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Introduction: After the Postsecular

Marley was dead: to begin with.—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843)

The secularization thesis is dead. There is no doubt whatever about that. Over years that have begun to stretch into decades, through the work of a diverse array of scholars—from Talal Asad, José Casanova, Saba Mahmood, and Charles Taylor, down to Americanists like Tracy Fessenden, Toni Wall Jaudon, Kathryn Lofton, John Modern, and Michael Warner—the notion that something called "secularization" provides an adequate conceptual framework for the post-Enlightenment movement of bodies and belief, of thought and authority, has come under sustained and multidimensional assault. We have become, as the term goes, *postsecular*, to the degree we understand those assaults to have been, finally, cumulatively, fatal. It's a fairly noncontroversial position at this point, as stated by Asad way back in 2003: "If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable" (2003, 1). Disenchantment, a swing from superstition to rationality, credulity to skepticism, eschatological fanaticism to liberal tolerance: ours is a scholarly moment no longer persuaded by the clarities of these stories of modernity, nor by the neat dichotomies nested within them. So the secularization thesis is dead. This must be distinctly understood.

To be clear, this sense of the postsecular does not carry with it a particular historical claim, as opposed to the desecularization narrative recently offered by the chastened secularization theorist Peter Berger

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(1999). The postsecular need not be taken as periodizing or prophesying eras of secularity or unsecularity, and this we take to be promising. Instead, *postsecular* refers to an epistemological and methodological reorientation from which history might look different. As Hans Joas (2008, 106) has assiduously argued, the postsecular does not "express a sudden increase in religiosity, after its epochal decrease, but rather a change in mindset of those who, previously, felt justified in considering religions to be moribund." In these terms, the postsecular—regardless of one's empirical assessment of or political hopes for the present or future secularity index—simply names the attempt to examine the historical past unburdened by a particular fantasy of the inevitable or necessary supersession of something called "religion." For the sake of convenience, let's call this project—the project of dislodging a particular style of progress narrative—*postsecular 1.*

Importantly, the undeniable empirical evidence of rampant religiosity in the United States, past and present, has played a substantial role in our arrival at postsecular 1 (see Casanova 1994). As Grant Shreve notes in his contribution to this issue, any account of secularity as a background condition of modern life, à la Taylor, needs revising in light of the facts of US history (and perhaps non–Western European history, more generally). In a way, then, Americanists might be seen as primed to blaze the trail out from postsecular 1. (More on this in a moment.) But such unburdening from the secularization thesis is perhaps more easily described than enacted, also keeping in mind that the United States has a foundational relationship to secularism as a political doctrine. As Dickens's Christmas ghost story reminds us, the things we kill off tend not to disappear. They have a mysterious tenacity, afterlives not easily reckoned with. Just so, it is our sense that, here in the aftermath of the demise of the secularization thesis, we are only now beginning to grasp how deeply we remain in it: how shaped our conceptual frameworks are, down to their most elemental premises, by secularization (see Asad et al. 2013; Pecora 2006, 195–208). We take Tracy Fessenden to be wholly on the mark when, in a recent essay about "the enduring hold of the secularization narrative on American literary studies," she worries articulately over "the persistence of this narrative in governing even the new postsecular plots that would disturb it," and over "the lingering impress of the secularization narrative" on that work (2014, 154, 155, 157). Lingering persistence is right. We know, or believe we know, that the secularization narrative is

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untenable, historically falsifying, and conceptually misapprehending. But as a wrought, masterful, and genuinely difficult book like John Modern's 2011 *Secularism in Antebellum America* suggests—with its steady insistence on the immanence of any critique of the regime of the secular—it may be that we are now only at the very beginning of an endeavor altogether more challenging than the killing-off of a once-commonsensical master narrative. This new task might demand of us a different, broader kind of reimagining.

Over the last decade, we have been made to feel just how dependent the whole enterprise of modern scholarship and critique may have been on the secularization thesis. As scholars, now liberated from the teleology of secularization, have looked to analyze their objects afresh, they have often found it difficult to escape the terms from which they have presumably been liberated, raising the question of to what extent our very analytic tools and categories are built to produce the very secularization theses history has since disproven. How much have we imperiled ourselves by triumphantly scuttling the secularization thesis? We think this is what Asad (2003, 1) is in part getting at when, after declaring the moribundity of the argument that religion is moribund, he asks, "Does it follow that secularism is not universally valid?" That is, to what extent has pulling at the loose thread of the secularization thesis to reveal a historically particular Enlightenment ideological fantasy actually unraveled the very fabric of contemporary intellectual inquiry? Is the task, then, to rebuild more elementally? Are we prepared or equipped to do that if necessary? What happens when we begin to move past merely corrective gestures in respect to secularization, and out toward a more destabilizing overhaul of first principles, of objects and modes of inquiry? What might change? What habituated forms of thought, what orthodoxies major and minor, might get reconfigured from the ground up if imagined away from their anchoring in an implicitly secularizing framework?

This we might call *postsecular 2*—the epistemological and methodological self-interrogation following from the naming and provincializing of the animating master narrative of secularization. The work of deterritorializing criticism in this way, endeavoring to unwrite secularist presumption, is just getting under way—which, we think, begins to explain the wonderful efflorescence of Americanist work taking up secularism in the current moment, work that strives to envision how the postsecular might rewrite our understanding both of the objects of

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Americanist literary study and of our styles of addressing them. Right now, in all, is very much the moment of postsecular 2.

One sees it not only in Modern's field-shifting book. Consider again Fessenden's very recent piece in *American Literary History,* "The Problem of the Post-Secular," which, in essence, argues that literary-critical deployments of the postsecular have simply added a new iteration of or a new phase to the profession's secularization story rather than superseded that story. For both Matthew Arnold, who made "the best that has been thought and said" the new and proper object of devotion in a world in which religious authority had faltered and the twentieth-century critics who subsequently rushed to make literature "the god that fails," the story of the profession turns on the notion of "a laudable change from a 'religious' past to a 'secular' present," writes Fessenden (2014, 155), drawing on the work of Michael Kaufmann (2007). Some twenty-first-century critics who have explicitly embraced the postsecular, Fessenden suggests, perpetuate this notion in slightly altered form—the laudable change is still from a religious past but to a "spiritual" present in which "belief without content" prevails (Hungerford 2010, xiii–xiv; see also McClure 2007). One of Fessenden's points is that this operative conception of the "spiritual" arises out of a particular history of Protestant liberalization that actually rubs our noses in rather than gets us beyond the problem of the secular.

So if even committedly postsecular works in literary studies are not in fact unloosed from secularist presumption, as Fessenden indicates, then perhaps this is indeed evidence of the profundity of the transformation required. And we can see fruits of this intellectual labor in a number of quarters, as scholars have begun to excavate countergenealogies of some of our most cherished bits of conceptual terminology. As Molly McGarry's (2008) scholarship has demonstrated, sex and the history of sexuality look different indeed when approached at a distance from the secularizing trajectory Michel Foucault's work suggests, with its movement from the confessional to the psychiatric couch. As scholars like J. Kameron Carter (2008), Sylvester Johnson (2004), and Vincent Lloyd (2012) have shown, race, too—that defining integer of American modernity—has long been misappraised as our most resolutely material category, free of the theologies, the battles among incommensurate Gods, that power the violences of contact in the misnamed New World. And then there is the "literary" itself, a notion that, as Caleb Smith's (2013) work on protest counterpublics of the early republic shows, emerges inextricably from dissatisfactions

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around the law and, especially, the law's movement toward secularization. In all these cases, we see critics working to reimagine some of the anchoring categories of Americanist critical thought, and to make them, perhaps, productively unfamiliar by virtue of their estrangement from secularizing premises.

By way of conclusion, then, and with the example of these provocations before us, we want to suggest a possible *postsecular 3*, quite literally postsecular in the sense that it dares to suggest that we might do our thinking about modernity—including our thinking about what in fact instigates modernity—under a sign other than "the secular." Would our thinking about the modern fruition of the religious and the spiritual be less agonizingly paradoxical if we didn't presume a condition of secularity, which, despite its many subtilizations and redefinitions in recent years, arguably will always carry for many readers the sense of "disenchantment" or the decline of religion, not to mention the fact that, as a Christian term of art, it will arguably always skew in favor of Euro-Christian subjects, thereby riveting rather than rescuing us from Eurocentrism? (see Casanova 2010, 275; and Hickman 2013). Or, to put the question in a form inspired by the essay by Jordan Stein that appears here: Should and could we find a way, without invoking secularization, to account for the undismissable emergence of irreversible historical phenomena—from "technological modernity" to "the organization of knowledge into disciplines"—that has made many feel like a "world free of religion" might be on the horizon? One hypothesis that presents itself in this vein invites us to wonder what might happen—what might come into new focus, or be reconfigured—were we to imagine that among the very most plausible historical ruptures to warrant the postulation of an encompassing modernity is 1492, that cosmic shattering and then reconsolidation that gave us the world, the globe as a finite planetary coherence, in which we now live. In this accounting, the "immanent frame," to use Charles Taylor's (2007, 539) term, that supposedly surrounds all of us might be better ascribed to globality than secularity, since it is precisely that encounter with radical, unforeseen difference within the emergent singularity of the globe that fragilized belief in an unprecedented way. Replacing secularity with globality as the background condition of modern life has the signal virtue of introducing a master category that by definition theoretically makes all planetary inhabitants full subjects of history and also is considerably more neutral in relation to religion. And—perhaps a bit more contentiously—it is a move that might place Americanists in a position to be in the

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vanguard of postsecular 3, insofar as this hypothesis traces the defining process of fragilization to scenes of encounter in the Americas—something José Casanova (2010, 273) has rightly espied and that Taylor himself seems to register when he passingly muses that his nova and supernova effects seem always to have been operative in the United States (a point Shreve here develops in innovative directions). Indeed, with the ensnarements of exceptionalism in mind, we are nevertheless reminded that what the world-systems theorists Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein called "Americanity" was a predicate of both globality and modernity. In these ways among others, the pairings offered here—of American literature and inquiries into what comes after the postsecular—make a rich and, we hope, productive kind of sense.

The essays collected in this special issue certainly show themselves to be in such a vanguard—asking what, if anything, the secular might mean in the context of US literary history. We have arranged them chronologically to facilitate readers' spinning of their own nonsecularization stories. We begin with Shreve's reading of Lydia Maria Child's 1824 novel *Hobomok* as both historical reflection of and metareflection on what he delineates as a distinctively "American secularity"—a scene of belief's fragilization by the proliferation rather than attenuation of belief under the early-national conditions of state disestablishment. He shows Child's novel to be drawing a line between the novel's pre-establishment setting in 1620s Salem and her frame narrator's (and her own) 1820s postdisestablishment moment, in which religious pluralism seemed both thrillingly and threateningly uncontainable. Child connects these dots in order to posit a medium for adjudicating between diverse and disparate options of belief other than the one that was historically instantiated in seventeenth-century Salem—namely, establishment. Instead of establishment, Child counterfactually gives us domesticity in the form of a multidenominational and multiracial family, reminding us in the process of Ann Douglas's ([1977] 1998) important linkage of the rise of the sentimental novel to disestablishment. But this happy household, or ecumene (to play on etymology), Shreve suggests, does not entirely subsume the particulars that constituted it, including, most significantly, the carefully rendered religious practices of the eponymous Native character, whose son with the female protagonist Mary Conant provides the novel's final ambiguous image. Like Shreve, Stein is also animated by a historiographic impulse. He

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reexamines a US media phenomenon—the transformations of the angelic figure from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries—that might be regarded as slickly indexical of a historical process called secularization as instead deeply interrogative of it. A secularist teleology simply cannot be vindicated by a representational history that is so zigzagging—involving an oscillation between metaphorization (humans are increasingly regarded as *like* angels) and literalization (angels are increasingly imagined to have human characteristics, including sexed bodies)— and shot through with contingency, dependent on but also not reducible to the expansion of media technologies and coverage around the Mexican American War. Stein's example becomes the occasion for some rather audacious and invigorating salvos regarding our methods of inquiry: If, as he trenchantly argues, "the historical processes called *secularization* generated a disenchantment narrative called *secularism*, which never accurately described the world that created it" but nonetheless largely governs our attempts to describe that world, which we have good reason to regard as irreversibly and massively different from earlier phases of history, then how do we not reproduce secularism ad infinitum? Playing on the analogy between secularism as a story of "something that didn't happen" generated by things that did in fact happen and literature as an essentially fictive content that may "belie" the material structures on which it relies, Stein suggests that literary scholars—in their attunement to textual incoherencies and extravagances, to literature's capacity to depict an encompassing "condition, a scene, an atmosphere, a mood"—may be especially poised to capture the "unevenness . . . provisionality . . . [and] contradictions" of something like (or perhaps unlike) what Taylor calls *secularity*. Dana Luciano's contribution turns her own historical revisionism under the sign of the postsecular toward the exploration not only of epistemic-methodological questions related to academic discipline and field but broader ontological questions recently raised by philosophers identified as New Materialists. Focusing on the psychometric practices of nineteenth-century American spiritualists William and Elizabeth Denton, she discerns what she calls "an alternate history of nonsecular engagements" with geology in the nineteenth century—that is, neither popular Christian "reconciliations of geohistory" with creationism nor incipiently atheistic assaults on creationism. By providing a different or fuller account of the discipline—geology—that supposedly "wrested earth away from God," Luciano

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draws attention to certain dilemmas of self-fashioning in what has been called the Anthropocene that transcend the secular/religious binary, and also amplifies our sense of the conceptual resources available, then and perhaps now, for thinking about the material world. Indeed, she enlists the Dentons as a point from which to critique the New Materialists' utopian affect around the supposedly salutarily self-dissolving effects of experiences of "transmateriality."

Moving us into the twentieth century, Elizabeth Freeman's essay enters into dialogue with Luciano's by also discovering "a counter-history of sexuality," materiality, and embodiment, however, not in "the Protestant evangelical and spiritualist traditions discussed by other Americanists" (like Luciano) but rather in the self-consciously Catholic exercises of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936). Remarkably, Freeman finds in the novel something like a systematic intervention in the history of the Christian sacraments—a recovery and reimagining of a sacramentality lost in the course of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, which together desomaticized and/or desacralized the rites of marriage and penance, in particular, thereby making them uniquely available for transference into the sciences of sex, as Foucault darkly glimpsed. She shows how Barnes's literary reinventions of baptism and the Eucharist might be mobilized to imagine forms of transhistorical and transmaterial, nonmonadic commingling that might enrich contemporary queer theory. From the history of sex to the history of labor we turn with Avery Slater's reading of Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 poem, *The Book of the Dead*, as a version of "postsecular Marxism" comparable to that of her more illustrious philosophical contemporary, Walter Benjamin. Rukeyser's "documentary-epic poem" on the Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, industrial disaster, Slater contends, anticipates or resonates with Benjamin's late-life repudiation of Marx's "scorn for the political uses of the dead" in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, which seemed to have given sanction to the philistine and murderous "triumphal futurity" of contemporary Stalinism. Slater considers Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*—with its titular allusion to ancient Egyptian rituals related to the afterlife—to reroute redemption through the claims of the laboring dead. These claims are imagined to assert themselves in the present in the form of those technological achievements, such as the Gauley Bridge dam, that are not only the cause of the laborers' death but also the concretization of the dead's labor, according them a kind of afterlife that rightly weighs on the brains of the living.

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Finally, as only seems fitting given the indispensability of Muslim perspectives to the related postsecular and transnational turns that followed from September 11, 2001, Danielle Haque's essay takes up Mohja Kahf's pointedly revisionary ethnic-American bildungsroman, 2006's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and meditates on the potentially useful distinctions to be made between what it names "prohibitory secularism" and the possibilities, limned by Kahf's novel, of an ampler and less necessarily delimiting secularism. Haque's work sketches out the deep entanglements of secularism and its own critique—the vexing entanglements, that is, of literary styles of critique and secularist presumption—and the pressing difficulty of bringing whatever enabling promise there might be in secular citizenship into contact with possibilities not only for a weakly multiculturalized "religiosity" but for something nearer to orthodoxy. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* helps us map precisely these zones of encounter.

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