Changing the Subject

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SO MUCH of the scholarly writing process is inevitably confined to library stacks, piles of articles, and long hours at a computer screen. I am lucky to have had the kind of support system that drew me out of the library and motivated me back into it at intervals and that kept me bolstered on both academic and personal levels.

The late and brilliant Robert Young was a crucial sounding board at this book’s inception. When what would later become this project was just a handful of thoughts, he asked the right questions, offered the right suggestions, and helped me ultimately turn our conversational brainstorming sessions into the very first drafts of some of the earliest work that would ultimately form this book’s basis. The seminars he led on Marxism and African American literary theory shaped my intellectual interests early in my graduate study, and his sharp critical edge motivated the theoretical questions that laid the foundation for my own work. His life exemplified the very best and most important implications of the work that he did, and I am honored to have known—let alone worked—with him. I am also grateful to his spouse, Nirmala Erevelles, whose own presence in the University of Alabama’s College of Education and in the academy in general is a gift. She forces scholars to think about race, class, and disability, and she makes better thinkers of those who have the good fortune to cross her path.
This book is dedicated to two people, both of whom have been instrumental to my development as a scholar. First, I extend deep thanks to Phil Beidler at the University of Alabama—a trusted advisor, mentor, and friend for years—who motivated me through the writing process, helped me hone my arguments, and offered a sounding board when I needed it most. He has been my compatriot and my ally, especially when the writing process felt isolating, and I have relied on his encouragement every bit as much as his savvy work on nationhood and identity. Next, when this book was just a pile of rough ideas, it managed nonetheless to introduce me to Houston Baker at Vanderbilt University. Working with him has been one of the great pleasures of my life, and I have come to rely on his calm insight and uncompromising feedback. His is the voice in my head, and this book would not be what it is without him. Indeed, my own understanding of myself as a scholar would not be what it is without him.

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The course of this work saw my incorporation of the academic study of religion into my range of scholarship. For this and so much more, I have my incredible colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama to thank. My professional life would look entirely different were it not for Russell McCutcheon, who helped me find my footing in a new discipline, who consistently and with encouragement challenges my ways of thinking, who helped me navigate the stages of book publication, and whose own work is among the clearest and most effective critiques of authenticity claims I have read. I am privileged to call him my colleague and even happier to call him my friend. Very special thanks also go to Ted Trost, to whom I owe my earliest introduction to the Department. His kindness and support have been so important to me, and I have found the phrase “Thanks, Ted” to be one of my most oft-repeated during any given day. Steven Ramey helped make my transition into a new department a smooth one, and he remains my go-to
for so many things. He graciously provides an extra set of eyes on the things I write, a trove of knowledge about all things logistical, and a general presence from whom I derive daily conversation and encouragement. Steve Jacobs has been kind enough to check in on me consistently, asking about the status of the book, talking with me about the writing process, and cheering me on. I am also grateful to the late Tim Murphy, who was always eager to talk with me about my work.

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