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More than diacritics: Writing, power, and the porosity of script and language in Java

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The world, Fox shows in *More than words*, tends to be a lot more open-ended than we imagine, with more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of, not just in our philosophy but also our philology.[1] As a student of Javanese literature, I had encountered glimpses of this open-endedness on the pages of manuscripts where we sometimes find little dots on top of Javanese letters. These dots often appear in the literature of Islamic Java written in the *carakan* alphabet. Known to us as diacritics, they are used for originally Arabic words to produce sounds for which there is no letter in Javanese. Not all originally Arabic words get dots in Javanese texts: while a significant percentage of the Javanese vocabulary is adopted from Arabic, many words have become naturalised to the extent that their origin has become invisible.[2] Sometimes, however, one does find dotted letters, marking words as somehow different from the other Javanese words around them. With Fox's analysis in *More than words*, I want to ask: how do we understand these dots? And what should we do with them?

To address these questions, I will focus on two lines of investigation from *More than words*. The first is Fox's observation that the Balinese script is caught between conflicting ideals and, hence, different understandings of the letters' significance and power. Letters have, on the one hand, a textual and symbolic function of representing Balinese language and tradition. On the other hand, Balinese letters also have a potency of their own that is irreducible to their symbolic force and even their utility in communication.[3] Fox traces these two conflicting understandings of writing through different contexts of Balinese collective life, showing that Balinese practices of script and writing point to broader 'styles of practical reasoning', or 'those forms of deliberation through which means and ends are evaluated and decisions to act are taken'.[4] But while incommensurable, when it comes to particular practices or

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1 See Richard Fox, *More than words: Transforming script, agency, and collective life in Bali* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 178. The reference to philology is mine.

2 Ronit Ricci, *Islam translated: Literature, conversion, and the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 19.

3 Fox, *More than words*, p. 6.

4 Ibid., p. 48.

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concepts, these different styles cannot be neatly disambiguated. The two Balinese understandings of writing, Fox thus shows, are not bounded but often intertwined.

Fox's second line of investigation that speaks to questions about the little dots is on translation. The basic metaphor of 'carrying across', on which our understandings of translation are founded, presupposes that languages are coherent wholes. In fact, they however, like the Balinese script, they are based on diverging, sometimes conflicting styles of practical reasoning. Fox gives examples of terms that are inhabited by different meanings, like *atma* and *agama*, that point to the plurality or complexity rather than boundedness and coherence of language. What, he asks, does this complexity mean for translation? Or put differently, 'If it turns out that language is not a stable and bounded totality, nor translation a "carrying across", what exactly have we been doing all this time?'[5]

We could ask the same question when we transliterate a Javanese word with little dots that set certain words apart and mark them as Arabic. Both the Arabic and the Javanese scripts, like the Balinese letters, do more than just represent meaning or symbolise some sort of tradition or religion. In Islam, the relation between Revelation and the Arabic language and script is not contingent, but inherent. The Qur'an itself comments on multiple occasions on the fact that it is revealed in the Arabic language and script, and that it is because of Arabic that its message is so eloquent and clear.[6] A translation or transliteration of the Qur'an is not the Qur'an in the full sense; and around the Islamic world, the materiality of the Arabic Qur'anic script has often been held to have religious efficacy, where the ink of inscriptions dissolved in water cures illness or wards off envy or attack.

The Javanese *carakan* script also has a power that transcends its ability to symbolise or to convey meaning; and like the Qur'an, the Javanese alphabet itself comments on this irreducibility. The *carakan* alphabet, as Ricci discussed,[7] is not only an alphabet but also a self-referential poem about its own creation. It tells in abbreviated form the story of the two loyal servants of Aji Saka, a Javanese king, who disagreed about the meaning of a command Aji Saka gave them. Unable to resolve this disagreement, the servants ended up killing each other. Upon hearing about their deaths, Aji Saka was so distressed that he invented the Javanese script, intending to create a medium that was clear enough that such confusion and tragedy could never happen again.

Both the Javanese and the Arabic scripts thus claim to have a unique power of clarity and are hence, from their own point of view, not neutral media. What this power of clarity means, in either case, needs to be studied against the background of the respective styles of practical reasoning to which they are linked. But, as Fox discussed and as the little dots in Javanese texts also underscore, these different styles are neither stable nor perfectly self-contained. The little dots point to the porosity between the two systems of writing: the dots constitute a kind of alienation from

5 Ibid., pp. 171–2.

6 See for instance Q 16:103 in M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

7 Ronit Ricci, 'Reading a history of writing: Heritage, religion and script change in Java', *Itinerario* 39, 3 (2015): 419–35.

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the Javanese script as they point beyond the *carakan* to the Arabic, with its own logic and power.

For those of us who have been trained to use diacritics in our scholarly work to represent sounds for which our Latin alphabet is ill-suited, the purpose of the little dots seems clear: because the Javanese script has no capacity to represent a letter like the ذ (*dhal*), it makes use of a diacritic. But as both the Javanese and the Arabic script have powers that are inherent and non-textual, we have to ask, with Fox, whether these dots might be more than diacritics. Could it be, for example, that they seek to harness the eloquence and agency of the Arabic, but without fully letting go of the power and clarity of the Javanese letters? Perhaps sometimes; but Fox cautions us not to be too rash in making totalising assumptions, and to be attentive to how the function or agency of writing is situationally constituted according to different and not always commensurate forms of practical reasoning. What these little dots mean or do is likely not always the same in a given text or for different readers.

This irreducible complexity poses a challenge when we transliterate from one script into another. Transliteration, in this regard, is akin to translation, in the sense that it assumes a carrying-over from one totality into another. When we are producing a transliteration of a Javanese text from the *carakan* script into the Latin script, we are following a certain manual where each Javanese letter or specific sequence of letters corresponds to a Latin letter or sequence of letters. And we may agree that this manual is just conventional, that a different system could be thought of, akin to Quine's translational indeterminacy.[8] But here too it seems that a unity of each of these scripts is presupposed, a unity that these little dots seem to refute.

How, then, should we produce a transliteration of a Javanese text into the Latin script when we encounter these dots that may sometimes make more than words? How could a transliteration adequately represent the potential power inherent in these letters, especially when this power is mobilised by their situatedness between two scripts? And how could we possibly represent this openness? In fact, in transliterating a Javanese transliteration of an Arabic word into Latin script, we are introducing yet another way of writing, which is itself linked to multiple, fragmented styles of practical reasoning, and which have their own potencies apart from the words they are taken to represent or the cultures they are taken to symbolise. Are we too somehow trying to convey the power of Javanese or Arabic letters while also harnessing the powers of our scripts? And are we really aware of what we are doing? Fox ends his book with observations about the non-textual uses and powers of academic writing, suggesting that what is usually regarded as an ancillary feature of writing might be a tail that wags the dog.[9] Based on the example of the little dots in Javanese texts, I suggest that this is true not only of the language acts of review and self-criticism that he names, but of the very letters themselves. For those of us who transliterate texts, his book makes clear that we need to reflect on the lives and powers with which we play, including our own; to become keenly aware of the situations in which they may emerge; and to consider less systematised ways of transliterating that better reflect these transliterational indeterminacies.

8 Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).
9 Fox, *More than words,* pp. 181–2.

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