



*Claire Maria Chambers*

Editor

# Editorial

## On Memes, Dreams, and Religious Narrative

Dreams and visions abound in religious narratives, as well as cultural ones. “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep”, concludes Prospero at the end of *The Tempest*, bringing together the realm of the mind, the cultural activity of theatre, and the ineffable qualities of both that many scholars and artists have linked with the religious and the spiritual. Being “rounded with a sleep” also implies, metaphorically, the inevitability of death—another theme that links religious experience with the arts. Although sleeping does not always entail dreaming, human survival seems to depend on hours of rest at the end of day. But why this is the case is still a source of mystery for scientists. Obviously, lack of sleep can lead to severe deterioration of physical and cognitive performance, and early studies using rats showed that total sleep deprivation could result in death (Feldman 2016, 126). If our minds and bodies depend on sleep, do we depend on dreams as well, since dreams—whether they are remembered or not—are integral to sleep? From the onierocritics of ancient Greece such as Plato who regarded dreaming as a kind of divination or soothsaying (see Bittrich 2014, 73), to medieval mystics for whom dreams and visions were esoteric access to the divine, to Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and other psychoanalysts’ explications of dreams as unconscious wish fulfillment, to evolutionary theories that dreams are interpretive learning tools for adaptation and survival, dreams and dreaming seem to have always had a place as a kind of bridge between the cultural, the spiritual, the religious, and the scientific. The more recent activation-synthesis theory of dreaming holds that the random electrical energy that the brain

produces during REM sleep stimulates memories stored in the brain; the brain takes these chaotic memories and “weaves them into a logical story line, filling in the gaps to produce a rational scenario” (Hobson 2005 and Hangya et al 2011, quoted in Feldman 2016, 130). This theory implies that storytelling, as an adaptive and interpretive activity, is part of human hard-wiring. Might it follow, then, that dreaming is an important aspect of narrative activity, writ as large as culture, religion, and politics? The frequency with which dreams, hope, and visions are rhetorically invoked in political speech of change and progress might uphold this idea.

How is a dream like a meme, and a meme like a dream? I suggest that it is through a similar narrative function. The activation-synthesis theory of dreaming has interesting implications for narration as an important part of our evolutionary development, as Rukmini Bhaya Nair puts forward in his 2002 book, *Narrative Gravity: Conversation, Cognition, Culture*, wherein he discusses the ways that narratives—be they myths, stories, novels, epics, blogs or tweets—provide theories and explanations for the world and the way it works. Although an activity of individual minds, dreaming can be thought of in this way as a social activity as well, even at a biological level, because its “stuff” draws from social experience. Of course, meme theory has a history connecting it to biology and evolutionary theory, since Richard Dawkins’s proposal in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* that memes (memetics) are akin to the genes (genetics) of culture, because they replicate units of cultural information in a similar way that genes replicate biological information. While I am not convinced that memes “selfishly” compete for dominance in order to pass on their memetic information (the almost obscene proliferation of the “stuff” of digital culture would seem to indicate that there is a lot of room for a lot of data—and attention needs to be turned to the ecological impact of this), I still find memetics a useful concept for describing cultural genealogies (memealogies?). (And neither is Dawkins convinced of a universal selfishness; see his chapter “Nice Guys Finish First” and his discussion of altruism in *The Selfish Gene*.)

Bringing together the biological and the cultural, Nair and other scholars have more recently developed a deeper understanding of the interrelation between narration and knowledge by turning to cognitive studies, as in the 2011 anthology *Religious Narrative, Cognition, and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*. Rather than narratives (or dreams) providing tools or “maps” that allow a mind to navigate its environment, scholars are now thinking about the phenomenological limits of such tools as constructing a vision of the world that is highly selective. Such selectivity highlights certain “memes” that map themselves onto new contexts, so that a meme, like a dream or a narrative, functions as a syncretistic cultural extension into the unfamiliar and the new. Once others are contracted into the in-group by the recognition and understanding of the meme, it is impossible *not* to see the meme’s significance. In this way narratives (and dreams, and memes) do not explain the *phenomenal* world, but serve as a node for the co-constitution of a *social* world. As the editors explain, because “cognition is neither solely nor perhaps even primarily located in individual brains, rather being distributed and situated in pragmatic social contexts, we are convinced that narrative is a key to discovering important insights into these complex relations” (Geertz and Jensen 2014, 2). One recognizes a meme as such when it performs as a medium of exchange, relay, remix, reconfiguration and redirection. Analogously, a dream is remembered and remarked upon when, by remixing and

reconfiguring the “stuff” of our experience, the dream seems to expose significance about events and relationships, the past or the future. As Bjarneskans, Gronnevik, and Sandberg (1999) argue in their discussion of the success and longevity of the meme “Kilroy was here”, “The artefact is easy to reproduce, but it is at the same time sensitive to mutation and creative input; it lacks univocal meaning; it does not require direct host-to-host contact for reproduction, though users still experience a sense of ‘belonging to’ when sharing the meme” (quoted in Zenner and Geeraerts, 2018, 168).

This list of attributes certainly describes memes, but could it describe dreams as well? Dreams repeat, but they are sensitive to mutation, as anyone with a recurring dream can tell you; dreams don’t necessarily have universal meanings, either. There is no “host” or Sandman bringing you dreams. Instead, they are the recycled detritus of your day. Still, they can produce a sense of the prophetic, the uncanny, or the fantastic, and seem to connect one with realms divine or demonic, depending on the perspective. How do we know that our dreams are not memes, and our memes are not dreams? Narratively speaking, perhaps we cannot make such a distinction.

Although connected to the concept of the shibboleth because memes do indeed seem to distinguish certain groups from one another, I argue that memes are more like lenses that shape perception in a way that directs attention to the malleability of signification and resignification, and how such practices depend on a community of those “in the know”. Memes attune us to the fact that the experience of perception is always already social, not simply individual. I think it is important to consider that even something so intensely personal as dreams could also be understood as socially constituted. Whether we are talking about the strange visions that dance through our minds during sleep, or the metaphorical “dreams” we may have for our visions of the future, such narratives gain and deploy significance because they are created in response to the circulation, adaptation, appropriation, remixing, and reconfiguration of *shared* experiences and information.

Each of the offerings in this issue of *Performance, Religion, and Spirituality* discusses an important aspect of narration as a shared experience, and as deriving its significance through processes of co-constitutional, often mutating, deployment. The editors are especially pleased to highlight the work of emerging scholar Miniature Malekpour, who, in her essay “The Art of the Martyrs: The *Taziyeh* and Street Art in Contemporary Tehran”, addresses moments in Iran’s political history where such processes of transmission and adaptation were attempted to be tightly controlled. Malekpour explores how underground street artists, through murals, stencils, graffiti, and tags that employ visual and textual reference to some of the most important narratives in Shia Islam, not only challenge the state’s authority, but also the broader cultural narrative of “martyrdom” and its meaning for Iranian youth after the protests of the Green Revolution (also known as the Persian Spring). Malekpour argues that in order to understand the significance of the *Taziyeh* as theatre today, one must understand its relationship to the narratives and images that both the state and the underground artists deploy; there is an interpretive battle being waged on the streets of Tehran, through its ubiquitous street art. Importantly, Malekpour connects the strategies of the street artists’ putting their lives on the line for intellectual freedom (potential martyrs) to the development of hip hop culture in Iran. The aesthetics of many of these artists converse with world hip hop culture and draw strength from themes that often characterize hip hop music, dance, and poetry: that of re-mixing,

adapting, and co-creating as a strategy for survival within the oppressive environment of a dominating culture.

With unplanned resonance, Malekpour's reflections echo in the discussion within this issue's forum, "Religion, Renovation, Rap, and Hip Hop", curated by *PRS* co-editor Joshua Edelman and featuring discussants Joseph Hill, Jeanette S. Jouili, Kendra Salois, and Wind Dell Woods, who are all scholars of global hip hop, as well as working in Islamic studies, religious studies, ethnomusicology, and education, respectively. Each participant contributes their understanding of rap and hip hop as conveyors and producers of religious as well as cultural (and sometimes sexual) identity, especially in its relationship to Islam. This forum represents a truly international exchange, with these scholars' different foci on Senegal, Morocco, the US and the UK. One fascinating aspect of the discussion is the participants' willingness to consider hip hop, as a genre, as already acting spiritually, no matter in what cultural context it may be found, because it speaks to universal experience without being "universalist." As Kendra Salois states early in the discussion, "[Hip hop's] lack of universal doctrine within it is what can make it so malleable and representational and yet still have a whole world of people in different countries, in different life positions and origins, still identifying what they do as hip hop" (p. 69). To draw from the ideas discussed above, it would seem that hip hop revels in its memetics because it speaks to the specific and local experience of the marginalized and the underground, with aesthetic choices whose significance will be most apparent and palpable to those of the in-group, but without anything to prevent uptake and remix by anyone else. "Universal without being universalist" describes the shared narrative force of both hip hop and memes, because it focuses on their functions as social practices that create social coherence at the same time that they play with inscrutability, nonsense, difference, or maybe even outright rejection, along with humor and satirical sophistication.

In "Pauline 'Adoption' Theology as Experiential Performance in the *Memoirs of African American Itinerant Preacher Zilpha Elaw*", Jennifer McFarlane-Harris directs our attention to memetics through memoir and memory. The editors are delighted to include this important contribution to the scholarship on an under-recognized female African American writer, whose energy as a preacher and missionary blended her subjective experience as a black woman with the universal principles of her Christian theology. Although Elaw has no direct connection to contemporary hip hop, I would like to consider her position in both American and British culture as a preacher and proprietor of what could be thought of as theological remix culture. As was common with other forms of black theology in the nineteenth century, Elaw appropriated and adapted dominant Christian thought and ritual in service to freedom not only for herself and those like her, but for all in the "body of Christ". As McFarlane-Harris illustrates in her discussion of Elaw's performance of Pauline "adoption theology" throughout her memoir, "Elaw variously claims God as her holy parent when she has no other guardian to confide in, counteracts racial and gender prejudice, underscores the importance of her ministry to the family of God (while downplaying her responsibilities to her earthly family), explains the importance of sanctification as a prerequisite for ministry, and proclaims the ideal of a single, unified church in Christ across denominations" (p. 10). As a remix artist of the soul, Elaw, like many hip hop artists today, was also arguing for a kind of universalism without being universalist, by virtue of a theology of radical inclusion.

As you take a look at the contents, I invite you to consider the “memetics” or the “memeology” of the narratives that you bring to your own understanding of the stories told here. Let’s dream some memes and meme some dreams.

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