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978-1-107-11658-0 - The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination
Aviva Briefel
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THE RACIAL HAND IN THE VICTORIAN IMAGINATION

The hands of colonized subjects – South Asian craftsmen, Egyptian mummies, harem women, and Congolese children – were at the crux of Victorian discussions of the body that tried to come to terms with the limits of racial identification. While religious, scientific, and literary discourses privileged hands as sites of physiognomic information, none of these found plausible explanations for what these body parts could convey about ethnicity. As compensation for this absence, which might betray the fact that race was not actually inscribed on the body, fin-de-siècle narratives sought to generate models for how nonwhite hands might offer crucial means of identifying and theorizing racial identity. They removed hands from a holistic corporeal context and allowed them to circulate independently from the body to which they originally belonged. Severed hands consequently served as “human tools” that could be put to use in a number of political, aesthetic, and ideological contexts.

AVIVA BRIEFEL is Professor of English and Cinema Studies at Bowdoin College. She is the author of *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (2006) and the coeditor of *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror* (2011).

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[More information](#)

À mes amours: David, Jonah, et Leah

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Aviva Briefel

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	i
1 The case of the blank hand: race and manual legibility	27
2 Potters and prosthetics: putting Indian hands to work	51
3 The mummy’s hand: art and evolution	78
4 A hand for a hand: punishment, responsibility, and imperial desire	102
5 Crimes of the hand: manual violence and the Congo	129
Coda	151
<i>Notes</i>	155
<i>Bibliography</i>	193
<i>Index</i>	214

Illustrations

1	Illustration from Francis Galton's <i>Finger Prints</i> .	<i>page</i> 8
2	"The Hand of Madame Sarah Bernhardt," from Cheiro, <i>Cheiro's Language of the Hand</i> .	12
3	Illustration of the hands of Beerbohm Tree, "Actors' Hands," <i>Era Almanack</i> .	13
4	"Handy Phrenology," <i>Punch</i> .	20
5	"Konai's Hand," from William James Herschel, <i>The Origin of Finger-Printing</i> .	28
6	"A <i>tep-sai</i> of Bengal" and "A finger-print," from William James Herschel, <i>The Origin of Finger-Printing</i> .	34
7	"Gold Brocade-Weavers," "Colonial Indian Exhibition," <i>Illustrated London News</i> .	55
8	"Wood-Carvers (Courtyard of Indian Palace)," "Colonial Indian Exhibition," <i>Illustrated London News</i> .	56
9	"A Potter," by Mortimer Menpes, from Flora Annie Steel, <i>India</i> .	67
10	Cover of E. D. Morel's book <i>Red Rubber</i> .	131
11	"Progress!" <i>Punch</i> .	132
12	"Montage of Children Whose Limbs Have Been Cut Off as Punishment."	135

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

As the daughter of a Jewish Moroccan woman, the hand has always held a strong symbolic importance for me. In fact, it was more than a symbol – from an early age, I fervently believed in the protective power of the Hamsa to deflect all kinds of evil eye–inspired trouble. When I was first introduced to postcolonial criticism as an undergraduate at Brown University, I was profoundly moved in reading Malek Alloula’s invocation of the hand in *The Colonial Harem*: “Among us [Algerians], we believe in the nefarious effects of the evil eye (the evil gaze). We conjure them with our hand spread out like a fan. I close my hand back upon a pen to write *my* exorcism: *this text*” (5). I remember this moment as one in which the personal and the scholarly coalesced into a shadowy future that could very well be my own.

Although there is no discussion of the Hamsa in my book, its protective and guiding spirit hovers over it through the many individuals who have sustained me through its writing. I am extremely fortunate to be housed at Bowdoin College, an institution whose support has allowed me to balance teaching and scholarship for several years. I give my warmest thanks to my wonderful colleagues in the English Department and in Cinema Studies. Pamela Fletcher in the Art History Department has taught me so much about all things Victorian and has gracefully modeled how to balance family and scholarly life. I could not have asked for better guidance from Dean Cristle Collins Judd and President Barry Mills, whose shared commitment to faculty never ceases to impress me. My deepest thanks go out to my students at Bowdoin, whose energy and curiosity fuel my teaching and writing. Last but not least, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the English Department coordinators Barbara Olmstead and Laurie Holland for making Massachusetts Hall such an organized and inviting place.

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Frontmatter

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x

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