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HUMAN, INHUMAN, POSTHUMAN

REVIEW

Unlearning as Moving Towards Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements – Singh, Julietta (2018): *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

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Unthinking Mastery examines the routes of knowledge production for their ongoing and sometimes even unconscious reliance on masterful ways of thinking. In assessing discourse from an inevitable 'inside position', Singh's non-masterful attempt follows a strategy of sensibility. As a practice of 'vulnerable readings' of a selected literature this diverts from masterful routines through attentiveness to the emerging slippages in interpretations. This admittance of an ambivalence uncovers how masterful structures of knowing contribute to the obscuring of particular bodies, spaces, and things. Her engagement not only touches on feminist and queer theories but also provides a powerful interconnection between environmental and postcolonial studies.

In her book *Unthinking Mastery* Julietta Singh unfolds mastery as a problematic concept that always entails violence. This becomes obvious especially through her reading of writer Jamaica Kincaid, where mastery is both, 'the driving force of the modern subject and its anticipated ruin' (Singh, 2018: 170). The paradox expressed in this insight guides her decision to avoid defining mastery as this 'would already be a gesture of mastering' (12). While routing her engagement with the politics of decolonisation through deconstructive, feminist, and queer readings (21), Singh recognises a similar ambivalence that informs her understanding of these feminist, ecocritical, and decolonial discourses. Inevitably emerging from within contexts that have been underscored by, and tied to, the foundational problem of mastery, Singh's query first addresses the self-representation of the subject, who is situated ambivalently in relation to Enlightenment thinking and its worldly manifestations (158).

Intrahuman violence and violence against other species, manifested at different levels across the globe, demonstrate that drives toward mastery are causing the major emergency situations of our times. These become apparent 'in the radical disparities in resources and rights between the Global North and Global South, through innumerable forms of human and nonhuman extinction, and escalating threats of ecological disaster' (3). Singh's

insights allow us to detect and follow vital connections between environmental and postcolonial studies (159). While the approach of *Unthinking Mastery* is clearly interdisciplinary, the author turns foremost to the field of comparative literature to unravel forms of systemic dehumanizing violence that become obvious in forms of embodiment and language/narration.

Singh's call for non-masterful ways of reading is based on her understanding of reading – and some forms of writing – as ways of listening that have a greater ethical potential than speaking (139). Following Jack Halberstam (2011) and his interpretation of failure as refusal of mastery, Singh argues against chrononormativity and consequently for queer temporalities. She defines non-masterful strategies as those that are inflected by sensitivity or vulnerability. Examples given are the *vital ambivalences* of Kincaid's garden writing, and the *multidirectional memory* of Michael Rothberg (2009) that both aim to unteach and unlearn common practices (Singh, 2018: 148).

These practices of 'delinking' tackle the limits of dialectical thinking. Following Aimé Césaire's (2001) notion of colonisation as the 'thingification' of colonised people (18), commodifying and objectifying other cultures and peoples, Singh argues that by rendering humans and non-humans as things, these become 'placed into a whole world of other things' (18). This overlay of subject/object (thingification) cannot be accessed through dialectical thinking and marks a core concern in her project to address the problem of mastery. Rather than relying on a dialectical splitting into either/or options, Singh

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demands an anti-masterful approach to reading our own histories, as well as the histories of others. Being open to the messiness and the entanglements of past and current lives points equally to 'the unsolvable riddles that shape us' (97) and towards 'a politics of entanglement from which other world relations can begin to flourish' (120), Singh argues. This includes an understanding of performativity and the imperative to realise that current 'ways of inhabiting structures of knowing' contribute to 'obscure and legitimate the masterful fracturing of particular bodies, spaces, and things' (citing Halberstam, 2011: Singh, 175).

In the first two chapters, Singh's endeavour follows this reasoning by looking at the practices of anti-colonial activists and thinkers. Focusing mainly on the writings and embodied practices of Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon, Singh discovers 'remainders' despite their articulation of resistance. These traits of mastery, as rules of exclusion, found their way into anti-colonial discourse subconsciously, as claims for a universal human subject were not thoroughly relinquished (146). The next three chapters take up examples of postcolonial literary texts – which, despite pointing to the lasting legacies of colonialism – reiterate recognisably masterful forms of relations and practice. Singh's method of vulnerable reading, however, also elucidates incongruences that 'in their messy narrative play' point 'toward mastery's undoing' (3). Singh develops Fanon's expression of 'becoming sensitive' as a means of tying embodied resistance and vulnerable readings together. Such sensitivity marks a quality of the self that is instrumental:

> to becoming porous to texts in ways that might reshape our subjectivities and our political aspirations. Pairing Fanon's sensitivity with Gandhi's always shifting experimental practices in search of truth, we can begin to see the possibility for a dehumanist praxis in which the remainders of anticolonial political thought—women, indigenous peoples, animals, the disabled, and nature writ large—become sites that can cultivate our own sensitivities to those we are currently (and often despite ourselves) producing as remainders to our purportedly inclusive politics. (63)

Dehumanism attempts to read the 'human otherwise' (4) and define 'a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others' (4). As such, dehumanism departs from the masterful foundation that also underlies interdisciplinary discourses of posthumanism and queer inhumanisms. Unfolding her conceptual frame of vulnerable readings, Singh argues in chapter three, entitled 'Posthumanitarian Fictions', that mastery as a delusional enterprise becomes obvious when the figure of the humanitarian realises the complicity of liberal subjectivity with the systemic dehumanizing violence it wishes to ameliorate instancing J.M. Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and Mahasweta Devi's 1979 short story 'Little Ones'.

Naming, Language, Humanimalities

Dehumanism's openness to ambivalence not only articulates the brutalities of dehumanisation but enables anti-masterful possibilities to emerge from dehumanised forms of living in the world (123). Naming, as a violent act of possessing and consumption (12, 160), defines language as a central issue in political discourses of anti-colonialism (82). Aside from (re)naming (166) there is the general problem of owning a language. How accessible is a language and what happens through dispossession? For Singh, dehumanist possibilities emerge, 'through active, unmasterful forms of self-dispossession in acts of transspecies identification and cross-species solidarities' forming queer collectivities (126).

In chapter four, entitled 'Humanimal Dispossessions', Singh depicts, through Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), a 'becoming with' as an entanglement with such *humanimalities*, which simultaneously is addressed as a discomforting embrace of the human's animality. This is followed by a critique of the human's masterful violence against animals in Coetzee (*The Lives of Animals:* 1993). These readings, set against common interpretations, reveal unconscious and often conflicting tendencies in humanist thought (143). In this sense, vulnerable readings allow a slipping through gaps and cracks, and the emergence of interpretations that do not follow a routine of masterful understanding.

Chapter five, 'Cultivating Discomfort', focuses on Jamaica Kincaid's book *My Garden* (1999) and the practice of being uncomfortable in the world (153). Singh follows Kincaid's contextualisation of gardening practices 'within histories of colonisation and their attendant human and botanical transplantations' (149). Registering discomfort in ambivalence reveals agency in the nonhuman, and thus fosters the stepping beyond established norms/categories of nonhuman and human. Singh argues, following Radhakrishnan (2000), that this ambivalence should be politicised and agentially produced to 'refuse modernity's insistence on a unified self' (158). She indicates that being uncomfortable in the world is about missing 'the fit between the body and the object' (citing Ahmed, 2013) (151). Discomfort not only hints at inhabiting norms differently but lets them become questionable. It is the oscillation of slippages between shadows of structural modes of violence, that still bind and yet allow the self, 'to be "plunged" by others (both human and nonhuman) into other orientations' (168) which enable Kincaid to maintain this reflexive distance of discomfort. This vital ambivalence thus brings to the fore an emphasis upon 'the split subject that is at once masterful and oriented toward decolonization' (158). Rather than 'seeking out forms of mastery to correct damages done' Singh argues for politicising this ambivalence to unfold and uproot the activities of mastery in all its aspects (173).

Finally, a short remark on Singh's usage of 'we', which the author sees not as a 'construct that includes only via a process of violent exclusion' (citing Ahmed, 2006: 172) but, congruent with her method of reading through gaps and cracks, also entails 'forms of being we have not yet learned to recognize, to hear, or to feel.' (173). Becoming vulnerable to failures thereby enables participation in emerging non-masterful possibilities of knowing.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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