more than just add to the experiences of the work's central figure. It goes beyond. Brown uses constructed characters, such as the figure of Jepete, to paint a larger picture of what life was like in rural Haiti for Mama Lola's family. Jepete, the

“scrawny, ageless,” maid to Joseph Binbin Mauvant (Mama Lola’s great grandfather), is a composite character based on Brown’s own experiences in rural Haiti.⁴⁶ By writing Jepete into the story, Brown is able to create a way for those who would have had their experiences left untold to be noticed. Beyond that, her use of a composite character opens space for many voices, voices of people who existed across Haiti, to be heard together in unison. There is a power in this unified voice, and through the use of the fictional Jepete, Brown amplifies the chorus of real experience for those long dead who cannot themselves. This representation of voices, across lines of gender, race, and class, is decolonial in practice, and her use of fiction to do so provides current scholars with a powerful example to follow in their own work.

That said, there is perhaps a certain danger in fictionalizing the lives of real people. One might worry that doing so, while combining the experiences of many, in turn diminishes the experiences of individuals with their own unique challenges to face. To this point, I think that the strength in numbers found in creating such composite characters outweighs the potential risk of the loss of the individual. Brown is able to let a multitude of voices be heard all at once in the character of Jepete, and ultimately adding the character to the story gives more real people the chance to be represented. Brown herself is aware of this danger, and takes steps to mitigate the effect that the use of fiction has on *Mama Lola* as a whole. First, she makes it clear to the reader outright that aspects of Mama Lola’s family history are fictionalized.⁴⁷ Telling the reader this outright, she avoids the potential issue of the stories being read as completely factual which they decidedly are not.⁴⁸ Also in this decision, Brown is able to explain how she grounds the figure of Jepete in the lives of real people, adding a deeper meaning to the character. Second, Brown physically separates the fictionalized portions of the book from the other chapters, clearly delineating between what is “real” and what is fiction. Making the distinction clear to her

readers, she is able to maintain aspects of standard critical ethnographic analysis, while still making a radical interpretive choice. She is, in a sense, able to tap into the best of both worlds, providing a fuller picture of Mama Lola's world.

Brown's own process of initiation into the Vodou religion provides another example of another powerful tool for religious studies scholars who choose to prioritize decolonization in the discipline. After some encouragement from Mama Lola herself, Brown, travelling in Haiti at the time, decided to begin the process of initiation into the Vodou religion.⁴⁹ Vividly describing her experience, she writes of the intricate, partnered dance during the final ceremony:

Karen [Brown speaks of herself in the third person throughout the text] was in a cold sweat. She knew she could not do this dance. She had tried many times, but she had always ended up feeling like an elephant in its death throes. In the excitement of the movement however, she forgot these failures, and suddenly she was dancing...though not through her own efforts. Her body was like a rag doll bound to the body of her partner. The woman's legs moved, hers moved. The woman's shoulders moved, hers moved.⁵⁰

In this short description, Brown provides a powerful example of the experiences that become accessible when scholars open themselves to moments of what D. Soyini Madison has coined "Co-performative witnessing." Defined as a sense of "shared temporality, bodies on the line, soundscapes of power, dialogic interanimation, political action, and matters of the heart," such experiences have the potential to break down barriers and grant forays into new, radical understandings of the inhabited spaces, struggles, and positions of the other.⁵¹ For Brown, this moment of her initiation process into Vodou, an intimate shared dance between two strangers, granted her a new understanding of her interlocutors' foreign worlds. The line between self and other was broken down, not only through a mutual understanding of the shared understanding of the dance and its meaning, but shared bodies as well. Moving in unison, Brown the unnamed woman inhabited the same space, the same time, and the same body all at once. The experience

of co-performative witnessing. Made possible by Brown's willingness and ability to embrace the world of her interlocutors granted her access to a wealth of knowledge, extending beyond ethnographic data collection but to a deeper, personal understanding as well. Crossing lines of race, class, and gender (although not in Brown's case), such experiences of co-performative witnessing are one example of a decolonizing tool for religious studies scholars to engage with. Uniquely positioned given the intimacy settings that religious spaces and rites often inhabit, religious studies scholars seeking to further the decolonial project can turn to experiences of co-performative witnessing in their own work.

That is not to say that engaging with one's research as a co-performative witness is an easy task. There is, as with perhaps all ethnographic choices, a potential for failure. This potential is especially pertinent when scholars attempt to engage with their interlocutors as a co-performative witness, as doing so requires both the researcher and interlocutors to share, if only for a fleeting moment, their respective identities with one another. To do this requires a special bond between the two parties, and if that bond is broken, be it by the researcher or interlocutor, the moment will shatter; the fragments left to pick up and try to put together. In the intimacy of co-performative witnessing there is a danger, but out of this danger is born the possibility of greater shared understanding by both ethnographer and interlocutor. Ultimately, however, it is up to both parties to engage together in such a relationship and both parties to determine if it is worth pursuing in the first place. There is a sense of shared agency here, and in that agency is the capacity for powerful decolonizing representation.

Having analyzed some of the choices Brown made in representing the voices of her interlocutors in *Mama Lola*, I now turn to the way she takes steps to weave the other into the very structure of the book itself. Organizing the chapters of the book in a way "designed to make

its own point about the creative role that Alourdes' multiple, and often contradictory, spirit voices play in orchestrating her life," Brown constructs the even numbered chapters of the book around the functions of different Vodou spirits.⁵² For instance, the sixth chapter of the book, titled after the Vodou spirit Kouzinn, "a rural market woman," concerns the economic aspects of Mama Lola's life. Similarly, the tenth chapter of *Mama Lola* explore the role of the spirit Danbala, who, as the oldest and most venerated of the Vodou spirits, presides over the stories of Alourdes' attempts to retain her deep spiritual traditions.⁵³ Organizing the book around these spirits and their respective roles, Brown engages with new sense of representation. The marginalized Vodou tradition is brought into direct contact with western traditions of ethnographic writing, and in doing so, complex interactions between the two worlds, othered from each other. Masterfully weaving them together, Brown is able to bring them into a unified analytical discourse, in which the other exists at the forefront of her work. Her decision to organize the book around the spirits of her interlocutors is one that other religious studies scholars seeking to further the discipline's decolonial project can learn from and incorporate in their own work.

As I have explored above, both *Poetics of Conduct* and *Mama Lola* are examples of works that undertake innovative projects of decolonization. There is however, an interesting juxtaposition to be made between the two works, specifically regarding the ways that Prasad and Brown choose to represent the voices of their interlocutors. In *Poetics of Conduct*, as I have explored above, Prasad takes incredible care in describing the words of her interlocutors *exactly* as they were spoken. Including even the non-verbal cues of her interlocutors in her work, she capture each conversation and shared story in the text with as much orality as possible. Brown in *Mama Lola* however, takes a quite different approach to maintaining the integrity of the words

and stories of her interlocutors. Choosing to embellish her descriptive passages of Mama Lola's family history with the addition of fictional elements, including composite characters, Brown's work takes representation in a distinctly different direction. How then, can both projects engage with the same decolonial principles so successfully? After all, are they not fundamentally different in their representational methods?

Both Prasad and Brown's works are successful decolonial project because, despite their differences in approach, both scholars open spaces for the representation of their interlocutors in radical and innovative ways. Both works give their interlocutors, the Sringeri people of India and the Vodou practitioners of Brooklyn respectively, the capacity to not only be represented but define the terms of their representation, and as such are decolonial in practice. Both Prasad and Brown's interlocutors, historically speaking, have been the direct victims of colonialism perpetrated by the West.⁵⁴ *Poetics of Conduct* and *Mama Lola*, then directly work to undo these legacies of colonialism that continue to resonate today, while understanding possibilities for representation in two distinct, yet successful ways.

As scholars in religious studies further their efforts for decolonization, it is necessary that the need for methodological innovation is crucial. Ethnographic methodology is varied, and the possibilities for new approaches to ethnographic practice extend. Recalling Harrison's definition of decolonialism, one of the crucial aspects of the movement is the experimental process of creating new strategies for interpretive, reflexive, and, especially in the case of religious studies, representational ethnographic research.⁵⁵ Such experiments in ethnographic practice may fail at reaching their lofty goals, but such failures are natural when innovation is the ultimate intention. Scholars of religious studies must continue to pursue new possibilities for ethnographic representation in their work, and, while authors such as Prasad and Brown have created powerful

models for innovation, their work, and the work of other successful decolonizing scholars, must serve just as that: models for new innovation. As scholars in the discipline build on the work of those before them theoretically, those focused on decolonizing projects must do the same regarding the representational, interpretive, and analytical choices of the decolonizing scholars before them. As such an interdisciplinary field, religious studies is uniquely positioned to draw from a myriad of academic disciplines, and as such as a wealth of potential tools at its scholars' disposal. In the section that follows, I explore one possibility for future representation in religious studies, drawn from the anthropological field.

New Possibilities for Representation in Religious Studies: Visual Ethnography

So far, I have only explored the work already done by scholars working out of the religious studies discipline. Now, turning to the anthropological work *Lissa*, I shift my focus to a promising future possibility for representational decolonization in the field. Given the highly interdisciplinary nature of religious studies, it is useful to turn to the anthropological field to explore these new possibilities for representation. I make this turn here, exploring the plausibility of mixed media ethnographies in religious studies, I believe that scholars in the field can (and already have in some cases) engage with the principles implicit in such form of representation as a productive endeavor for further decolonization. In what follows, I examine the recently published *Lissa*, a graphic, or rather “ethnographic” novel written by Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye. Their use of the nontraditional graphic novel format to produce an academic work is an innovative example for future scholars, perhaps especially in the field of religious studies, to draw from.

Lissa tells the story of two young girls, Anna and Layla, tracking their friendship as they grow up during the tumultuous time of the Arab Spring. Based in Egypt, the book is primarily a work of medical anthropology. For instance, the major plotline of the book explores Anna's process of grappling with the possibility of hereditary breast cancer. Simultaneously, *Lissa* tells the story of Layla's experience as her father's kidneys begin to fail, weaving both girls' experiences with healthcare together into a larger analysis of medical freedom and decision-making. Exploring how medical decisions are made and carried out in different contexts, Hamdy and Nye in *Lissa* shed light on

Similarly to *Mama Lola*, *Lissa* also incorporates fictional elements into its writing. The characters of Anna and Layla are in fact, fictionalized composite characters, based on the authors' prior experiences with medical anthropology in both the United States and Egypt. That is not to say that the work is not grounded in "real" stories however. Hamdy and Nye base much of the story of *Lissa* on events that actually occurred during the Arab Spring, weaving the revolutionary period into the text.⁵⁶ Combining these elements, the authors, similar to Brown in *Mama Lola*, are able to bring new possibilities for representation to light, allowing voices to be heard that would otherwise be lost. This is not a new development for anthropology or religious studies, but it is crucial to *Lissa*'s effectiveness as an ethnography. That said, while its subject matter and choice to incorporate fictional elements are necessarily unique, the way that *Lissa* tells the stories of Anna, Layla, and their families is an example of an innovative approach to ethnographic representation.

Lissa is written as a graphic novel. It is a distinctly visual project, and while text appears throughout the book, it is only as a complement (in the form of speech bubbles) to the visual depictions of Anna and Layla's lives. The art of the graphic novel, drawn in tandem by two

illustrators, Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer, is striking. For example, when Anna learns for the first time that she is a carrier of the BRCA1 gene, increasing her likelihood of developing breast cancer, the accompanying art portrays the disconnect she feels. As Anna hears the news Bao and Brewer depict her as quite literally fading out. Her facial features disappear as she sinks into her chair, disconnected and perhaps not fully registering the harrowing news she has just received.⁸⁶ The words of her doctor, captured in speech bubbles, fade out as well, as the letters lose their black color in favor of a lighter gray. Able to visually capture the intense emotional state of one of its characters, *Lissa* as a work brings a new possibility for representation to the table.

Applying the concept of visual ethnography to work in the religious studies field brings new, exciting implications. Visual ethnographies, be they graphic novels like *Lissa* or works using some new, unexplored format, have possibilities for representation and accessibility. The embracing of visual academic production in religious studies would provide a new way for scholars to bring marginalized voices into the discourses surrounding academic literature. The vast majority of literature, created with an emphasis on written language, is by nature exclusionary. Those who cannot access the resources needed to develop the necessary skills for understanding such written language are left out of the conversations surrounding such work, even though they may have been crucial in its development. Utilizing visual methods of production however, scholars have the potential to create work that is accessible to a much larger audience. Such newfound accessibility would allow more voices to enter the larger discourses surrounding the production and outcomes of ethnographic research projects, providing a powerful tool for scholars working towards decolonial aims.

One potential criticism of visual and other mixed media ethnographies is the lack of perceived attention to larger metanarrative analysis. In a book such as *Lissa*, it can be difficult at

first glance to perceive the underlying conversations from medical anthropology that frame the text. This same criticism was levied against similar works, such as *Mama Lola*, that focus on providing rich ethnographic description rather than larger metanarrative conversation.⁵⁸ To this possible critique, I argue that overarching metanarrative can still exist in projects that explore non-traditional medium, as *Lissa* makes evident. In fact, in such projects, metanarratives are potentially made more accessible to all readers, including those who may not be aware of their inclusion.

Focusing on *Lissa* as an example for the inclusion of metanarrative, I turn to an interview of Hamdy found in the appendix of the book. Interviewed by Marc Parenteau, who also worked on the project, she speaks of the way key concepts from the field of medical anthropology made their way into the text. She states, “[In *Lissa*] we really wanted to highlight what we call the “social embeddedness of the patient.”... We see for example, that often patients’ motivations for seeking treatment are to become independent and to free their loved ones from the burden of the expense.”⁵⁹ This concept of “social embeddedness,” tying into a larger theoretical metanarrative in medical anthropology, is woven implicitly into the very fabric of *Lissa*. Able to draw on fictional techniques for their work, free from the traditional conceptions of ethnographic production, Hamdy and Nye can create characters of Anna and Layla and then create situations for them that, although constructed, engage with “real” situations that happen off the page. In these “real” situations, larger metanarratives of discourse, in the case of *Lissa* that surrounding the social embeddedness of medical patients, are revealed, and can then be added purposefully into the stories that non-traditional projects seek to tell. This same process of metanarrative inclusion would be applicable to non-traditional ethnographies in religious studies, providing for the continued inclusion of larger disciplinary conversations in new, innovative approaches.

Applying visual ethnographies to the field of religious studies also furthers decolonizing efforts in another way. As a discipline religious studies has largely focused on textual analysis as a result of the Protestant Christian origins of the field. With a textually based religion at the core of its being, religious studies as a discipline has followed suit, holding written forms of expression in high regard. This focus on text and written word has lent itself to scholars in the field focusing primarily on projects in the traditional written form, be they books, journal articles, or short reviews. The privilege lent to written work in religious studies has marginalized certain forms of academic expression, and sets limits as to what “counts” as a valid academic project in the field. If scholars in the field choose to conduct their ethnographic projects using non-traditional mediums of expression, perhaps a graphic novel or another form of visual ethnography, they push back against this active marginalization and bring about the potential for a redefinition of what scholarship can look like. This opening up of the “ivory tower” is crucial for any discipline that seeks to engage with decolonization on a holistic level, and ultimately invites those left out field-wide discourses to enter the many conversations guiding what the future of academia will look like. Religious studies, with an embracing of non-traditional mediums, especially in ethnographic projects (but potentially projects beyond ethnography), would be poised to do just this.

Conclusion

How should the field of religious studies go about the process of decolonization? What further possibilities are there for scholars already involved in the project of decolonization? As I have explored throughout this thesis, many scholars have already grappled with these same questions themselves, and come up with unique possibilities for ethnographic representation for

both themselves and the interlocutors they collaborate with. That said, the future of ethnographical decolonization in religious studies rests in the *continuous* adoption of new and innovative choices for the representation on all sides. Scholars cannot stop working towards decolonization, it is an active project, and as such most constantly remain in motion.

This motion need not and should not be smooth. Out of debate, such as the one between Orsi and Prothero that I have outlined here, comes the potential for new ideas that bring with them new prospective methods for decolonizing religious studies. It is out of the ambiguity created in such debates, about the place of the scholar, the place of the interlocutor, or the place of any other figure present in research, that such potential is able to grow.

That said, while decolonization is a noble goal, it is imperative that scholars do not lose sight of the origins of Religious Studies, a topic which many have already explored, including scholars such as Asad, Smith, and Nongbri whose work I have outlined in this thesis. As Peter Pels notes in his critique of decolonization efforts in the anthropological field, claiming a total decolonization of a field runs the risk of losing the origins of the discipline itself, which, grounded in colonial notions of scholarship, can perhaps actually achieve such a removal from its foundation.⁶⁰ Whether or not religious studies can ever achieve decolonization in totality is outside the scope of this thesis, but Pels' worries are applicable nonetheless. While I have argued throughout this thesis that religious studies must move past its focus on the disciplines colonial roots, those roots still, as Pel warns, cannot be forgotten. In service of this, it is necessary that scholars invested in the decolonizing project see it as a moving target that can perhaps never quite be attained but must be constantly reached for. In this perpetual reaching, religious studies scholars are positioned to further decolonizing efforts in the safest way possible. There are certainly other potential pitfalls along the way, but scholars can, and, and I believe will, work

through them whenever they arise. The process of decolonization in religious studies cannot stop here, and I am confident that such endeavors will continue as long as the field exists.

Notes

1. Faye Venetia Harrison and Association of Black Anthropologists, eds., *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology of Liberation*, 2nd ed (Arlington, Va: Association of Black Anthropologists, American Anthropological Association, 1997), 2.
2. Harrison and Association of Black Anthropologists, *Decolonizing Anthropology*, 2.
3. Harrison and Association of Black Anthropologists, *Decolonizing Anthropology*, 2.
4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.
5. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 91.
6. Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, no. 2 (June 1983): 237, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2801433>, 252.
7. Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion," 252.
8. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284, 281-282.
9. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," 276.
10. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion Religions, Religious," 277.
11. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 154.
12. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 154.
13. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 154.
14. Whether or not they choose to make this understanding known is a different matter however.
15. Robert A. Orsi, "Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth," in *Between Heaven and Earth*, STU-Student edition, The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton University Press, 2005), 177–204, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cg9sd.10>, 177.
16. Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*, 15th anniversary ed (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 230.
17. Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 235.
18. Even though Covington writes as a journalist and not an academic scholar of religious studies, Orsi's analysis of *Salvation on Sand Mountain* still holds weight as those in the discipline may be forced to confront similar situations in their own work.
19. Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 178.
20. Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 178.
21. Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 180.
22. Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 198.
23. Stephen Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She is Coming From," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32, no.3 (2004), 16-18, 17.
24. Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed," 17.
25. Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed," 17.
26. Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed," 17.
27. Robert Orsi et al. "Four Responses to 'Belief Unbracketed,'" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (2004), 15-18, 16.

28. Robert Orsi, "Four Responses," 16.
29. Robert Orsi, "Four Responses," 16.
30. Robert Orsi, "Four Responses," 17.
31. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion Religions, Religious," 281-282.
32. Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York, UNITED STATES: Columbia University Press, 2006), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/haverford/detail.action?docID=908549>, 1.
33. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 12.
34. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 12.
35. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 13.
36. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, xiii.
37. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, xiii.
38. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, xiii.
39. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 131.
40. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, xiii.
41. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 183-184.
42. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 187.
43. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Updated and expanded ed, *Comparative Studies in Religion and Society* 4 (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 14.
44. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 14.
45. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 18.
46. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 19.
47. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 18.
48. Reading *Mama Lola* in and of itself is perhaps a move that scholars could take towards decolonization. Understand that the stories told in the text are not necessarily "pure fact," yet still taking them at their value, requires a "suspension of judgement" in the Orsian sense. Reading the text, and embracing this suspension, scholars who take *Mama Lola* "seriously" implicitly further decolonial aims and expand what can count as scholarship in the field of religious studies.
49. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 316-317.
50. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 326.
51. D. Soyini Madison, "Co-Performative Witnessing," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 6 (November 2007): 826-31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701478174>, 827.
52. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 15.
53. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 15.
54. Both India, the place where Prasad's interlocutors make their lives, and Haiti, where Brown's interlocutors live and have lived, are nations that have both been subject to colonizing regimes. (Haiti by the French, and India by the British)
55. Harrison and Association of Black Anthropologists, *Decolonizing Anthropology*, 2.
56. Sherine Hamdy et al., *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*, EthnoGRAPHIC (North York, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 251-253.
57. Hamdy et al., *Lissa*, 86.

58. David Watt, review of *Review of Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, by Karen McCarthy Brown, *Sociological Analysis* 53, no. 3 (1992): 338–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711714>, 338.
59. Hamdy et al., *Lissa*, 266.
60. Peter Pels, “Anthropology Should Never Be Fully Decolonized...,” *Etnofoor* 30, no. 2 (2018): 71–76, 71.

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