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Assistant Professor of Religion Elizabeth McAlister has found a link between contemporary Vodou and 15th-century Africa.

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT VODOU

If you think you know about Vodou, think again. With a new book, Elizabeth McAlister turns a scholar's eye to this often misunderstood religion.

It's difficult to decide which is more intriguing: that Assistant Professor of Religion Elizabeth McAlister keeps a couple of zombies in her office, or the idea that she might not have the zombies (or the office at Wesleyan, for that matter) if it weren't for Phil Donahue. Both facts can be easily explained, but perhaps the best place to start is at a Haitian cultural center in Rockland County, N.Y., in the 1970s.

The center was created by McAlister's father, a high school French and Spanish teacher and long-time civil rights activist who wanted to give the influx of Haitian immigrants a safe place to congregate and learn ways to acclimate better to their new home. Befriending some of the new Haitians in the area, "Liza" and several friends began studying Haitian drumming with a master drummer—a "priest of the drum" in Afro-Haitian religion.

"Then one night he announced, quite matter-of-factly, that we would be going to a Vodou ceremony to play for a prayer service," she says.

"It turned out to be a whole night of ritual drumming, prayer songs, and dance," she says. "It was fascinating."

At the time, McAlister was majoring in anthropology at Vassar, and the ceremony provided a crystallization of sorts.

"Vodou is a very complicated religious system," she says. "It draws from Roman Catholicism and West African religions, and it's been changed—Creolized—

through the centuries by African slaves and their descendents in Haiti.

"I realized that Vodou was also a new religion in the United States, and that it had really been misrepresented in the media and especially in Hollywood. This misrepresentation was detrimental to new Haitian immigrants, like the people I knew through the Haitian community center. Few people had studied and written about the real practice of Vodou as a religion. It quickly became my research passion."

But this passion wasn't quite enough to propel McAlister into academia immediately after earning her undergraduate degree. Instead she chose journalism and took a job at *Esquire*. Soon after, she penned an article on Vodou for a sister magazine called *New York Woman*. Very quickly, the calls started pouring in.

"I got calls from every TV and radio talk show out there asking me to come on and talk about Vodou," she says.

In the end she decided to pass on Oprah, Geraldo, and the others and appear on Phil Donahue's nationally syndicated television show. She made the decision in part because, at the time, Donahue was the most established and respected talk show host in the country. But more important to McAlister, his show presented itself to her as the most principled of the lot.

But when the lights went up, and the cameras rolled, Donahue opened by turning to McAlister and asking: "Elizabeth, what did your parents say when you told them you joined a Vodou cult?"

"I was ready for a serious discussion, and all Donahue wanted to do was sensationalize the issue. He basically said, 'What's a nice white Vassar girl like you doing with all these Haitians?' It was racist and sexist. His take was the same as most American popular culture on Vodou—that it is irrational, and even evil. It was disappointing."

But it was also motivating. McAlister realized that if she wanted to educate people about African-based religions and be taken seriously, she would have to be more than a journalist. She needed to undertake a thorough, scholarly

study in order to acquire the expertise she would need to teach others about rich African American cultures.

Along with earning master's and doctoral degrees at Yale and learning Haitian Creole, this quest involved field studies of Haitian communities in the United States and several trips to Haiti, where she acquired the zombies she keeps in her office.

The zombies were a gift from a *bòkò*: loosely translated, a "sorcerer." While McAlister was interviewing him in Port-au-Prince, she admired a bottle decorated with, among other things, scissors, pins, mirrors, and fabric. The man offered to make one for her. McAlister agreed, thinking she had just commissioned her first piece of Haitian art. But then the *bòkò* asked, "Would you like me to put good luck in?" McAlister learned that this good luck would come from capturing spirits of the recently dead and containing them in the bottle.

While part of a person's soul goes on to the afterlife, according to Vodou, another part of the soul lingers at his or her gravesite. A *bòkò* can capture this lingering soul and put it to work for someone who is alive.

"Don't worry," says McAlister, smiling. "After a certain time, the whole soul is thought to go to God!"

The *bòkò* allowed McAlister to witness the ceremony. He stood in front of his small altar, singing along to the soundtrack of ritual music playing on his shiny new Panasonic cassette deck. After a few songs, he shaved small bits from two human skulls, and put the bone fragments into the



A Vodou ritual provided McAlister with zombies that she keeps in her Wesleyan office.

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bottle, along with the ashes from an American dollar, leaves, perfume and liquor. The zombies comprised the bones and prayers together, McAlister realized later.

Adding the American dollar was a symbolic command to bring her money. The leaves were a signal of health, the perfume was to attract love, and the liquor would preserve the assemblage and give it mystical “heat.” All the ingredients together were instructions to the captured spirits, for what specific kinds of work they were commanded to do. Even the outside of the bottle was a set of instructions: the scissors were to stab anyone coming to harm her, the mirrors would also deflect harm. But the cloth that dressed the bottle was McAlister’s first clue—reflecting later, back at Yale—that the bottle was a relative of Kongo religious thought. The black, red and white that covered the bottle were exactly the colors that the Kongo used (and use) in their religious symbolism.

“I found a clear historical link between contemporary Haitian magic and certain ritual practices of the Kongo of Central Africa. The key elements used in making this twentieth-century Haitian object were consistent with fifteenth-century Kongo ‘spirit-medicine’—what the Portuguese colonizers called *fetico*, or fetish.”

She points to her bookshelf, to the bottle. “I traced, through the religious material culture of contemporary Haitians, a link to the religious worldview of the Kongo Kingdom. Many Europeans have assumed that Africans in the Americas have no lasting culture traceable to Africa. This one little bottle proves that African Americans have a particular and identifiable rich and creative cultural history that has lasted—in changed forms—for centuries in the Atlantic world. And it proves that we can trace that history using creative scholarly methods.”

McAlister has recently published a book, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora*, that explores Rara, an annual festival

the religion holds to coincide with the Catholic celebration of Lent. The Haitian poor use the festival as one of the last bastions of uncensored speech in a country where a “political economy of brutality” leaves the majority of the country totally disenfranchised. Haitian immigrants also perform Rara in New York City parks during the summer, creating a “roots culture” which, like Jamaican Rastafarians, lets them express a particularly Caribbean Black ethnicity.

McAlister hopes that through the kinds of careful scholarship she—and others—do on Vodou, the demonized images of the religion promoted by the popular media and movies will diminish.

“Vodou is one of the foundations of Haitian culture,” she says. “Historically, it is wrapped up in politics, medicine, justice, gender, and now transnational migration and other facts of Haitians’ lives. We need to treat it as we treat other religions: critically, but with basic respect. We need to talk less about what it isn’t and look more at what it is.”

Phil Donahue, are you listening?
—David Pesci

**NOTED MUSICIAN
T. VISWANATHAN DIES**

South Indian flutist and adjunct professor of music Tanjore Viswanathan died Sept. 10, of a heart attack at Hartford Hospital. *Wesleyan* magazine will carry a remembrance of his life in the next issue.

**COL FACULTY MEMBER
HOPE WEISSMAN DIES**

Hope Weissman, associate professor of letters and of women’s studies, died July 24 at the age of 58 of complications following surgery.

Weissman, who received Wesleyan’s 1999 Binswanger Prize for Excellence in Teaching, was known for her dedication and commitment to teaching and to her students. Her students described her as a skilled moderator who had a much-appreciated ability to listen to them and to provide a nurturing environment for discussion of difficult topics.

A specialist in medieval culture, women’s studies and visual arts, she wrote articles in a variety of publications ranging from *Chaucer Review* to *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*.

She received fellowships from organizations including the Southeastern Institute of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Radcliffe Institute of Independent Study, the American Council of Learned Societies, and Wesleyan’s Center for the Humanities.

She also belonged to several organizations, including Phi Beta Kappa, the Modern Language Association of America, the New Chaucer Society, and the Medieval Academy of America.

She earned her M.A. and Ph.D. in English from Columbia University and her B.A. from Wellesley College. She came to Wesleyan in 1974 after teaching at the City University of New York.

Her family, friends, and former students have initiated the endowment of a permanent scholarship in her honor. Gifts may be made to Wesleyan University, attention Hope Weissman Memorial Scholarship Fund, c/o University Relations, 318 High Street, Middletown, CT 06459.

**40TH ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATE WORLD MUSIC**

On Feb. 21–23, Wesleyan will celebrate 40 years of the World Music Program with marathon concerts, panels of distinguished musicians and scholars, and special programs.

Forty years ago, in 1961, Wesleyan’s small music department began an ambitious experiment to be the first college with an integrated view of all musics, especially world and experimental musics, and invited the first artist in residence, T. Ranganathan, from south India. Then Indonesian, African, African-American, Indian, and East Asian musics appeared, and by the 1970s Wesleyan was known throughout the world for composition, performance, and scholarship.

All alumni who were music majors, graduate students, or who remember music as a highlight in their Wesleyan years are urged to attend and join the programs—performers welcomed! Professors Emeriti Richard Winslow and David McAllester, along with other former faculty, will be on hand.

For more information, contact Hope McNeil, hmcneil@wesleyan.edu.



Instruments of the gamelan, such as this rebab, suggest the scope of Wesleyan’s World Music Program.



These U.S. soldiers had good reason to smile since they had returned from WWII European battlefields to Hartford’s Bradley Airfield.

**WWII DOCUMENTARY
THE COSTS OF WAR**

“The line between the poet and the warrior is very thin,” says Richard Hanley MALS ’93, as he describes the third, and last, episode of his television documentary, *Connecticut and World War II*. This final segment, titled *Heroes*, achieves his goal of merging poetry and war.

Hanley, assistant professor of communications at Quinnipiac University, is passionate as he describes the project the Connecticut Humanities Council and Connecticut Public Television jointly commissioned him to research, write, and produce. Originally proposed as an hour-long documentary to explore Connecticut’s experience of World War II, Hanley says, “I told them you can’t do that concept in just an hour.” He has already presented two episodes of

Connecticut During World War II on Connecticut Public Television: *Homefront* and *Battlefront*, which together run three hours. *Heroes* runs 60 minutes.

Hanley recruited students from Middletown’s Oddfellows Playhouse to read biographies of Connecticut soldiers killed in the war. “The girls and boys are the same age as many of the young men killed, 17 and 18 years old. I want to show the cost that war extracts. I don’t sanitize it. It’s a very sad show.”

He did substantial research at many libraries, including the Connecticut State Library where he looked at each of the 4,500 records and pictures of Connecticut men and women who died in the war. He kept returning, however, to Special Collections and Archives at Wesleyan’s Olin Library. “The Wesleyan materials just felt right,” he says. “Professor Fred Millett’s introductory essay on letter writing”—in

220 Wesleyan Station, a thin publication of students’ letters to him from war zones—is “the best thing regarding letters I’ve ever read. It’s a brilliant analysis.”

The documentary includes Donald Hall and Richard Wilbur, two poets closely associated with Wesleyan, represented with readings of Hall’s “The Man in the Dead Machine” and Wilbur’s “First Snow in Alsace.”

“The Wesleyan experience of the war resonated more than others,” he continues. “The students were representative of what we were fighting for—the American right to stand up for what they believed. The campus community treated the students who were conscientious objectors as heroes as much as those who went to war. The students were literate; they took Shakespeare to war in their back pockets. They intellectualized their experiences, pinning them on the lectures they had

heard in class. I wanted to capture the universal through the particulars of what I found in the Wesleyan archives.”

Wesleyan servicemen, he adds, received a newsletter from campus that kept them informed of the wartime activities of their fellow students and included messages from Wesleyan presidents James L. McConaughy and Victor L. Butterfield.

“We’re still making *Heroes*, incorporating whatever we can right up to the last minute. The cost of war is so much higher than we know either at the time or afterwards,” he says. “Each face I looked at in the boxes of pictures at the State Library [including his uncle, killed at age 18 in 1945] and each letter I read at Wesleyan.” He pauses. “We lost some good people.”

Heroes will be shown on Connecticut Public Television in November 2002. —Marie L. Clark

**NATIONAL DEBATE
WISH UPON A STEM CELL**

While the U.S. Congress continues to debate policy regarding human embryonic stem cell research, federally funded researchers nationwide, including some at Wesleyan, remain tantalized by possible scientific advances. At present, research is limited to the 60 human stem cell lines already in existence, as mandated by President Bush. No cell lines derived after August of 2001 may be used, and only 17 of the authorized 60 are currently available to researchers.

These limitations frustrate Laura Grabel, a developmental biologist and dean of the natural sciences and mathematics. She is an authority on mouse embryonic stem cells (ES cells) and believes research with mice suggests the importance of pursuing studies with human ES cells. Her lab uses mouse ES cells to mimic very early events in a mouse embryo and to examine what molecular cues may be involved in directing a cell to become, for example, a blood cell or a nerve cell.

"I have seen first-hand the remarkable potential of these mouse cells to differentiate in a plastic dish, spontaneously forming beating muscle or a vascular tree full of red blood cells," she says.

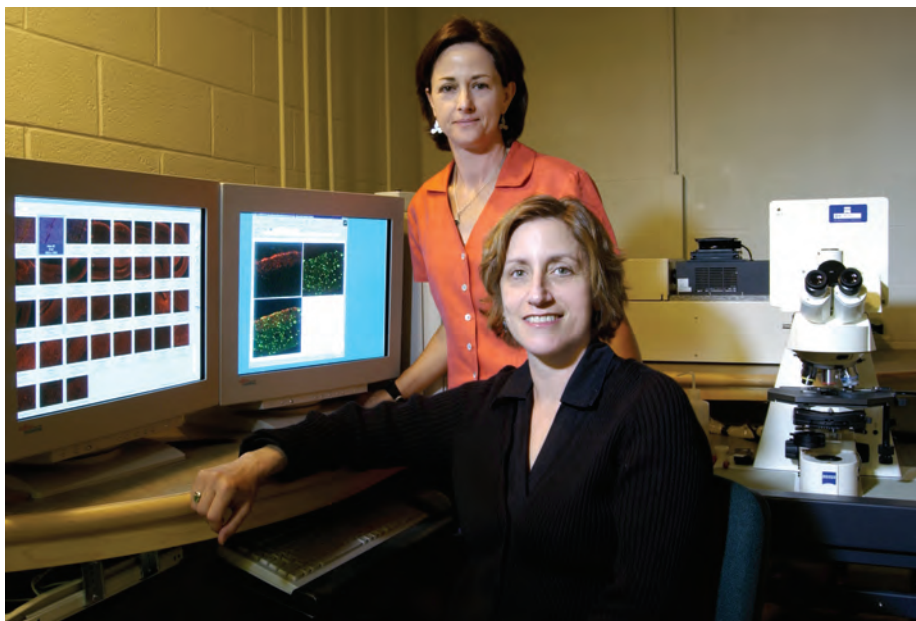
"Most recently, ES cells have been used to generate insulin-producing pancreas cells in a diabetic mouse. This study and others like it demonstrate the potential for treating a wide variety of currently incurable diseases, including Parkinson's and Alzheimer's."

One of many amazing qualities of ES cells, she notes, is that after injection into a host animal, they will migrate to a place where they're needed, and settle down to become functioning cells. For instance, if stem cells are transplanted into the bone marrow of a mouse whose own blood-forming stem cells have been killed by a lethal dose of radiation, some will colonize the depleted bone marrow and generate a new blood supply.

This find-a-need-and-fill-it quality of embryonic stem cells has made the hu-

man ES cells isolated in 1998 agonizingly controversial. As their name implies, they are harvested from embryos, in most cases from embryos left over from in vitro fertilization attempts. While some people find it ethically unacceptable to sacrifice human embryos to derive such cells, their potential for repair of damaged, diseased, and worn-out body parts has made others equally passionate in their eagerness to use them. Grabel hopes to obtain cells from some of the 60 lines President Bush authorized for use by researchers who receive federal funds.

"We have got so much experience working with mouse ES cells, I just



Dean of the Sciences and Mathematics Laura Grabel (foreground) and Associate Professor of Biology Janice Naegele use a confocal microscope to examine tissue samples.

think that we could add something to characterizing the human cells—how they're different from the mouse cells, how they're the same," she says.

In a *Hartford Courant* op-ed, Grabel questioned whether the 60 cell lines cited by Bush are adequate.

"We have no way of predicting today which cell lines will be successful in the clinic tomorrow. There is no way to know if cells from these lines will continue to divide and produce more

"I have seen first-hand the remarkable potential of these mouse cells to differentiate in a plastic dish, spontaneously forming beating muscle or a vascular tree full of red blood cells." —Laura Grabel

stem cells or be able to generate the kinds of cell types needed for transplantation studies.

"And what if they can't? What if the cell line that best generates precursors of neurons lost in Parkinson's disease is not among the 60 cell lines? What if it is found in the coming year?"

public interest may not be well-served by creating such an imbalance between the private and public sectors.

Meanwhile, she continues her work with the mouse cells, submitting a joint grant with Associate Professor of Biology Jan Naegele to use Naegele's mice and her own ES cells for a project. Naegele is a neurobiologist whose research focuses on how the brain is sculpted during development. As the mammalian brain develops, the number of cells is continually adjusted to achieve a balance between cell division and programmed cell death (lest the brain outgrow the skull). Her lab is particularly interested in the role of programmed cell death (apoptosis) in brain development—cell death can sometimes lead to a need for repair work. This is where the transplanted stem cells could be useful. The neuronal damage associated with strokes and accidents may someday be treated with replacement stem cells.

Other research confirms that repairing damaged neurons may not be the impossible task it was once thought to be. Associate Professor of Biology John Kirn studies adult neurogenesis in birds, where new neurons are born throughout the cerebral cortex. Canaries, for example, learn a new song each year, and seasons of song learning are correlated with the growth of new neurons in the area of the brain known to control singing. Kirn connects his research on bird brains to eventual medical uses for people, saying, "Why don't we try to understand those limited number of cases where neurogenesis occurs naturally, to get as much information as possible about how nature does this?"

—Sandy Becker

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CAMPAIGN NEWS SEPTEMBER 2002



GIFT FROM JOHN DODGE '52 WAS MANY YEARS IN THE MAKING

John F. Dodge '52 has donated \$1,000 to Wesleyan in honor of his father, Arthur C. Dodge '23. His gift, which forms part of the Class of 1952's 50th Reunion gift to financial aid, is especially meaningful because John spent almost half of his life preparing it. John, a career executive with the Boy Scouts of America until his retirement, created a collection of international Boy Scout stamps dating from the early 1900s to 1985. He recently sold his collection and gave the proceeds to the university in memory of his father and the Wesleyan experiences they both enjoyed.

GIFT FROM THE REIFENHEISER FAMILY GOES TO CAMPUS RENEWAL FUND

Tom and Marianne Reifenhiser, parents of Tom Reifenhiser '94, have made an unrestricted commitment of \$150,000 to the Campus Renewal Fund. Their gift, to be paid over five years, will be invested with the endowment and will support campus facilities improvements into the future. To recognize their generosity, Wesleyan will name a new squash court in

honor of the Reifenhiser family when the athletics facilities are consolidated at Freeman within the next few years. Intercollegiate squash and tennis were important parts of Tom's Wesleyan experience, and the Reifenhisers are very pleased that students will soon enjoy new squash courts.

WAF SUCCESS

Just over \$6.6 million was given through the Wesleyan Annual Fund by 10,967 alumni during the fiscal year that ended on June 30. This achievement sets a record for dollars contributed, and Wesleyan was only 170 gifts shy of its 50 percent participation goal. WAF National Committee Chair Steve Levin '75 thanked all donors and volunteers and stated, "In spite of a year bracketed by the events of September 11 and the stock market crash of June, alumni once again demonstrated their strong loyalty and financial commitment to Wesleyan. We can all be extremely proud of the results of this year's WAF campaign." Gifts through the Annual Fund support student aid, faculty salaries, laboratory equipment, campus maintenance, library resources, athletics and arts programs, and make a real difference to every Wesleyan student and professor.

**BY THE NUMBERS
THE CLASS OF
2006**

TOTAL NUMBER	720
MEN	48%
WOMEN	52%
ASIAN	9%
BLACK	8%
HISPANIC	6%
INTERNATIONAL	6%
NEW ENGLAND	29%
NEW YORK	28%
MID-ATLANTIC	15%
MIDWEST	6%
SOUTH	5%
WEST	9%
ALUMNI OR STUDENT RELATIVES	14%
FINANCIAL AID RECIPIENTS	45%
GRANT AID	42%
EARLY DECISION	42%
TOP 10% (52% REPORT A RANK)	73%
MEDIAN SAT VERBAL	700
MEDIAN SAT MATH	690

A View Within the Gate

New York Times education reporter Jacques Steinberg spent the 1999–00 admission cycle observing Wesleyan’s inner workings. He found surprise and reassurance, chronicled in his new book, *The Gatekeepers*.

Motivated by a desire to demystify the admission process, Wesleyan provided Jacques Steinberg with an unsanitized, wide-open view of its admission process over a period of months. Steinberg, then new to the education desk at the *Times*, produced a series of articles that appeared on the front page, now expanded into a new book, *The Gatekeepers*. He portrays Wesleyan’s deliberations through the eyes of Ralph Figueroa, a former admission official who has since become director of college guidance at a private school in New Mexico. *Newsweek* said the book “should be required reading for any student or parent who seeks insights into what Steinberg correctly describes as a process ‘hidden behind a cordon of security befitting the selection of a pope.’”

Q: Was your access to Wesleyan’s admission process unfettered?

Jacques Steinberg: Absolutely. Nobody ever told me to close that folder or leave the room. I was able to become a fly on the wall. I saw several hundred decisions, and I know that they forgot I was there at some points. I didn’t pull any punches with Wesleyan; there were certainly things Wesleyan would have preferred not be in the book.

Q: Were there any ground rules?

JS: One ground rule was that I couldn’t reach out to a student until that person had received a decision letter. I spent a lot of time with Nancy [Nancy Hargrave Meislahn, dean of admission and financial aid] making sure that the details we used were not so telling that kids would recognize themselves. After the first piece ran in which we talked about a Latina girl from the Northeast who had a SAT score in the 1100s, the ad-

mission office heard from several guidance counselors who were furious that their kid was mentioned; none was right.

Q: But several applicants were later named in the book.

JS: Viking drew up a very stiff release in which the kids agreed to let us have access to all of their papers in their files and let us use their names. I wanted to profile a half-dozen kids, and I wanted each to represent something different about the process. We approached six kids and got six releases signed. I told them up front that there would be things in the book they wouldn’t like. I told them that the portraits of them would not be believable if they each looked like saints and I was going to let the chips fall where they may. Without question, all of them said they thought this would help kids in their shoes.

Q: Why did you conclude that there is no way to game the admission process?

JS: There’s an industry of books that claim to hold the secret to how to get you in. Having spent the better part of a year watching that process, I don’t know how anybody in good conscience could tell you that there was some secret code. It’s so messy up close. When you see them wrestling with case after case, you realize there are very few generalizations you can draw on. It was surprising to me that the admission officers spent so much time looking at how rigorous your high school curriculum was. It was

only then that they looked at your grades. Another revelation to me was that it wasn’t the list of extracurricular activities as long as your arm that they wanted. They prize: did you love the activity and were you committed to it? Did you spend enough time at it that you were a leader?

Q: Why were you surprised at the emphasis on a tough curriculum?

JS: A lot of us are raised to think they are looking for straight As. I’m sure there are kids out there who think that it might be better to get an A in an easier course than a B in a harder one. It was reassuring, frankly, that this would be recognized.

Q: What are your observations on the way students approach the application essay?

JS: It saddens me that there is so much second-guessing that goes on among applicants. There’s a story in the book about a girl who wrote a fairly ordinary essay about her parents and feng shui. When I found her afterward and said there was nothing in her application that made her come alive as a person, she talked about her correspondence at the age of 14 with inmates on death row, telling them not to give up hope. I said, “I’m no college counselor, but did you think about writing that essay?” She said she had thought about it, but decided to play it safe. It’s possible the essay might have offended someone, but why not take the chance?

Q: Do private high school kids have an edge?

JS: It cuts both ways. One of the more subtle things in the book is that there is some resentment about Ralph’s pushing particularly hard for kids from Harvard-Westlake [a private school in California] where his best friend from Stanford is a college counselor. Ralph knows that sometimes there is backlash against Harvard-Westlake applicants. That hurts when it’s a kid getting a rougher time for something he or she has no control over. But each of them knew they had their own favorites and that Ralph’s relationship had brought a lot of good people to Wesleyan.

Q: Did you think Wesleyan applied affirmative action fairly?

JS: I would have a hard time defining what’s fair. If you accept the premise that a racially and ethnically diverse class is educational both for students of color and for students who are not of color, then I’m not sure that there is a better way to practice this. You’ve got an office of people at Wesleyan who subscribe to the notion of affirmative action. Yet there is such a range. Ralph’s definition is often so different from Greg Pyke’s [senior associate dean of admission]. It’s the nuance that gets missed in the national discussion.

Q: How did you react to the amount of personal judgment that goes into selecting applicants?

JS: If you are somebody with a 1400 SAT and a 4.0, I’m sure you would love it if those numbers were just fed into a computer. But if you are not that person, I would think that you would be thrilled to know that at Wesleyan people are really going to look at you and get to know you. I remember being in an information session at which Greg Pyke gave parents a briefing on how they make choices. A father stood up, furious, saying this process sounds so subjective. Greg said, “Yes, thank you. I’ve been heard.” It’s not scientific and they don’t want it to be.

Q: Do you think the process is fair?

JS: I’m not sure I could design a better process. Knowing the limits of standardized testing, I would not want to throw all these scores into a computer and come up with a class. If you decide you are not going to do that, then you have to let people respond to these files as people. We quote Doug Bennet as saying that fairness is not the only or the first objective of this process. I don’t know how you would define fairness.

Q: Did you detect a Wesleyan type of applicant?


JS: They are trying to build a community. They want it to be diverse in the broadest definition of the word. They need oboists and tuba players, second-basemen and philosophers, physicists...there are so many oppor-

tunities for kids to make their case that they would fit into this community. When you actually see them wrestling with case after case after case, you realize there are very few generalizations you can draw on. It was hard to anticipate whom they were going to take or not.

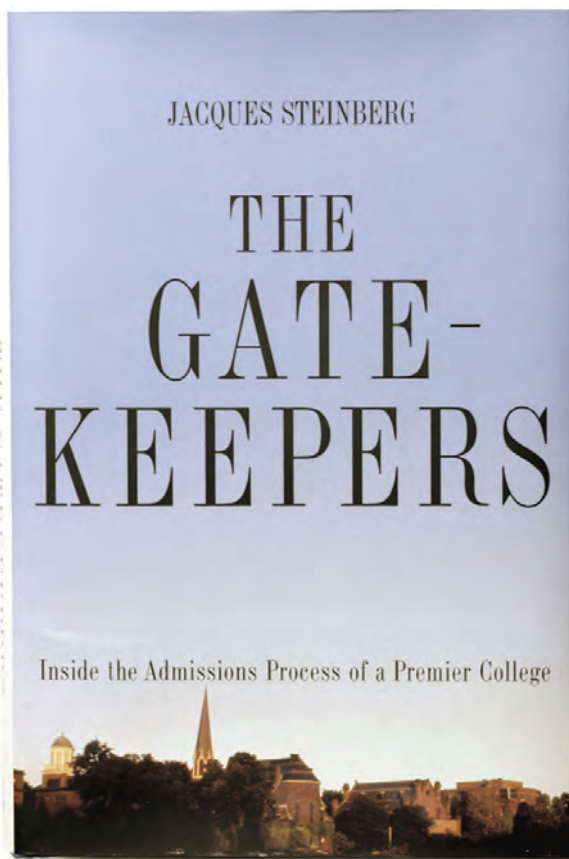
Q: Admission officers don’t have much time in committee to present their cases, do they?

JS: Some applicants will surely be surprised to learn that at Wesleyan your application is read by two people and in all likelihood the dean or her deputy at least familiarizes herself with the case. If there is not consensus between the first two readers, Wesleyan goes the extra mile by throwing it to the committee. Even if you only get a five-minute committee hearing, they are still giving you one more chance. The lengths to which Wesleyan went to try to get it right were amazing to me. There are so many checks and balances in this process, and I would hope that is reassuring to people.

Q: Is the job of being an admission officer different from what you expected?

JS: I found what I was hoping I would find: individuals who felt, in most instances, this responsibility in the very fiber of their being. Ralph had this wonderful line, “I can’t bring them all to Wesleyan.” They know that they will not make everyone happy. Ralph’s wife was always telling him to read faster, say no. I was glad I saw that Ralph and his colleagues really sweat these decisions. You could tell that they knew they were handling precious cargo. Ralph gave every applicant a chance, and I know he’s not unique. I hoped that I would find people who agonized, who welled up with tears over the occasional essay. I found what I hoped to find. 

Jacques Steinberg wrote candidly about admission at Wesleyan with the stories of successful and unsuccessful applicants.



BY BILL BURKHART

