Professor of English and American Studies at the University of Stuttgart and is based at the University of Stuttgart and is internationally recognized for his research in colonial aesthetics and early modern colonialism. Ian Baucom, Elleke Boehmer, Annette Bühler-Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn, Benita Parry, Ralph Gauri Viswanathan.

Beyond the Black Atlantic
Relocating modernization and technology

Edited by Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK
134 Colonial creations of the West


8 Spectrality’s secret sharers

Occultism as (post)colonial affect

Gauri Viswanathan

My chapter probes the complex role of occultism in loosening boundaries between closed social networks. I will argue that in late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century colonial culture, occultism offered the means for mobility between different personae and world-views otherwise denied or at least circumscribed by the restrictive relations between colonizer and colonized. If the stratified class structure of British life offered little room for broad social interactions (as witnessed in the awkward bridge party in Forster’s A Passage to India), occult practices like séances, table rapping, and spirit communication permitted colonial relations to be imagined outside a hierarchical framework, just as occult doctrines of the cyclical evolution of life forms from asexuality and hermaphroditism to sexual differentiation challenged normative conceptions of sexuality. Forster’s novel is a useful reference point in that it focused on the alienation of a small group of Englishmen from the racial exclusivism practiced by the colonial bureaucracy. As teachers, missionaries, doctors, and other professionals, they could not but be involved with Indians at a level of intimacy forbidden by colonial logic. Such contact, necessitated by the nature of their work as service professionals, did not necessarily mean they were all anti-colonial activists, but it did put them in positions where their day-to-day transactions with colonized Indians gave them a more complex perspective on racialized encounters, resulting in far deeper questioning of the structure and style of existing bureaucratic relationships. Aziz’s sharing of the photograph of his dead wife to Fielding opens a field of interaction that would be impossible under the normal protocols of colonial relationships. ‘We can’t build up India except on what we feel’, says Aziz to Fielding, who in a quick and fleeting moment is given access to a dead woman’s presence materialized in a photograph (‘he wished that he too could be carried away on waves of emotion’).

The distance of people like Fielding from the exclusivist practices of the colonial administration dovetailed with an interest in new ways of
conceiving relations to various unseen powers, which constituted an important part of the belief systems of the Indians with whom they interacted. In part, this connected with an interest in spiritualist matters that late Victorian society had already begun to demonstrate through its fascination with herbalism, animal magnetism, mesmerism, and other mind practices. The phenomenal, worldwide growth of the Theosophical Society under the tutelage of Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, with its international headquarters set up in Madras, India, is one important indicator of the widespread enthusiasm for astral study among Europeans and non-Europeans alike. Yet it is within the colonial context that spiritualism is seen most powerfully to loosen boundaries between closed social networks. In fact, the otherworldliness of the occult, and its premium on secrecy and silence, offered alternative possibilities for imagining colonial relations outside a formal hierarchical framework. In reimagining colonial relationships, occultism performs a function similar to what Robert Young describes as culture’s role in imperial Britain, which allowed for a cross-fertilization of language, history, and literature without the racial degeneration caused by reproductive sexual relations. In part, the growing appeal of the astral world lay in its opening up of other cosmological views in which the normal distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized blurred and discrete histories across time and space were collapsed into simultaneous experience. Occult knowledge, in short, enables an expanding field of social interaction.

If, as I shall argue here, occultism signals the emergence of a postcolonial moment in literature, it does so by salvaging lost fragments from the past that collect suppressed memories and desires into an intimate social space shared by colonizer and colonized. This space constitutes a countermemory that expresses itself as (post)colonial affect, whose moments of appearance are too fleeting and elusive to be part of the historical record and are captured only in what I would like to call paranormal texts. I shall talk about one such text, Yeats’s ‘The Manuscript of Leo Africanus’, later in this chapter.

But before I do so, I would like briefly to contextualize my argument in the recent scholarship on occultism, which has gone a long way in establishing how important so-called fringe movements like occultism and spiritualism were in the shaping of fin-de-siècle Europe and India. Alex Owen, for example, in her recent book The Place of Enchantment, places occultism squarely at the heart of the British national experience of modernity, arguing that ‘advanced occult theory and practice represented an acute engagement with the concept and experience of self’, resonating with the rise of new sciences of self such as psychoanalysis, each in its own way underscoring the self’s multiplicity and contingency. Her perspective helps one recall that occultism’s conventional identification with the nonrational and premodern flies in the face of the nineteenth century’s new scientific interest in the innermost recesses of the human psyche, which brought occult practices like mesmerism, clairvoyance, and telepathy within the purview of academic investigation (albeit in some instances to prove charlatanism, but in the process also validating the occurrence of certain forms of psychic phenomena – such as in the work of Arthur Conan Doyle).

To trace the emergence of (post)colonial affect, we must look at occultism’s shifting relationship not only to science but also to science’s putative opposite – religion. This relationship is particularly important – and I should add repressed – when one considers the enduring power of Matthew Arnold’s rewriting of literature as a successor to religion. Arnold gave humanism a new genealogy by making literature’s relation to religion its centerpiece. In reading the decline of Victorian religious life in inverse proportion to literature’s ascendant moral authority, Arnold sought to give cultural sanction to literature as the harbinger of a new canonicity, the strongest measure of which is that literature disseminates the moral and social values formerly dispensed by ecclesiastical authority. In Arnold’s reading, literature does not mark a break with religion or become the secular world’s chosen vehicle of expression, but rather inherits the mantle of religion in a world unmoored from its spiritual underpinnings. Literature, in short, becomes modernity’s moral anchor, bridging the inevitable gaps in time and space that measure the distance between text and readership by transmitting the values of a once religiously ordered society to a world robbed of any moral compass. The new cultural order based on the stable religious values of the past affirms human superiority in those faculties that separate man from the beasts, and assigns to reason the key role of enabling a developmental narrative denied to animals.

This narrative deserves to be questioned at many levels and in its many aspects, but the one I focus on here is the implicit assumption that a version of scriptural authority remains present in literature, accounting for its canonical power. Such a view ignores the counter-cultural, anti-rational, and anti-ecclesiastical trends that are as important to literary studies as traditions of religious orthodoxy and rationality. One might even describe occultism as post-religious, situated strategically between belief and unbelief, between the protocols of an orthodox believing society and the antithetical compulsions of an atheistic, skeptical, and rational one. In incorporating occultism into literary history, we also inevitably question reductive models of secularism based on an either/or logic (i.e., societies are either determined by religious ideas or they are not), just as we also question the empiricist foundations of rational civil society and its institutions. The question to ask, therefore, is not whether literature replaces religion, as Matthew Arnold had craftily proposed and henceforth secured the frame
of discussion from the nineteenth century onwards. Rather, I suggest we shift our focus to ask what kind of new narrative of literary history and its affect emerges when we examine late nineteenth-century religion as a much more heterogeneous formation, in which esoteric, non-traditional currents (such as occultism) challenged the dogmas of institutional religion even while resisting rationalism and materialism.

The question I suggest we ask, therefore, is this: How is the study of culture affected by this other, hitherto subordinate face of religion — as esotericism and occultism, forged as ‘the monstrous alliance of all the conquered religions'? How indeed might this ‘monstrous alliance' uncover an affective dimension of coevalness and secret sharing hidden from view in the rupturing, rationalist discourse of us vs. them, civilized vs. savage, modern vs. pre-modern?

Let me approach these questions by bringing into the discussion a significant historical change wrought by what Helena Petrovna Blavatsky called ‘dogmatic Christianity': the conversions of ‘pagan' peoples. On the effects of forcible conversion on a history of the occult, there is no more illustrative example than W.B. Yeats's fragmentary correspondence with the sixteenth-century African slave and Christian convert, Leo Africanus. In 1912, during a period when he frequented many séances, Yeats first felt contact from a spirit claiming the name of Leo. Even though the spirit had a strong Irish accent, this voice from the dead described himself as a Moorish writer and explorer. Claiming to have been with Yeats since childhood as his alter ego or opposite self, Leo asks the poet to write to him as if to Africa. In a curious conflation of the past life of a dead being with textual presence, Yeats's discovery of Leo's original name comes about only after researching Chambers Biographical Dictionary, where he learns that Leo was formerly Al Hassan Ibn-Mohammad Al-Wezar Al-Fasi, a sixteenth-century Spanish Arab poet and explorer captured as a Roman slave and then subsequently forced to convert to Christianity.

Leo's insistence that Yeats write to him as if he were still living among the Moors and the Sudanese acquires a particular poignancy in the context of his servitude, forcible conversion, and the subsequent erasure of his African identity. Narrated through a tin trumpet and all the paraphernalia of mediums and séances, Leo's story of Africa, colonialism, and slavery makes him both native informant and anti-colonialist. That is to say, he appears to be a native informant when his records of travels are incorporated into European writings on geographical exploration. But Leo is also fiercely an anti-colonialist, as when his disembodied voice taunts Yeats for his skepticism and rationality as prime causes for the poet's failure to recognize the ‘not wholly stable' identity produced by colonialism. Most importantly, the voice of Leo's spirit reaches Yeats not as private, mystical experience but as public history. Nothing in the text conveys this effect more than Leo's conjoining of two geographies to show the scale of a world much larger than the one dominated by the West: ‘Side by side with the streets of Fez, or desert I seemed to see another world that was growing in weight & vividness, the double of yours, but vaster and more significant.' Such a vision cannot be told in the sequential narrative of western history but requires a simultaneous experiencing of seemingly disparate moments in time and space. The occult serves a vital role in modernist writing in that it collapses the binaries between us vs. them, opening the door to an exploration of hidden or repressed histories that dislocates the 'local' as the time and space of immediate experience. It is precisely this dislocation of the local that enables the writing of another kind of history in which colonial subjection can be articulated, and in which fluid identities come to characterize an emerging world order.

Why would an obscure work in the Yeats corpus be important at all as a key text in the production of postcolonial affect, as I am suggesting here? After all, few critics are willing to concede an integral importance to Yeats's occult phase, other than to see it as offering an elaborate repertoire of symbols that eventually spring free from their occult moorings and get reconstituted as a defining feature of Yeats's imagination. Yet I will argue that the relevance of occultism is precisely that, as a response to the crisis of knowledge it challenged the received developmental narratives of western knowledge and salvaged obliterated histories, cultures, and beliefs by means that were at once non-temporal and non-spatial. Seasoned scholars of the modern, we are all too familiar with the transformative effects of epistemological crises on the history of English studies, producing radical schools of criticism like poststructuralism and deconstruction. In its response to the crisis of science and knowledge in the late nineteenth century and in its symptomatic questioning of representationalism in aesthetics and philosophy, modern occultism can loosely be described as a precursor to poststructuralism and postmodernism. If figurative and representational art constrained the colonized world, release from representationalism provided a freer way of expressing colonial subjection. The search for a higher reality beyond matter was simultaneously a search for ways of expressing the historical experience of oppression and subjugation, as well as a means of bypassing the Manichaean binarism of good vs. evil. Occultism's interest in the blurred lines between seen and unseen forces is crucial in elucidating modern ideologies, modern systems of power, and diverse forms of colonial control. Maria Carlson, for instance, who has written extensively on the Theosophical movement in Russia, sees occultism as integral to a broad search for new values and a new world conception. The unresolved tension between the spiritual and the secular, with all that the struggle implied...
for the modern subject, emerged as constitutive of a new dialectic of modernity. As Alex Owen astutely observes, occultism addressed this tension and sought to negotiate the oppositional deployment of a contingent and transcendent self as formulated through competing accounts of subjectivity. She notes that 'it is in this sense that occultism constituted a crucial enactment of the ambiguities of the modern'.

Theosophy and other occult movements played a major role in the crisis of culture and conscience in fin-de-siècle Europe, reflecting changes in the status of not only science but also Christianity. Theosophy gained some legitimacy in scholarly circles because it was helping to make available Eastern texts at around the same time that western scholars were researching Hindu and Buddhist literature. For better or worse, Theosophy made possible new assertions of commonality between Indian and Irish cultures, Indian and Slavic cultures. Unlike other countercultural movements which became part of the mainstream, like modernism itself, Theosophy remained at the fringes and was perceived as too enveloped in arcane symbolism and wild sleights of hand to be anything more than an eccentric movement. Yet, despite being at odds with the prevailing world-view and establishment culture, Theosophy's importance in the history of ideas cannot be denied. As part of a broad search for a new world conception, Theosophy explored psychic and spiritual states that defined rational, positivist comprehension. In Theosophy artists and intellectuals found a new vocabulary for discussing topics that could no longer be discussed in the existing terminology of theology or science, although this did not mean that thinkers who were drawn to Theosophy necessarily stayed with the movement or remained faithful adherents. Some, in fact, like George Bernard Shaw, became downright hostile. But for artists like Kandinsky and the early Yeats, Theosophy contained a cache of imagery that helped them move far beyond the limiting Kantian categories of time, space, and causality. From such images they could develop a non-representational abstract art to convey spiritual and psychic realities that remained unseen and unknown.

Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater's 1901 publication, Thought Forms, which exerted a powerful influence on European and Russian writers and artists, explored the mysticism of form and color and the use of color and abstract forms as shorthand for emotions, thoughts, and feelings projected onto the astral plane. Widely available and advertised, Thought Forms was closely read by the avant-garde art community. The book defines thought form as a mental projection, thought, or idea, too subtle to be seen in gross physical matter but manifesting itself in refined astral matter. The notion of the modern that emerges in such works as Thought Forms is based on the supersensible perceptions of a reality lying beyond the plane of gross matter, where spiritual 'forms' need not resemble the forms of physical matter.

found in this world. To an extent, this non-representational notion of the modern involved stripping the speaking voice of its historical baggage and even its own personality. Speaking through other voices is more than a trope of the poetic imagination. When combined with the widespread interest in the sciences of ventriloquism, hypnotism, and mesmerism, polyvocality is constitutive of modernity itself, deliberately fragmenting centers of authority into multiple speaking selves. Like the ventriloquists and mediums that define occult practices, historical subjects would have to see themselves outside their historical moment, just as Yeats is forced to do so by his 'tormentor' Leo, who impresses on him the experience of colonial conversion and enslavement several centuries earlier as a prototype for British imperialism. (Yeats alternately describes Leo as a Frustrator and malevolent control in A Vision.)

Indeed, Yeats's encounter with the Moor in the geographies of the historical imagination shifts the register of 'discovering' the past through language. Leo appears before the poet through mediumship, to be sure, but the vivid reality of other worlds beyond Yeats's immediate grasp comes about through Leo's archeological method of reconstructing the poet's memory of forgotten, repressed histories. Yeats's turn to the historical past, through Leo's archeological reconstruction, was preceded by Blavatsky's and Bulwer Lytton's in their respective search for lands literally submerged by history. In her work A Land of Mystery, Blavatsky substitutes archeology for philology as the means by which the origins of religions can be established. She writes, 'If the history of religion and of mythology and — far more important — the origin, developing and final grouping of the human species are ever to be unravelled, we have to trust to archeological research, rather than to the hypothetical deductions of philology!' Blavatsky reorients the basis of historical research away from philology, which had succeeded in defining older civilizations as merely undeveloped, primitive prototypes of the Judeo-Christian civilization. Instead, through an archeology relying to a great extent on privileged communication with remote Masters, Blavatsky salvages the ruins of civilizations destroyed by western conquerors, of submerged continents lost to history. Unlike ancient languages, which can be deciphered by searching for a common origin that then becomes the key to reading other languages, ruins, suggests Blavatsky, resist the best efforts of cryptographers. She illustrates her point by noting that knots of cords were a means of communication among the predecessors of the Peruvians. Though the knots were recoverable by archeological research, since the community that understood them was no longer alive the meanings of the knots had vanished with them. If history is an assemblage of fragments — broken pieces that once represented the sum of mankind's achievements — those achievements can never
be thrust back into the past as forever dead, though it requires a signal intelligence (or spiritual insight) to acknowledge their continuing vitality. Invoking the Day of Judgment, in its broadest sense, as not simply the moment of Christian reckoning but also, more importantly, as the day when the unknown but always-present histories of the world would be made known — revealed — Blavatsky placed correct interpretation at the heart of the unknown but always-present histories of the world would be made moment of Christian reckoning but also, more importantly, as the day when Invoking the Day of Judgment, in its broadest sense, as not simply the religiously ordered world therein reflected but initiation into the absolute wisdom of the Masters who are key in bridging the present's distance from the past. According to Blavatsky, only a select few — the Masters — had access to the hidden knowledge that would unlock nature's secrets, and to understand their wisdom properly, to interpret it justly, was to restore the 'race' of people (as historical memory?) who had vanished along with the monuments of their civilization. Increasingly, then, archeology is the mode for salvaging the lived religion of the people, before it came to be hijacked by the forces of dogmatic Christianity. So, tellingly, even as the earth's geography begins to be radically reconfigured from the latter half of the nineteenth century, first by European and American imperialism and then by the spread of global capitalism, both of which have virtually left no part of the known world untouched, occultism conjures up ever new spaces and places — hidden, subterranean, extra-terrestrial — that are available for human recolonization, if only in and by the imagination.

As fields of knowledge developed through the course of the nineteenth century, their most marked effect was to make the earth less of an enchanted place. Occult fables of lost worlds like Atlantis and Lemuria emerge to complete the history of earth that had been emptied of religious significance by the physical sciences. In contrast, therefore, to the geologist's investment in lost continents, in order to document what has passed for science than it is to the history of religions. Religion treats the unseen as if it has already been experienced and seen. Science, on the other hand, depends on imagining the unseen in another space and time, prior to experience, to a degree that religion does not. To this extent, occultism claimed a closer affinity to science than to religion. More often than not, occultism is associated with mythology rather than history or science. Yet I will argue, with Leon Surette, that occultism 'typically seek[s] to establish a line of transmission of the gnostis from high antiquity, through the classical and medieval worlds, to the present'. This line of descent is the 'secret tradition'. The occult theme of the secret tradition coincides and overlaps with broader trends in modern literary and aesthetic culture: historicism, speculative philosophy of history, and meta-history — all attempts to locate the overarching and persistent structure of historical events. Indeed, it should be possible to draw up a genealogy of modern literary studies that traces meta-history not to empiricist epistemologies alone but to occultism as well.

In light of the revaluation of 'pagan' religions in relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Arnolidian notion, stressing not the enduring moral authority of texts (and the interpretive communities. Hers is a view of culture that contradicts the Arnoldian notion, stressing not the enduring moral authority of texts (and the religiously ordered world therein reflected) but initiation into the absolute wisdom that animates the occult imaginary, reintroduces into the contemporary the symbolic importance of Blavatsky's huge investment in the Masters as key links to the past. As Sumathi Ramaswamy notes in her book on Lemuria, the search for lost wholeness and unity, for the lost Word and lost wisdom that animates the occult imaginary, reintroduces into the contemplation of the earth's deep past all the mystery and meaning that were understood to have been banished with the steady progress of the material sciences, at the same time that the latter's findings are used to construct new geographies of Spirit and new histories of Man.

So let me then suggest that occultism is not so much opposed to modernity as it is to a particular mode of narrativizing modernity's emergence as a disenchantment of the world, to counteract the ill effects of which literature steps in to provide the values of a stable religious order. The great established religions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, among others, appropriated heterogeneous religious experiences, which in some instances still preserved aspects of supplanted religions, even those of 'pagan' religions. Such religious experiences are often described as 'mysteries'. Denis Saurat's characterization of the occult as the 'strange and monstrous alliance[s] of all the conquered religions' helps one to identify occultism with colonial subjecthood in its rebellion against 'dogmatic Christianity' and the European imperialism that sanctioned its spread. Blavatsky's unique achievement, in my view, is that she uncovers the layers of history and experience that were suppressed by mainstream religion and encases them in a different narrative mode, which may be described as at once archeological and cosmological. The method seems idiosyncratic enough for it to be dismissed as esoteric cosmography or personal myth-making. But in this elaborate counter-narrative of the evolution of races, Blavatsky cleverly picks up on a key understanding of science as creating systems of meaning about unseen phenomena in order to claim that her method is closer to science than it is to the history of religions. Religion treats the unseen as if it has already been experienced and seen. Science, on the other hand, depends on imagining the unseen in another space and time, prior to experience, to a degree that religion does not. To this extent, occultism claimed a closer affinity to science than to religion. More often than not, occultism is associated with mythology rather than history or science.
these forgotten and repressed histories and restores to public memory aspects of other cultures, beliefs, and practices that were effaced by mainstream Christianity. It is in this sense that occultism challenges both the Christian developmental and secular modernist narratives of literary studies, restoring to literature a function that just as much resists a stable structure of moral authority as affirms it.

Notes
2 See A. Winter’s study, *Mesmerized: The Power of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, for an engrossing account of mesmerism as a major spiritualist preoccupation of Victorian society, which engaged artists and musicians just as much as it did psychiatrists and medical doctors. One of the significant insights of this book is its argument that mesmerism was instrumental in fashioning modes of human interaction through, for example, performative means: ‘The power of looking [that mesmerism conveyed] and the relations of influence operating between the person looking and the thing being looked at were at the heart of experiments’ (p. 31).
11 Ibid., p. 19.

Bibliography