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Emotion, Ritual and Power in Europe, 1200–1920

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CONTENTS

1	Emotion, Ritual and Power: From Family to Nation	1
	Merridee L. Bailey and Katie Barclay	
Part I	Familial and Personal Rituals: Local and Community Networks	21
2	Gift-Giving and the Obligation to Love in <i>Riquet à la houppe</i>	23
	Bronwyn Reddan	
3	Intimacy, Community and Power: Bedding Rituals in Eighteenth-Century Scotland	43
	Katie Barclay	
4	Late-Adolescent English Gentry Siblings and Leave-Taking in the Early Eighteenth Century	63
	Lisa Toland	

Part II Civic and Nation-Building: Power Created, Power Reinforced	81
5 Shipwrecks, Sorrow, Shame and the Great Southland: The Use of Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Dutch East India Company Communicative Ritual	83
Susan Broomhall	
6 Ritualised Public Performance, Emotional Narratives and the Enactment of Power: The Public Baptism of a Muslim in Eighteenth-Century Barcelona	103
François Soyler	
7 Ritual Encounters of the ‘Savage’ and the Citizen: French Revolutionary Ethnographers in Oceania, 1768–1803	123
Nicole Starbuck	
8 Channelling Grief, Building the French Republic: The Death and Ritual Afterlife of Léon Gambetta, 1883–1920	145
Charles Sowerwine	
Part III Religious Rituals: Relationships with the Divine and the Political	169
9 Emotions and the Ritual of a Nun’s Coronation in Late Medieval Germany	171
Julie Hotchin	
10 Miraculous Affects and Analogical Materialities. Rethinking the Relation between Architecture and Affect in Baroque Italy	193
Helen Hills	

11 Political Ritual and Religious Devotion in Early Modern English Convents	221
Claire Walker	
12 Moravian Memoirs and the Emotional Salience of Conversion Rituals	241
Jacqueline Van Gent	
13 The Transformation of Sabbath Rituals by Jean Crépy and Laurent Bordelon: Redirecting Emotion through Ridicule	261
Charles Zika	
14 Afterword: Ritual, Emotion and Power	285
Harvey Whitehouse and Pieter François	
Correction to: Moravian Memoirs and the Emotional Salience of Conversion Rituals	C1
Select Bibliography	305
Index	313

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Ritual Encounters of the ‘Savage’ and the Citizen: French Revolutionary Ethnographers in Oceania, 1768–1803

Nicole Starbuck

In the long term, encounters between Enlightenment explorers and Oceanian peoples impacted significantly on European government and colonialism. Accounts of the contact, and observations and evaluations made during these meetings, were read widely among the public and were used by philosophers, naturalists and eventually scientists to advance theories about the nature of humanity, society and ‘civilisation’. Yet in the moment, these encounters were unpredictable, precarious events fraught with fear and confusion, approached with high anticipation and coloured by a heady mix of sights, sounds and smells. Newcomers and locals each tried to bring some order to these episodes and to navigate them according to their respective needs. While circumstances varied from beach to beach and from one experience to another, participants routinely performed a combination of customary, ritualistic, practices: signs of peace and friendship, exchanges of gifts, products and knowledge, sharing of food and drinks, demonstrations

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123

of weaponry, planting of gardens and sometimes acts of possession.¹ In different ways, they sought either to enter into a new relationship or to reaffirm and advance an existing but tenuous one. Indigenous communities often dealt with Europeans as with more familiar visitors, according to their usual protocols and sometimes by incorporating them into their existing relationships of exchange, while the voyagers sought to fulfil immediate needs—resources, respite and fieldwork—and to familiarise the ‘savages’ with European ‘civilisation’.² Given the mixed objectives, the process was never entirely smooth, nor was the experience entirely shared; often, it proceeded no further than a burst of shouts and spears from a distant shore. However, the protocols of contact generally rendered meetings something which explorers could interpret and describe in a coherent report.³ The cross-cultural encounter might indeed be treated as a ritual.

This chapter tests a ritual frame on the voyager–Indigenous encounter, using as case studies the encounters of French voyagers Louis-Antoine de Bougainville during the mid eighteenth century and Jean-François de Galoup de la Pérouse on the eve of 1789, as well as the expeditions that occurred at either end of the French Revolution: the first led by Bruni d’Entrecasteaux and the second by Nicolas Baudin. Its scope does not extend to all the ritualistic aspects of the voyage encounter or the affective and cultural elements which influenced its course and French representation. There already exists a strong body of scholarship on gift exchange and gender in this context, while the sharing of meals and the significance of touch, performance and music each merits further analysis in its own right. Focusing on three broad themes—the initiation of contact, the use and significance of space and, lastly, power and civilisation—it is an overview of the voyage encounter as ritual that is provided here.

The study also queries how far and in what ways the ritual contact practices of eighteenth-century French voyagers changed in line with the transformation of France during the Revolution of 1789–99. Developing via a myriad of celebratory, militant and transformative episodes, the French Revolution was highly ritualistic in itself. Its leaders sought to ‘regenerate’ France by applying the democratic to everyday life and bringing its entire people into *une famille indivisible*. It altered relations of power, inspired a more urgent analysis of the nature of Man and advanced the concept of the nation, which, all together, accelerated a shift from sentimentalism to science and renewed the significance of French ‘civilisation’.⁴ This episode, so heavy in ritualistic elements, provides a rich context for the overview of the voyage encounter as a ritual.

The ritual, in general, is classified in diverse ways. According to Edward Muir, it is 'basically a social activity that is repetitive, standardized, a model or a mirror, and its meaning is inherently ambiguous'.⁵ To others it further involves spiritual and/or transformative elements,⁶ while many scholars agree that rituals do not need to be planned, yet often function as social scaffolds. Mona Ozouf asserts that ritualisation—'even if anonymous, even if destitute of an explicit system of regulation or of a conscious cohesiveness'—provides an 'armature' to human experience.⁷ What many rituals have in common is that they are given unpredictability and are partly driven by rising emotion: emotion roused by the senses, anticipation, the sharing of interests and actions, and the tension between parties. Not all participants experience the same feelings, but they are typically affected by an emotional 'effervescence'.⁸ While the circumstances of a ritual excite the passions, its processes serve simultaneously to harness them. The resulting tension gives the episode its shape and overall effect.

Cross-cultural encounters are problematic as rituals. Each party was motivated differently and gave different meanings to the event. While Europeans saw 'natives' as the subjects of their mission, those natives, as hosts, carried out 'staged events' of their own.⁹ These Oceanian rituals varied from place to place, culture to culture, while aboard each ship and ashore each island existed a further range of interests and concerns. The participants' interrelations were also complicated by the problem of universality of sentiment and, correspondingly, misinterpretations of emotion.¹⁰ Indeed, more than any sharing of emotions, it was such misunderstanding that critically affected power relations and thus directed the course of the ritual. As William Reddy, Joanna Bourke and Sara Ahmed argue, emotions do not merely describe inner states, but actually 'do things': they mediate between the individual and social, the self and the Other, and lead to negotiations of boundaries.¹¹

As noted above, both visitors and locals aimed to establish a relationship and to affect a degree of change in the other. Their encounters featured repeated actions, the effervescent and regulating effects of senses, bodies and emotions, and performances that served at certain times to model a social organisation that could be, and at other times to mirror a social organisation that was believed already to exist. Europeans and Islanders did perform within a Pacific 'theatre' in the late eighteenth century, yet their assertions of power and identity and their manipulations of feelings such as fear were not entirely consistent. Practices altered over time as familiarity between Europeans and Islanders increased and, as Patricia Seed reveals in relation

to ceremonies of possession in the New World, encounter rituals varied between French, British and Spanish explorers. They mirrored the ceremonial practices that were typical at home and shaped by local culture, politics and social organisation.¹²

‘DEMONSTRATIONS OF PEACE’: INITIATING THE ENCOUNTER

Bougainville and La Pérouse were typically met at sea by Islanders seeking to engage in trade and so they rarely initiated encounters. Their accounts indicate that they, especially Bougainville, were reluctant to go out of their way for the sake of cross-cultural contact. The first Islanders Bougainville saw in Oceania, at Hao (west of Tahiti), kept their distance and he recorded no effort to make direct contact. When the inhabitants lit fires along the length of the coastline, he responded by having a series of rockets fired from his two ships, and sailed on: ‘this spectacle will have greatly astonished the islanders’, he remarked. This expedition left a powerful legacy in its romantic account of ‘New Cythera’, now known as Tahiti, but it had initially been intended as a political mission rather than a scientific voyage. The subsequent expedition was a different matter. La Pérouse aimed to rival the accomplishments of James Cook and he carried detailed instructions from the *Société de Médecine* concerning the observation of Indigenous peoples. Still, while this captain did record more thorough observations than his predecessor, ethnographic curiosity alone rarely directed his course.¹³ Both he and Bougainville watched for stereotypical signs of welcome—Bougainville described Tahitians approaching with ‘demonstrations of friendship, all carrying tree branches, symbols of peace’—and, on the water, allowed the local people to lead the proceedings. For them, as for voyagers before and after, the ritual of contact commenced officially with an exchange: usually local produce for ‘trinkets’ or ‘trifles’ (see also Chap. 2). They used this time to judge how ‘friendly’, welcoming and trusting their potential hosts were, the levels of honesty and gratitude evident in their trading practices, and how wealthy they appeared to be, before deciding to weigh anchor.¹⁴

They then, typically with a show of force, headed ashore to mark out a space for themselves and their officers on land. At Tahiti, local chiefs ordered Bougainville and his officers to sleep aboard the ship rather than on shore. However, soon ‘everything was settled’: he dined with a local authority and his family, ‘had 12 rockets fired on land in front of the

guests'—'their fear was indescribable'—and slept ashore with 'the soldiers and an armed boat in front of the camp'.¹⁵ La Pérouse, for his part, regularly set up his camp in military style. At Easter Island in 1786, though he 'flattered' himself that he would have 'friends ashore, having showed gifts on all those who came aboard the previous day',¹⁶ his 'first care after landing was to make an enclosure with armed soldiers in a circle'; in this guarded space, the expedition's tent was erected.¹⁷ Later, at Maui (Hawaii), 20 armed soldiers with an officer performed a similar ceremony and 'with their bayonets fixed [they] carried out their manoeuvres with the same precision as if they been in the presence of the enemy'.¹⁸ La Pérouse remarked: 'these rather frightening activities made no impression on the inhabitants' of Maui;¹⁹ undoubtedly, like Bougainville with his rockets, his intention had been to inspire fear in his hosts.

For the voyagers, the successful accomplishment of the encounter ritual relied on a perceived balance of power in their favour, and that, in turn, depended on a balancing of friendliness and fear. They sought what they described as friendly conduct from their hosts—'friendly' in the sense of a willingness to provide all they needed and desired. Once they had gained access to the locals' territory, the voyagers sought to encourage this so-called friendliness by encouraging their new hosts to regard them with a degree of fear. As Jonathan Lamb's research would suggest, they were no doubt driven largely by their own preoccupation with self-preservation. However, the voyagers must also have been influenced by contemporary French culture and ideology; specifically, the cultural significance of fear and the theory of supposedly civilised societies' superiority over so-called savage societies.

In eighteenth-century France, fear was associated with respect and subordination, on the part of children regarding their parents and the people before their ruler, and it played an important part in the maintenance of social order.²⁰ In encounters with non-European contacts and colonial subjects, as Lisbeth Haas demonstrates, attributions of fearfulness served to diminish Indigenous agency.²¹ They reduced Indigenous people from rational, active agents, with possession of local knowledge and authority and in pursuit of local agendas, to emotionally ruled, submissive subjects. Still, when during any encounter ritual a voyager chose to incite fear amongst his interlocutors, and whether they made this decision as a matter of routine or in response to a particular circumstance, was variable. Bougainville's and even La Pérouse's provocation of fear during only initial stages of contact corresponds with the hierarchical and fear-based social order of *ancien-régime* France (see also discussion in Chaps. 5 and 6).

It also corresponds to an era of exploration when the study of humanity was a lower priority and a vaguer objective than it was soon to become.

The expeditions led by d'Entrecasteaux in 1793–4 and Baudin in 1801–3 sought out contact with the peoples of Oceania more actively than their predecessors had done. Although an emotional balancing of power continued to play a key part in the contact ritual, that balance was managed more cautiously. From the Revolutionary years into the nineteenth century, voyagers tended to draw less readily, dramatically and routinely on the provocation of fear. This development was influenced in part by different and changing contact experiences. D'Entrecasteaux and especially Baudin happened to spend more time than their forebears with people who followed contact protocols involving displays of strength and 'cold shoulder' treatment.²² Such protocols were more difficult for European voyagers to navigate than those found generally in Polynesia and, if met with a forceful approach, would obstruct the voyagers' own contact procedures and objectives. Furthermore, familiarity between Oceanian Islanders and scientific voyagers had increased considerably by the early nineteenth century; therefore, the latter less frequently felt the need to boldly assert power. Yet the voyagers' comparatively cautious initiations of contact were not driven merely by circumstance, but also by significant ideological developments at home.

D'Entrecasteaux had been sent primarily to search for La Pérouse, but he was also to investigate the natural world. Unlike his predecessors, but in common with Baudin, who was to follow him, d'Entrecasteaux had no territorial objectives. Furthermore, he carried a memorandum which instructed him to observe 'the character of each nation, what they have in common with other savages and with civilized nations'; as Carol E. Harrison points out, revolutionary naturalists looked more for similarity than difference.²³ D'Entrecasteaux recounted in detail attempts to draw hesitant Islanders into contact with him and his men. His favourite tactic was to place 'some trifles' on a plank of wood, which sometimes 'fluttered a small red flag', push the plank through the window of the great cabin, and float it towards the distant canoes. Usually, this successfully initiated trade: men near the Admiralty and Bougainville Islands, for example, replaced the trifles with bows, arrows, ornaments and shells, and pushed the plank back towards the French ship. However, near one of the Admiralty Islands, d'Entrecasteaux tried a different approach: 'I wanted to display a rocket', he wrote in his journal, 'keeping in mind ... that this spectacle would start to surprise them', he explained, 'but that their admiration and perhaps

their curiosity would follow.' However, when, as it burst and came down in a 'shower of fire', the people took fright and retreated, d'Entrecasteaux regretted his action. In contrast to Bougainville, who had intended his fireworks to intimidate, he reflected: 'if I had anticipated the effect this produced I would have spared them this fright, as this can only increase a very natural suspicion that we must try to erase—avoiding with the most scrupulous attention everything that can encourage it'.²⁴ The firing of a rocket was traditionally an expression of power, used ceremonially before other Europeans who were familiar with its meaning and as a tool for frightening, impressing and subordinating Indigenous contacts who were not. D'Entrecasteaux drew on the custom instinctively, naively seeking simultaneously to impress and to gain trust.

Baudin's approach to commencing encounters was similarly cautious and reflective. His expedition, organised by a committee of the Institut National and sponsored by the Consulate, was aimed at completing and perfecting the chart of Australia and studying the natural history of the Australian environment and its inhabitants. He had set sail from France in 1800 with a team of 24 naturalists specialising in various disciplines and including a self-styled 'observer of Man'. The study of 'anthropology' in Australia was in fact one of the expedition's most innovative and important tasks and, to assist the voyager-naturalists in this work, the Société d'Observateurs de l'Homme had provided guiding material: instructions compiled by comparative-anatomist Georges Cuvier and a treatise on the *observations des peuples sauvages* by Joseph Degérando.²⁵ During the course of his exploration of Australia, Baudin was determined to maintain a record of no bloodshed on Australian soil and accordingly his men were well-instructed on how to approach Australia's Aborigines.²⁶ Even by the final stage of the exploration, this resolution had not weakened. For example, in early 1803, Baudin wrote to his second-in-command, Louis Freycinet:

you are ordered to attempt by all possible means—gentleness, friendship, demonstrations of peace—to withdraw from their territory rather than seek to enter by force using your weapons—which should only be used in a case of imminent danger to yourself or those accompanying you.²⁷

On this voyage, it was the officers who initiated encounters during initial onshore surveys. They too presented 'signs of peace', such as green branches, and offered 'trifles'. They paid particular attention to practices of exchange and demonstrated an expectation that by 'showering' their

new acquaintances with gifts, they would secure a harmonious relationship. This led them occasionally to perceive the Aborigines as ‘ungrateful’, which, disappointedly, they associated with the peoples’ ‘savage’ state. Still, they were eager to minimise tensions and generally tried hard to interpret the Aborigines’ signals and to respond appropriately.²⁸

Like that taken by d’Entrecasteaux and his companions, the Baudin expedition’s approach was directed less by a desire to gain access to resources or curiosities than a keen desire to observe humanity, yet it involved a more ‘scientific’ ethnographic lens. During the late 1790s, the transformation of natural history had been markedly accelerated. The Revolution had inspired a pressing demand for more in-depth and precise knowledge about human nature and led to the establishment of the *Muséum national d’histoire naturelle*. By the turn of the century, naturalists were advancing from Enlightenment pursuits of encyclopaedic knowledge to specialised analyses, particularly in biological disciplines. The Baudin expedition’s first attempt to initiate an encounter with Australian Aboriginal people, at Geographe Bay in 1801, was an exceptional case as the men thereafter showed more sensitivity and restraint, but serves to demonstrate how powerfully the imperatives of research had come to influence the nature of expedition contact. A group of Aborigines had been watching the Frenchmen from afar and upon being noticed ran hastily away; one, however, a heavily pregnant young woman, threw herself to the ground, stricken with fear. According to François Peron and botanist Théodore Leschanault, the Frenchmen felt her terror, but proceeded to examine her thoroughly before helping her to her feet.²⁹ This conduct was influenced by a deeply ingrained assumption of cultural superiority, but was not intended as an assertion of such. Whereas the early stage of previous encounters had often been characterised by voyagers’ interest in establishing a balance of power in their own favour, by the nineteenth century, it was usually approached with scientific imperatives foremost in mind. And, generally, as the ethnographic lens steadily focused, the voyagers took up the green branch themselves and cautiously sacrificed a degree of power for the sake of a productive encounter.

‘SEATED ON THE GRASS TOGETHER’: SPACES OF ENCOUNTER

Beginning with this initial stage of contact, one of the most crucial aspects of the encounter ritual was the use and effect of space. The Frenchmen experienced and sought to control contact rituals differently as the dynam-

ics of power and emotion shifted from place to place: aboard the ship, on the water's edge, by a local campfire or in their own tents. In turn, the sense of threat or relative comfort led contact participants to regulate these spaces through the delineation or relaxation of boundaries. The voyagers' approach also reflected contemporary associations between space and power in France. The festivals of the French Revolution, as revealed by Ozouf, closely reflected the principles of equality and national regeneration in their use of space. They took place in areas that were free from buildings that represented history and continuity, and lacking in depth, darkness and variations in height which might suggest the politics of social hierarchy: they were 'open, horizontal and luminous'.³⁰ Even given the different contexts, this spatial arrangement is strikingly different from that of Bougainville's and La Pérouse's earlier Oceanian encounters.

With French spaces marked out and guarded by armed soldiers, those pre-Revolutionary episodes featured a distinct and enforced cultural divide. In the case of Bougainville's encounters, this divide was clearly also about subordination. Like an old-regime provincial lord extracting seigniorial dues from the local peasants, the captain repeatedly provoked the Tahitians' fear—which, reflecting the biblical proverb 'fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge', he claimed was 'the beginning of wisdom'.³¹ In turn, the Tahitians placated him and his men by offering supplies of fruit, livestock and girls, and the encounter proceeded.³²

During the Revolutionary period, however, d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin were determined to observe Indigenous people closely and in their 'natural state' and accordingly tried to minimise the disruption of that state by their presence.³³ This involved efforts to create a contact space shaped by a relatively delicate and even balancing of power. Although these voyagers often erected tents on shore, neither captain presented this event as one aimed at intimidating the local people or excluding them from a French space, but usually as places for enabling astronomical observations and tasks such as salting meat. At the island of Tongabatu in 1793, d'Entrecasteaux was unnerved by the large population and its contingent of 'agitated men' and tried to maintain a reassuring sense of order by declaring one tent to be the 'trading post'. However, in other ways, he still tried to respect the rights of his hosts. Upon finding some water-holes, for example, he exchanged 'some trifles' with the owner for permission to collect water there.³⁴ These men also tried to follow their hosts' directions more often than they took the lead and gave their hosts a degree of access to their own bodies by permitting them to remove their uniforms and

paint their skin.³⁵ Ideally, the success of the encounter ritual now required immersion.

This goal is particularly evident in Baudin's descriptions of the encounters at the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and Maria Island. The Frenchmen and the Tasmanians sat 'together on the grass and anyone who saw [them]', remarked the commander, 'would have taken them for the best friends in the world'; however, 'their anxious looks and private conversations' made Baudin suspect 'hostile plans on their part'. His response was to retreat, promising that he and his men would return the next day, and there followed a series of tense and, eventually, tender movements in advance, withdrawal and detachment. As the Frenchmen retreated, they were 'assailed by a hail of stones'. Baudin threatened to return fire, the locals retreated into the forest, and though he advanced further with his men, upon finding no one, neither he nor any of his men fired their guns, but returned to their ship. The next day they tried again to find the Tasmanians and 're-establish the relationship on good terms'. Unsuccessful once more, some turned to the task of fishing, whereupon some local men emerged and watched from a distance. The Frenchmen appeared to ignore them; the Tasmanians gradually approached and, wrote Baudin, were finally 'reassured of our intentions by the caresses we gave or, even more so, by the presents they received'.³⁶ During the subsequent encounter at Maria Island, one of the expedition's carpenters found himself, as Baudin described, surrounded by armed men. 'Rendered masters', by the carpenter's submissiveness, the group drove him to the beach and, 'having stripped him naked from head to foot, conducted a scrupulous inspection of his entire body'.³⁷

Local participants had always influenced encounter rituals; the change taking place was in how their counterparts responded to it in order to fulfil their objectives. Bougainville, for example, heightened his displays of military strength, increased his use of violence and sought explicitly to provoke fear in response to certain behaviours. However, the process that Baudin describes here, of advance and retreat, intimacy and reserve, and particularly the final act of inquiry and power on the part of the Aboriginal men and of submission on the part of the French carpenter, emphasises the extent to which, increasingly, the encounter ritual was being directed by Indigenous agency and shaped by emotional responses to the perceived feelings and intentions of Indigenous interlocutors.³⁸

The most obvious way in which the significance of space in the French-Islander encounter ritual changed during this era is, as Harrison argues, in

relation to territorial claims.³⁹ Before he set sail from Tahiti, Bougainville inserted an Act of Possession in a bottle and buried it without ceremony.⁴⁰ This straightforward approach, seemingly carried out without consultation with or the involvement of the local people, contrasts with the elaborate ceremonies of possession enacted by Bougainville's forbearers in the 'New World'. In the sixteenth century, Patricia Seed explains, Frenchmen felt it was crucial to give a sense that Indigenous people consented to their territorial claims.⁴¹ Bougainville's approach was in line with his attitude concerning the encounter overall. By contrast, La Pérouse and Baudin explicitly took issue with the concept of claiming possession of territory already inhabited.⁴² In a letter to the governor of New South Wales, Baudin asserted that the Australian Aborigines were 'no more savage' than the Highlanders of Scotland or the peasants of Lower Brittany and, furthermore, that European governments would be wiser to concentrate on the civilisation of their own peoples than on societies in distant lands.⁴³ This last comment was a particular concern, of course, of the French Revolutionary administrators. Alessandro Malaspina, leading a Spanish expedition in Oceania at the same time as d'Entrecasteaux, did not share the Frenchmen's point of view. Even though earlier treaties had already laid claim to the entire Pacific on the part of Spain, he left acts of possession at Alaska and Tonga. His ceremonial approach and emphasis on eliciting Indigenous consent suggests that his motive was largely symbolic: this was a reassertion and celebration of Spanish imperial authority, and one that was more traditional than the new sense of republican authority that emanated from contemporary French voyagers.⁴⁴

'TAKE THEIR HAND AND RAISE THEM TO A HAPPIER STATE': EMOTION, POWER AND 'CIVILISATION'

The different ways in which these voyagers managed their spaces of encounter, and the finer elements of the contact ritual itself, were associated with the geopolitical objectives of their expeditions and their attitudes concerning human nature and social progress. Similar to the way in which disputes were publicly resolved in Parisian communities during the eighteenth century, they were often assertions of French moral norms—largely futile, given that the audience was not familiar with their metaphors and meanings, but encouraging for the Frenchmen themselves.⁴⁵ They were also designed to contain and control the emotional escalation and contagion these encounters could cause, in order to prevent open

conflict. Through their demonstrations of force and authority, the voyagers represented themselves in particular ways.

At a time when France had recently lost a string of colonies in the Seven Years' War and had taken up arms with the American colonists against Britain, Bougainville's dramatic 'spectacles' and shows of martial power asserted a fierce imperial ambition. Twenty years later, La Pérouse's military parades and defences reflected a preoccupation with self-preservation. Following repeated 'thefts' at Easter Island and then again after a bloody conflict at Samoa, he wrote with anguish about his wish to make the Islanders know the effects of French weapons. Although his men had killed many locals while under attack at Samoa, La Pérouse curbed his instinct either to seek vengeance on the Samoans or similarly to punish the 'thieves' of Easter Island, out of his sense of duty to protect the reputation of European society and to impress the locals with his 'patience' and 'generosity'.⁴⁶ Over the course of the Revolutionary period, the French voyagers acted out a renewed patriotism, born from the regeneration of France.⁴⁷ Although, when feeling threatened, d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin fired their guns to inspire fear and thus to discourage acts of hostility from their hosts—at Tongatapu, d'Entrecasteaux even had local thieves flogged on his ship before a local audience—they gave such performances less frequently and arbitrarily.⁴⁸ The more improvisational and relatively sensitive approach affected a subtle evolution in the voyagers' ritual of encounter.

Increasingly, the voyagers' desire to inspire fear in their hosts stemmed less from any intention to establish dominance than from a sense of vulnerability. This apprehension may often have arisen early in the encounter when, as they rowed from their ship towards the shore, the captain and his men were sometimes met by crowds of over 100, even several hundred, animated Islanders. Yet, assuming that emotions and their expressions were universal, voyagers reported signs of 'cheerfulness', 'joy', 'sincerity and confidence' expressed by the 'shouts and features' in these crowds.⁴⁹ If such scenes were overwhelming, they also, as Gillian Beer and Vanessa Smith argue, flattered the visitors' egos.⁵⁰ Indeed, according to their accounts, it was typically once the encounter was well under way that voyagers' anxieties developed. They noted a change of mood in the crowd, remarked upon the size and muscularity of the men's bodies, and worried about the expressions on those men's faces and their laughter. Above all, they suspected a withdrawal of that wonder they had felt subject to earlier.⁵¹ As Beer opines, they felt insulted at moments such as these, but it

was insult mixed with consequent fear.⁵² The fear in these encounters was circular, contagious; the voyagers attempted to take it in hand, regulate it and wield it in an effort to gain power over the process of encounter (see the parallel discussion in Chap. 6).

La Pérouse's own sense of unease at Easter Island had grown steadily, as he failed to stop the rampant 'thieving' and perceived that the Islanders were less innocent and more intelligent than he had assumed.⁵³ While their initial welcome had given him 'the most favourable opinion of their character', he later declared: 'all their displays of friendship were a pretence and their features did not display a single feature that was genuine'.⁵⁴ In response, the Frenchmen had at times 'taken aim with a musket', which made the Islanders retreat, and once had been 'forced' to fire into a crowd with birdshot. Yet, on the whole, La Pérouse believed he had behaved 'with softness', and only because his stay was short. Had his expedition been staying longer, he noted, his men would have meted out a punishment 'in proportion to the crime': 'a few blows with a rope would have made these islanders more amenable'.⁵⁵ The captain's frustration was far more profound when 12 of his men were killed by Islanders on Samoa. In his journal, he did not imagine what offence he and his men had caused, but declared the Samoans more emotional than rational and asserted that they had felt that the power balance was in their favour. Indeed, he had warned his first-lieutenant:

that these islanders were too turbulent to send ashore boats and longboats which could not be assisted by our ships' guns, that our moderation had inspired little respect for us on the part of these Indians who were colossi and looked only at our physical strength which was inferior to theirs.⁵⁶

At times, voyagers believed that all that prevented the implosion of an encounter ritual was their weapons. If these did not impress the locals, then the power balance seemed to hinge on relative physical strength and, in that scenario, the voyagers often felt distinctly disadvantaged. At Tongabatu in 1793, apparent hostility on the part of local 'warriors' and acknowledged fear on the part of himself and his men intensified so sharply that d'Entrecasteaux decided that it was 'necessary' to inspire fear amongst the armed men by arranging a demonstration of the expedition's firearms. To his horror, however, his riflemen twice missed the target—two birds, fastened to a tree—then a second rifleman's gun failed to fire. 'Laughter could be detected on all sides', he recorded, followed by 'no

end of applause' after one of the local men 'stretched his bow and struck one of the birds' himself. This seemed a 'pitiful contrast', and the voyagers noticed that the locals' fear of French weapons had 'decreased considerably'; they 'perceived' the men's 'insulting looks' and, worried that their defences were inadequate, moved their ships closer in order to 'intimidate [the local people] with the display of [their] artillery'.⁵⁷ In this way, the rising emotions and conflict of power were contained until the encounter could be brought properly to its conclusion.

This pattern, whereby their own anxiety incited voyagers to provoke fear in their hosts, was repeated throughout the history of maritime exploration; yet, during this period, there was a development in the way in which voyagers perceived or at least represented signs of danger among their interlocutors. According to records from the expeditions of Bougainville to Baudin, French voyagers paid closer attention to facial features and expression, and read more into them, as they approached and passed into the nineteenth century. Bougainville referred vaguely to Islanders' joy, beauty and 'demonstrations of happiness', leaving the reader to imagine precisely how these looked. Moreover, based on his writing, the captain's responses to these people were based more on their actions—their giving of gifts, for example—than their expressions.⁵⁸

The more reflective La Pérouse later frequently commented on his hosts' expressions in an impressionistic way and usually in hindsight after an unsettling, disempowering, turn of events. Reflecting on the conflict at Samoa, he noted that the Samoans' 'expression often seemed ... to indicate a feeling of scorn towards us'. These impressions developed in the context of La Pérouse's preoccupation with how locals 'looked' at his expedition: the Samoans, he perceived, had 'looked only at [the Frenchmen's] physical strength which was inferior to theirs' and when shown the effects of French weapons, 'they looked upon the noise as a diversion and a joke'.⁵⁹ The same anxiety was occasionally revealed in the observations of the d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin expeditions, though, if only a few years later, these were usually more considered and precise. As d'Entrecasteaux's remark after a peaceful meeting off the Santa Cruz Islands indicates, they did not necessarily follow actual conflict: the Islanders, d'Entrecasteaux noted, had 'an extreme ugliness and a sombre look which inspires disgust and mistrust'. He continued: 'I have no doubt that we would have resorted to force had we spent a longer time among them.'⁶⁰ From this defensive, if relatively thoughtful, attitude to that reflected in the records of the Baudin expedition, we find a marked

transition. The contact behaviours described above indicate that Baudin and his men were particularly sensitive to local feeling. No doubt facial expression was one sign they observed, yet they rarely drew conclusions on that basis about temperament. Back in France, writing the official ethnography of the voyage, young anthropologist François Péron finally did so, with confidence and in hindsight regarding moments of conflict in Tasmania, yet he gave it legitimacy for his contemporary audience by presenting it in 'scientific' style. 'In all individuals', he declared, 'their look always has something sinister and savage in it, and I strongly believe that basically their character corresponds with the expression on their features'.⁶¹ While emotional management had been crucial in the moment for keeping the contact ritual in process, at a distance from the encounter itself, Péron extracted the influence of human interaction and reduced the matter to the Tasmanians' 'look' alone. In this way he assumed a sense of authority based on his 'knowledge'. Such confidence in the possibility of accurately assessing others' characters encouraged the civilizing imperative in France. In the eighteenth century, French expeditionary interests had developed from predominantly territorial to civilising, which nuanced the rituals of encounter. Although the planting of gardens and the gifting of 'useful' items and products continued, acts of possession did not, while voyagers increasingly tried to represent a society that was not merely powerful but also humane and sophisticated.⁶² La Pérouse wrote repeatedly of his expedition's desire only to 'do [Oceanian peoples] some good'⁶³: 'we showered gifts on them', he explained, 'we patted those who were weak, especially children still at their mother's breast; we sowed all kinds of useful seeds in their field; we left pigs, goats and ewes in their settlements ... we asked for nothing in return'.⁶⁴ D'Entrecasteaux, with more faith in the concept of the 'noble savage', wrote less about 'improvement', but continued the practice of introducing European items and, as he highlighted, 'none of them was given without its use being explained'.⁶⁵

In his treatise provided to the Baudin expedition in 1800, Degérando opined that French voyager-naturalists ought to offer Indigenous people 'the pact of a fraternal alliance!', to 'take their hand and raise them to a happier state' and, more precisely, to 'bring them our arts, and not our corruption, the code of our morality, and not the example of our vices, our sciences, and not our scepticism, the advantages of civilization, and not its abuses'.⁶⁶ Their cautious contact behaviour suggests that the philosophy of Baudin and his men was generally in line with that of Degérando, as does the little they wrote and the disappointed tone of what they wrote during

their sojourn at Port Jackson. The Aborigines of Port Jackson had already been introduced to the ‘abuses’ of ‘civilisation’ and the corruption and vices of ‘civilised’ people. They already spoke English and were habituated to European society. The Frenchmen were deprived of the opportunity to contribute to a civilising effort and the ritual of encounter, in its structural elements and objectives, was rendered redundant. They consequently lost their bearings as well as the sense of purpose and control that usually gave them some power in cross-cultural encounters.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The importance of the encounter ritual as armature, to use Ozouf’s term, had remained fairly consistent over these years and most of the basic steps of the ritual’s civilising aspect had stayed in use. The ritual of cross-cultural encounter provided a script to follow in daunting situations and to guide expeditions in pursuit of their objectives. It also provided a framework for the voyagers’ evaluation of and performance before the peoples they met. Participants in the encounter were expected to experience a sense of a shared purpose and enjoyment, and when local gratitude and curiosity seemed lacking, voyagers’ feelings about the relationship and the people’s character quickly soured. The ritual, as a civilising process, was a failure.

Gradually, emotions played a more complex role in the encounter ritual, in combination with changing ideologies and objectives around the study of humanity. They affected finer balances of power. French–Oceanian encounters of the late eighteenth century evolved from bold ceremonies of territorial discovery and possession to cautious rituals of ‘civilisation’ and knowledge accumulation. D’Entrecasteaux and Baudin were much like the administrators of the Republic who ventured into the far corners of regional France: they sought, if not to ‘teach the revolution’ itself,⁶⁸ at least to teach the ‘civilisation’ of regenerated France more broadly, as well as to advance it with their ethnographic knowledge. The power relations and affective currents in the Oceanian encounters were treated accordingly, as participants met in a space that still reflected a mode of imperialist thinking, but was relatively ‘horizontal’. They sought to enter the local world rather than to carve out their own space within it, aimed more often at allaying fears than provoking them, and facilitated more balanced power relations, which allowed locals greater agency and themselves better opportunities for ethnographic observation. Ultimately, as the management of emotion and power grew more refined, the ritual of encounter

became more potent. During the Revolutionary era, it opened up a space for not only closer cross-cultural relations but also the development of theories that would feed the 'science of race' and French colonial projects.

NOTES

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INDEX

A

Admiralty Islands, 128
adolescence. *See* youth
adulthood, 12, 45, 57, 78, 185, 250
affect (emotion), 85, 146, 193–219,
223, 225, 242–3, 298
affection (emotion), 176, 183–5
affection (love), 25, 27, 29, 35, 73–4,
76, 78
agency, 11, 64, 76, 127, 132, 138,
184, 187, 198, 257n13, 290
fictive, 184, 187
alcohol, 44, 47, 50, 72, 73
alms, 233, 235
Alsace, 146, 147, 150, 152, 155, 160,
161
Amsterdam, 83, 86–8, 91, 93, 261,
279n1–3, 280n9, 280n13
anger, 3, 66, 69, 89, 90, 95, 105,
109–15, 117, 118, 235
anthropology, 7, 129, 137, 222–4,
243
architecture, 116, 155, 195

and affect, 15, 193–219
emotion, 11–12, 14, 194, 200, 201,
215
art history and *representation* of
emotion, 193–5, 197, 215,
261–84
aşabıyah, 285, 286
Ashton (Somerset), 63–6, 68, 71–3
Augustinians, 221–3, 226, 227,
229–32
Australia, 84, 86, 88, 91, 95, 96, 129,
130, 133, 243
Port Jackson (Sydney), 138
Tasmania, 132, 137
Azen, Mustafa, 105–10, 111, 113–17,
119

B

baptism, 5, 10, 12–14, 103–21, 251,
270, 287, 292, 293
Barcelona, 103–21
Baroque art, 193–220

Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

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313

- Basque lands, 268, 270
 Batavia (Jakarta, Indonesia), 84, 87–95
 Batavia (VOC vessel), 84, 88–90
 Baudin, Nicolas, 124, 128–34, 136–8
 Beacon Island, 84, 88
 bedding (ritual), 5, 43–61, 298
 beds, 43, 44, 47–57, 59n20, 73, 149
 Bernard, Catherine, 23–41
 Berthelsdorf (Germany), 241, 247, 248, 250
 blood, 8, 11, 12, 41n53, 49, 64, 193–219, 250
 Bodin, Jean, 263, 265, 270
 body/bodies, bodily, 3, 6, 9, 10, 14, 28, 69, 71, 74, 125, 131, 132, 134, 146, 147, 149–52, 157, 160–2, 176, 179–80, 198, 199, 206–7, 217n24, 224, 235, 244, 269–75, 277
 Bordelon, Laurent, 6, 261–84, 298
A History of the Extravagant Imaginations of Monsieur Oufle, 261–84, 298
 Bougainville, Louis-Antoine de, 124, 126–9, 131–4, 136
 Bourbon monarchy, 105–18
 Bourdieu, Pierre, 12, 117, 146, 223
 bronze, 201–3, 208, 210, 213–15
 Bruegel the Elder, Pieter, 276, 277
- C**
 Cape settlement (South Africa), 91, 95
 Catalonia, 104–7, 111–14, 117
 Catholicism, 2, 107, 110, 113, 115, 116, 118, 149–51, 157, 171–87, 207–8, 222–6, 229, 231–6, 241–2, 245, 248, 288, 293–4, 297
 children, 52, 66–8, 70, 88, 89, 103, 127, 137, 155, 157, 173, 174, 182, 184, 185, 204, 222, 226, 241, 242, 245–53, 270, 275
 Christ, 157, 171–7, 179–87, 190n29, 191n38, 246, 247, 249–52
 Christiansfield (Denmark), 251, 253
 chronicle, 222, 223, 228, 232–5, 238n35
 church, 43–5, 47–9, 54, 55, 57, 115, 116, 153, 159, 172, 179, 196, 197, 199, 227–31, 233, 235, 242–5, 253, 254, 256n11, 287, 290
 discipline, 44, 47
 Kirk, 43, 45, 47, 55, 56
 civic, 2, 11, 13, 107, 109, 152, 154, 155, 158, 160, 200–1
 clerical, clericalism, 149, 153, 159
 comedy, 262, 276–7
 confusion, 49, 50, 56, 57, 123, 180, 198
 consecration, of nuns, 1171–92. *See also* coronation, of nuns
 convent entrance rites, 173–4, 185. *See also* coronation, of nuns; investiture; profession
 convents, 10, 14, 108, 171–92, 196, 198, 199, 202, 203, 221–40, 288, 290, 297
 Ebstorf, 174–7
 Lüne, 179, 180
 Our Lady of Sion cloister of Augustinian canonesses, Paris, 221–40
 Wienhausen, 177, 178, 183, 186
 conversion, 104, 106, 110, 111, 115, 118, 225, 230, 241–60, 287
 narrative, 115, 244–5, 250, 254
 coronation, of nuns, 5, 14, 171–92, 287
 courtship, 11, 26, 27, 29, 48, 56, 298
 credulity, 262–6, 278
 Crépy, Jean, 6, 261–84, 298

crown, nun's, 14, 171, 172, 174–8, 181–4
 custom, 64, 66–70, 73–5, 78n3, 123, 129, 150, 247, 269

D

dances, 9, 47, 50, 263, 264, 269–78
 database, 286, 289, 294, 295, 298
 Degérando, Joseph-Marie, 129, 137
 de Gheyn, Jacques II, 263, 270
 de Lancre, Pierre, 265–75, 278
Tableau, de L'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges et Demons, 268, 271, 272; culture of Labourd, 268–70; dances, 269–74; lasciviousness, 269; women, 269–71, 273, 275, 276

D'Entrecasteaux, Bruni, 124, 128–38

devil, Satan, 14, 263–5, 267, 270, 273–5, 278

devotional practice, 110, 182, 196, 198–99, 201, 206, 213, 221–36, 251–2, 293

reading, 106, 183–4, 186, 266
 singing, 183–5, 186

didacticism, 264, 266, 276

disgust, 34, 69, 136, 262, 263, 266–74, 278

Durkheim, Émile, 4, 146, 162, 286

Dutch East India Company
 (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC), 5, 10, 82–102, 287
 administrative documents, 84–8
 organisational culture, 85, 86

E

Easter Island, 127, 134, 135

Emeloord (VOC vessel), 92, 93

emotion. *See also* affect, individual emotions (i.e. love, anger etc)
 arousal, 4, 7–9, 172, 185–7, 234, 243, 244, 254, 287, 291
 collective, 3, 4, 9–10, 96, 115, 146, 162, 181–6, 224, 242–3, 254–5, 263, 274, 285–7
 contagion, 9, 10, 133, 135, 224, 243
 and embodiment, 3, 27–8, 69, 74, 146, 149, 161, 183, 205, 235, 244
 and gender, 26, 36, 54, 56, 57, 77, 80n51, 147, 243, 244, 253, 255
 history of, 6–7, 9, 69, 71
 and memory, 8, 9, 64, 73, 74, 76, 114, 147, 158, 159, 161, 162, 242, 243, 254, 289, 291
 methodology, 1–2, 9–10, 14, 69–70, 223–5, 243–4, 296–9
 performance, 6–8, 27–8, 34–6, 54, 71, 77, 85, 146–7, 172, 180, 182–4, 186, 205, 241, 245, 253, 254, 277
 performative, 3, 6–7, 95, 147
 and representation, 14, 109–10, 194, 197, 200–1, 215, 243, 246
 rhetoric, 27, 72, 74, 77, 85, 87, 93, 291
 scripts, 28, 138, 184, 186, 187, 190n28, 223, 291
 strategies, 49, 242–3, 262, 263, 278
 emotional community, 9, 69–78, 85, 86, 147, 148, 153, 158, 160–2, 174, 177–8, 180–2, 184, 187, 223, 232, 236
 emotional effervescence, 4, 9, 125, 224, 234
 emotional intensity, 8, 110, 154, 157, 172, 186, 242–4, 285, 287, 290–2, 297

emotionality, 285, 289, 290, 297
 emotional regime, 115, 118
 emotional salience, 241–60
 emotional style, 69, 70, 224, 242
 emotive, 183
 Eucharist, 227, 228, 232, 235, 247,
 293, 294
 exile, 66, 67, 105, 113, 222, 223,
 225, 226, 229, 231, 233–6

F

family, 5, 8–10, 12, 27, 29, 30, 44,
 46, 49, 51, 53, 55–7, 63–80, 87,
 124, 126, 150, 173, 185, 223,
 225, 228, 230–2, 236, 241,
 246–50, 254, 255, 289
 fear, 33, 41n50, 49, 50, 60n31, 66,
 71, 72, 77, 78, 91–5, 106, 123,
 125, 127, 128, 130–2, 134–6,
 138, 157, 162, 180, 197, 210,
 227, 261–74, 278, 287
 feast, 179, 180, 184, 195, 196, 198,
 202, 207, 222, 226–36, 238n25,
 241, 275–7, 293
 feasting, 50, 51, 263, 270
 festival/festivities, 47, 103, 105, 110,
 113, 116, 131, 179, 222, 231,
 234, 235, 274, 293
 folly, 262, 264, 266, 276
 fools, 261, 264, 266, 274–7, 281n15
 Franco-Prussian War, 146, 154, 158,
 160
 funeral, 5, 13, 150–2, 160, 161, 228,
 245
 fusion, 7, 56, 195, 288–90, 292

G

Gambetta, Joseph, 151, 152
 gentry, 5, 63–80, 287
 gestures, 8, 67, 71, 148, 179, 181,
 211, 243, 273

gift-giving, 11, 23–41, 67, 68, 74,
 106, 123–4, 127, 130, 136, 137,
 183, 226–7, 229, 293, 298
 and emotion, 13, 23–41, 67, 136
 and marriage, 11, 13, 23–41
 obligation of reciprocity, 24–8, 33,
 34, 69
 Gold, Anna (married Kriegelstein),
 246, 249–50

Great War. *See* World War I

grief, 1, 3, 9, 64, 66, 69, 75, 89, 90,
 95, 96, 145–68, 234, 235, 248,
 249, 255

H

habitus, 7, 224, 225, 235
 heart, 72, 76, 77, 89, 94, 148–50,
 174, 176, 179, 180, 183, 184,
 190n30, 196, 197, 199
 Gambetta's, 149, 157, 159–61
 heresy, 228, 231, 232, 236, 269
 Herrnhut (Germany), 241, 244–52
 Hugo, Victor, 151, 159, 160
 humoural system, 204–5

I

identity, 2, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 16, 64, 86,
 96, 106, 118, 125, 162, 172–4,
 180, 184, 199, 225, 227, 231,
 232, 236, 242, 249, 253, 255,
 287–90, 298
 imagination, 89, 114, 145, 261–7,
 270, 276–8
 imagistic rituals, 224, 234, 243,
 286–93
 India, 245, 251–4
 indulgence, 228, 231, 232, 234, 235
 intimacy, 28, 43–61, 68, 74, 77, 132,
 179, 184, 190n28
 inversion, 270, 275, 277
 investiture, 173–4, 179, 184, 185

J

- Jacobites, 11, 222, 223, 236
 James II, 222–31
 Jardies, les, 149, 152, 153, 157,
 159–61, 297
 joy, 50, 76, 104, 107, 115, 134, 136,
 171, 179–81, 183, 185, 187,
 196, 205, 242, 250, 252, 287

K

- kiss, 3, 68, 74–6, 263, 271, 275
 Kiss of Peace, 3

L

- La Pérouse, Jean-François de Galaup
 de, 124, 126–8, 133–7
 laughter, 134, 135, 267, 278
 law, 12, 26, 29, 30, 34, 41n53, 44,
 47, 51, 52, 54, 56, 105, 112–13,
 173–4, 179, 181
 Commissary Court, Scotland, 43,
 48, 49, 59n22
 leave-taking, 5, 11, 13, 63–80, 287
 legal records, 29, 43–61, 112
 letter-writing, 5, 10, 14, 30, 63–80,
 83–102, 104, 133, 222, 227,
 243
 liminality, 4, 65, 214
 liturgy, 154, 171–3, 175, 176,
 178–87, 222, 228, 231, 235
 Louvre, 155, 160
 love, 23–41, 50, 53–7, 63, 64, 69, 74,
 75, 78, 105, 110, 158, 171,
 174–87, 190n29, 223, 244,
 250–52, 269, 293. *See also*
 gift-giving; marriage
 loyalty, 27, 67, 68, 71, 72, 77,
 78, 105, 112, 223, 231,
 252, 255
 obligation of, 24, 28, 33–6

M

- Maria Magdalena of Malabar, 250–4
 marriage, 5, 11–13, 23–41, 43–62,
 65, 70, 181, 247, 264. *See also*
 gift-giving; love; reciprocity
 changing conception of, 24–5, 36,
 54–5, 185
 companionate, 24, 29, 35
 critique of, 23–41
 irregular, 44, 47, 48
 legal definition of, 29–30, 47
 spiritual, 173–4, 181, 184
 martyr, 14, 116, 171, 175, 179,
 182–6, 199, 203, 208, 212,
 222–36
 Mary of Modena, 222, 226, 227, 230,
 239n35
 materiality, 3, 12, 14, 172, 173, 176,
 185, 193–220, 256n8
 and affect, 193–5, 197, 200, 201,
 215, 298
 and miracle, 12, 193–219
 memoirs, 67, 241–60
 memory, 8, 9, 64, 73, 74, 76, 114,
 147, 154, 158, 159, 161, 162,
 230, 242–5, 248, 254, 291
 semantic memory, 289
 miracle, 11, 12, 106, 109, 110, 117,
 193–219, 224, 249
 mockery, 44, 278
 modes of religiosity, 224, 286–99
 monarchy, 2, 10, 67, 103–5, 107,
 112–15, 118, 147, 153–6,
 226–31
 monastic, 6, 173–9, 184, 186, 202,
 221, 222, 225, 226, 228, 230–3,
 291, 292. *See also* convent
 monument(s), 109, 116, 150,
 152–61, 195, 202, 203, 228,
 230, 262
 mood, 75, 84, 134, 146, 205–6, 275,
 277

Moravian Church, 7, 241–60
 and conversion rituals, 241–60
 and memoirs, 241–60
 missions, 242–4, 250–3
 revival movement, 246–50, 254
 mourning, 147–50. *See also* grief
 music, 45, 50, 51, 110, 124, 154,
 158, 160, 178, 179, 184, 194,
 197, 221, 235, 270. *See also*
 devotional practice
 Muslim, 5, 103–21, 285, 287

N

Naples, 11, 193–220
 nation, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 46, 86, 124,
 128–9, 131, 145–68, 231
 nationalist(s), 147, 157
 natural History, 128–30
 Nitschmann, Anna, 246–9, 253
 nuns, 5, 10, 11, 13, 14, 171–92,
 221–40, 264, 287, 291, 292

O

obedience, 34, 56, 153, 254
 Oufle, Monsieur, 261–84, 298

P

Paris, 106, 133, 145–62, 221–40,
 261, 268, 274, 288, 297
 parody, 262, 263, 276–8
 patriot, (Gambetta), 145–7, 152–5,
 158, 160
 patriotism, 11, 87, 117, 134, 145,
 149, 153, 154, 157, 158, 160,
 223, 234
 patron, 11, 12, 26–7, 109, 116, 177,
 185, 193, 201, 226, 228–30
 Péron, François, 130, 137
 Perrault, Charles, 23–41

Philip V (King of Spain), 103–22
 phoenix, 110, 116, 117
 pleasure, 50, 54, 67, 68, 104, 146,
 198, 207
 power, displays of, 10, 54, 105, 110,
 113–15, 118, 128, 129, 131–3,
 136, 195, 253, 274–5
 prayer, 45, 94, 177, 181, 183, 186,
 207, 208, 222, 224, 225, 228,
 230, 232, 235, 236, 288, 289,
 293
 procession, 11, 13, 14, 103, 104,
 107–10, 115, 134, 151, 152,
 154, 158, 160, 173, 179, 180,
 202, 208, 209, 221, 222, 224,
 228, 230–36, 238n34, 287, 290,
 297
 profession (nun's), 173, 174, 179,
 184, 185
 Protestant, 2, 86, 173, 207, 232, 241,
 242, 245, 246, 248, 249, 254,
 255, 293, 294

Q

Quitt, Anna, 246

R

reading, 6, 11, 15, 24, 85, 88, 89, 92,
 94, 106, 110, 123, 136, 158,
 162n2, 183, 184, 186, 245,
 257n14, 261, 264–6, 278
 reciprocity, 23–41, 69, 74. *See also*
 gift-giving; love
 Reformation, 2, 45, 290, 293, 294
 Counter Reformation, 201, 241,
 245, 246, 248, 249
 regeneration, 117, 124, 128, 131,
 134, 186
 relics, 13, 14, 157, 159, 160, 196,
 200–3, 205, 209, 211, 214, 222,

- 223, 226–36, 238n25, 239n35,
287, 297
- reliquaries. *See* relics
- Republic, 84, 133, 138, 145–68
- Republican(s), 11, 133, 145–59, 161
- Revolution, French, 123–43, 146,
154–6, 160, 225
- revulsion, 33, 273, 278
- ridicule, 261–84
- ritual. *See also* bedding; convent
entrance rites; conversion;
coronation, of nuns; investiture;
liturgy; marriage; profession;
witchcraft
defining, 3–6, 243
desacralisation of, 4
dysphoric, 4, 8, 287, 297, 303n28
euphoric, 4, 287, 303n28
routinised, 4, 93, 123, 127, 128, 224,
289, 291–3
- S**
- Sabbath, 6, 9, 261–84, 298
- Saint(s), 109, 116, 149, 157, 159,
193–220, 270
- St. Agnes, 171, 175, 179, 181–4, 186
- St Justin the Martyr, 221–40
- Samoa, 134–6
- San Gennaro (Naples), 11, 193–220
- Scheer, Monique, 6, 7, 27, 28, 146,
147, 161, 223–5, 235
- Scotland, 5, 43–61, 133, 226, 232,
236, 298
- sculpture(s), 155, 157. *See also*
monument(s); statue(s)
- semantic memory, 289
- sermon, 45, 221, 228, 235
- Seshat: Global History Databank,
295–8
- sex, 28, 45, 47, 49, 51–7, 73, 86, 263,
273, 274
- sexual arousal, 9, 272–3
- Seydewitz (married Molther), Johanna
Sophie von, 246–8
- shipwreck, 83–102, 106, 287
- sibling, 11, 63–80
brother, 43, 63, 64, 70, 71, 73, 89,
249, 265
sister, 63, 64, 70, 71, 73, 74, 177,
253
- Smyth,
Anne, 66
Astrea, 71, 73–7
Elizabeth, 71–3, 75
Elizabeth (Betty), 65, 75–7
Florence, 63, 64, 69, 71–8
John (Jack), 63–6, 69, 71–5
Sir John, 64–6, 70–1, 73, 75–6
- social cohesion, 4, 5, 7–10, 12, 84,
182, 187, 224, 234, 285, 286,
288, 291, 295
- sorrow, 69, 74–7, 83–102, 185
- space, 9, 11, 12, 51, 65, 70, 74,
77, 96, 124, 126, 127, 130–3,
138, 139, 155, 177, 195,
202, 203, 210–12, 225,
235, 286
- Spain, 67, 103–22, 133, 231, 272,
287
- speeches, 148, 149, 152, 154, 155,
158, 159
- spiritual marriage. *See* marriage
- statue(s), 109, 116, 150, 154, 155,
157, 158, 161, 195, 202, 203,
228. *See also* monument(s);
sculpture(s)
- Stuarts, 221–40
- superstition, 109, 263–65
- symbols, 11–15, 26–7, 29, 49, 51, 55,
74, 77, 85, 104–5, 110, 111,
113–18, 126, 133, 146, 150,
154, 155, 158–60, 172–6, 180,
183–4, 206, 231, 254

T

Tahiti, 126, 131, 133
 tears, 71, 72, 74, 76, 77, 80n51, 149,
 196, 247–50
 touch, 68, 74, 85, 124, 205, 272
 trade, 48, 65, 86, 126, 128, 131, 227
 trust, 106, 112, 126, 129, 136,
 180–2, 186, 252, 253

V

Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or
 VOC. *See* Dutch East India
 Company
Vergulde Draeck (VOC vessel), 84, 91–3
 Vesuvius, 207–12, 214, 215
Vincq (VOC vessel), 91, 92
 visitation, 64, 69
 volcano, 201, 207–15

W

Waekende Boei (VOC vessel), 92–5
 weeping, 71, 72, 76–8, 80n51, 110,
 145, 158, 244, 251. *See also*
 tears.
 witchcraft, 6, 9, 261–84, 298
 World War I, 149, 158, 161
 World War II, 161

Y

youth, 44, 56, 63–5, 68, 71, 74–5, 77,
 113, 114, 155, 173–4, 181–2,
 218n27, 246–8

Z

Ziarnko, Jan, 263–78