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Unthinking Mastery

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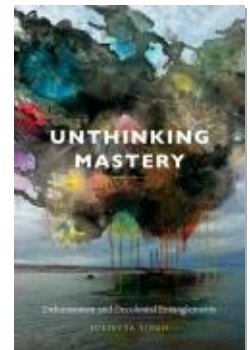
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CHAPTER 2

The Language of Mastery

Mastery of language affords remarkable power.

—FRANTZ FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967)

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.

—NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986)

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.

—MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1975)

Yes, I have only one language, yet it is not mine.

—JACQUES DERRIDA, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (1998)

In the spring of 2015, after weeks of campus protests, a statue of the British colonial magnate Cecil John Rhodes that symbolically lorded over the community was removed from the University of Cape Town's campus. The protests were initiated by an activist who threw human feces on the statue, an act that repudiated the enduring legacies of racism at UCT. The subsequent public debates around the removal of the Rhodes statue brought to public attention the extraordinary racial inequality of UCT's campus environment. Across South Africa and beyond, the removal of the Rhodes statue came to signal the necessity of refusing the legacies of colonization, emphasizing the critical relation between symbolic spaces and material realities. As Rhodes continued to reign symbolically on the campus decades after the formal end of apartheid, it made a certain disturbing sense that UCT should have a scant five South African-born black professors on its faculty.

A few months later, in the fall and winter of 2015, the legacies of colonial mastery on college campuses in the United States likewise came to public consciousness through mainstream media attention. At the University of Missouri, the football team protested the administration's lack of attention to incidents of racism on campus, resulting in the resignation of its president, Timothy Wolfe. At Yale University, the spouse of a "college master" (known elsewhere in the United States as a "resident dean") publicly disparaged a student-led request that the campus community be considerate in choosing their Halloween costumes. The college master, Nicholas Christakis, and his spouse, Erika Christakis, both faculty at Yale, insisted that no one should be allowed to "control the forms of costumes" that students elect to wear, and in so doing advocated for freedom of self-representation—even if that representation may be racist. Around the same time at Princeton University, student protests over Woodrow Wilson's legacy on their campus prompted their own college "masters" to be renamed "heads of college."

Across these various and ongoing instances of student protest, the legacies and language of mastery have been challenged and transformed by mobilizing student bodies. Through these various protests, the haunting questions of race, domination, silencing, and abjection have been brought to the fore of campus politics. At Yale and Princeton, the language of mastery reflects a particular political practice: the "master" is not merely a title but a relation that signals a very specific history of colonization and slavery. This relation has continued to linger and to be confirmed through everyday speech acts across even the most elite college campuses. What the language of mastery does is to enforce legacies of violence, erasure, and dehumanization on which the nation—and indeed our educational institutions—have been erected. The language and practices of mastery that underscore these debates are critically instructive. For so-called racial minority students, mastery names a global political relation on and well beyond the site of the college campus. Indeed, watching the viral videos of black and brown student protesters, it is virtually impossible not to see the palpable traces of slavery and colonialism playing out. By no means am I arguing that students of color in privileged college institutions are *in fact* slaves—but the dynamics of power in which they are enfolded and the legacies (linguistic and material) that they are aiming to confront are *at least* inseparable from the exploitation, torture, and deaths of people who gave rise to the very institutions in which many thrive today.

In U.S. mainstream media, these student organizers have been cast as overly sensitive “cry-bullies” demanding “safe spaces” in place of a real brass tacks education. This radically insufficient notion of education as a practice that holds no room for “sensitivity” is at its root a colonizing gesture that casts education as a practice of *subjecting* others to the exclusive force of a firmly established hierarchy. Both the student protests and their critiques draw attention to the linguistic and symbolic force of colonial mastery that continues to resound in the ostensibly postcolonial present. Like anticolonial discourse, student protests and the media attention that has followed them have underscored mastery—most often implicitly—as an enduring ethico-political problem. In support of student organizers internationally, and against the deeply problematic registers of education in mainstream media, we might think toward a decolonized education that would engage education as praxis, as a process of critical becoming that entails various (and at times totally unanticipatable) forms of care and practices of unlearning that which we already “know.” Education in this sense is a transformative act of becoming profoundly vulnerable to other lives, other life forms, and other “things” that we have not yet accounted for or that appear only marginally related to us. Nathan Snaza calls this a practice of “bewildering education” (2013, 48), one that insists on our vital entanglements with other forms of life and matter. Following Snaza, I would call for a *dehumanist education* through which “subject matter” comes not merely to describe a topic of study but to signal the physical matter that makes study possible. Coming to “know” ourselves through education must also be a radical renarration and reorientation of what it is that we are aspiring to know. A dehumanist higher education would insist that knowledge production itself become unpredictable, unanticipatable, unmasterful. Recalling my discussion of Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter in the preceding chapter, coming to know ourselves in this way will require taking account of “sociogeny,” and engaging new narrative inventions that bring into being alternative modes of subjectivity. As Snaza proposes: “We must learn to think of ourselves as something other than ‘human,’ and we have to imagine and experiment with pedagogies that do not presuppose this ‘human’ as their *telos*” (2013, 50). This education would have to take language seriously, to interrogate how we name and what histories of conquest, erasure, and profit are embedded in the words through which we come to “know”: Education *as* ethics; education as a radically unmasterful act that requires that

our ethical grounds are always aspiring, shifting, experimenting, failing—but striving nevertheless toward more ethical orientations.

Possessing Language

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida writes of his own intimate estrangement with the French language, declaring, “I have only one language, yet it is not mine” (1998, 2). Derrida reminds us, as an Algerian writing in France, of the historical force rooted in the very use of language. To elaborate the fantasmatic notion of language as “possession,” he turns to the colonial politics of language: “Because the master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language . . . because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as ‘his own’” (23). This “always essentially colonial” relation between the master and his language reveals the fraudulency of the master who by *performing* language possession conquers and usurps foreign cultures. Gauri Viswanathan’s account of British language and literature education in India emphasizes this foundational element of colonial “masking” in her argument about how “English literary study had its beginnings as a strategy of containment” (1989, 19). Aiming to “teach” colonial subjects how to mimic British civility, this strategy of containment was, Viswanathan argues, a mask for “the vulnerability of the British, the sense of beleaguerment and dread” felt by British colonial administrators who anticipated an almost certain rebellion by natives against their authority (10). English language and literature education was a “humanistic” method of civilizing natives by teaching them how to approximate their colonial masters. Yet, as Viswanathan elucidates, “the view that a humanistic education holds the same meaning and purpose for both colonizer and colonized quickly crumbles under the weight of even the most casual scrutiny” (7). When we read Viswanathan and Derrida together, colonial language and its masterful framing emerge as a fantastic defense against the vulnerability of the master who fears his own lack, and who responds to that fear through instituting and enforcing his “own” masterful language.

Derrida’s declaration of French as his sole language *and* as that which is not his own is not only a historico-political problem but also an ontological

one in which language both shapes and refuses to become the property of the subject. The language Derrida speaks is neither historically nor ontologically his own; it belongs to another as Other. The intimate political nexus of language, mastery, and colonization always summons the problem of what language *is*. I engage in this chapter evocations of language and mastery across anticolonial and postcolonial discourses, thinking alongside those whose language relation has been overtly caught up in the political and dehumanizing stakes of colonization. I illustrate how mastery surfaces repeatedly in colonial and postcolonial language debates around the force of the colonial language over colonized subjects, the desire to reclaim mastery over native languages in decolonization efforts, and the advocacy of language mastery as the aim of literary studies in the purportedly postcolonial world. Across the complex and widely divergent formulations of decolonization, language and mastery return us to the figures of women, animals, adversaries, and weaponry that were at play in the preceding chapter. Querying the figurative evocations of language in relation to colonial mastery and decolonization, I turn at the end of the chapter to the contemporary discourse of “world” literature in an effort to reconsider the current aims of literary practices. Current discourses that detail the aims of ambitions of literary study, I argue, speak to a much wider tendency in academic thinking and aspiration today. Calling into question intellectual production from the vantage point most intimate to me as a literary scholar, I urge scholars away from intellectual mastery and toward the horizon of a dehumanist education.

Decolonizing Languages: Fanon and Memmi

Across twentieth-century anticolonial discourses, language repeatedly emerged as one of the most vital problems in the production and articulation of decolonized subjectivities. If in Western thought language has been understood as key in the shaping of human subjects, anticolonial thinkers pressured and elaborated the crucial place of language for those dehumanized by political formations of the proper human subject. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Tunisian writer Albert Memmi charted the political function of humanization *and dehumanization* through language use and acquisition. Because these thinkers insisted on thinking the politics of language from the position of those excluded

from the status of the fully imbued human, they were already pointing us toward a dehumanist politics even if they also remained caught up with a masterful thinking of the human.

The gender politics of decolonization and mastery that I charted in chapter 1 echo across debates of colonialism and language, in which a male speaking subject is often cast in relation to a feminized language that he is either in pursuit of or at war against. Rife with metaphors of antagonism, emasculation, and patriarchal force, the predominant discourses of decolonization in the last century characterized language relation through gendered violence. Whether through struggles with colonial language and its enforcement in the colonies, through the colonial subject's torturous embodiments of colonial language, or through the reclamation of "native" languages, gendered force repeats across discussions of language and colonial power. Language and the speaking subject are repeatedly caught up in colonial and anticolonial force exerted (literally and metaphorically) against "other" bodies.

Both Fanon and Memmi dwell on the corporeal force of colonial language for the educated colonized subject. In "The Negro and Language," Fanon writes that "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (1967f, 17–18). *Locution* for Fanon is directly tied to *location*, to the arduous labor of the speaker who endures a civilization's "weight." The act of speaking is locational, "to be in a position" to "grasp" the forms of language, and to carry the historical pressure encompassed by language. The speaker, cast as a capable and laboring subject in a particular time and place, is also locked into a relation of power with language. Within the relay of power between the speaker and the world, Fanon declares that "it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (18). The existential quality of this statement seems to imply an ethical relation to another; yet in the colonial context where language is imposed on the colony, this absolute existence that language entails becomes a confirmation of the mastery at stake in the colonial enterprise. The colonized subject who speaks a language he has inherited by force comes to "exist absolutely" for his master.

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, Fanon was not one to decry mastery outright but rather insisted on the emergent master-status of the masculine, colonial subject. He situates himself as a "master" who has been

“crippled” by the force of the colonial relation (1967c, 140). In so doing, Fanon claims mastery as the proper status of all men, regardless of race. Beyond the exclusions that this masculinist frame of mastery produces, what Fanon does not attend to is how his declaration “I am a master” relies on a relation to language that is fundamentally dependent. Fanon must articulate himself as master through language, revealing a dependency on language that threatens his own self-conception as master. In order to identify himself in the first place, through the written utterance “I am,” Fanon troubles his own master-status by showing mastery as a fantasy. If one needs language to identify oneself as master, one cannot hold “true” mastery over language and the world it signals. Fanon attempts, then, to renounce colonial mastery while recuperating the masterful subject toward a deracinated global politics.

Fanon’s relation to language mastery is as complex as it is at times confounding. He declares that the “mastery of language affords remarkable power” and that the speaking subject who masters a language “possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (1967f, 18). By “mastering” language, the speaker comes not only to “possess” language but also to hold power over the “world” that language signals. Like Heidegger (1995), who frames language as “world forming,” Fanon as psychoanalyst ascribes a fundamental significance to the phenomenon of language in the human’s relation to the world. At the end of *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss turns to Fanon’s own “complete reliance upon translators to converse with his Muslim patients” (1995, 162) to remind us of the intimate bind between politics and language. As both Fuss and Fanon’s biographer Irene Gendzier (1985) note, as a French-speaking analyst treating Arabic- and Kabyle-speaking patients in Algeria, Fanon’s analytic practice hinged on local Algerian hospital staff who translated for him throughout his analytic sessions. These vital intermediary figures—Algerian men working as nurses who were not permitted to become doctors under the colonial administration—appear only incidentally in Fanon’s analytic notes. Fuss dwells on how the use of translators not only reveals Fanon’s own inability to “master” Arabic and Kabyle but how the question of language so crucial to psychoanalytic practice—the word choices and slips—are “lost in translation” through Fanon’s own linguistic lack and his reliance on others to make his analysis possible (1995, 162). What Fanon is interpreting, Fuss argues, is the language of the translator as

opposed to the patient. What I find so fascinating about Fanon's Algerian translators is how they come to illuminate his own complex relation to language mastery. Fanon-as-analyst does not give sustained attention to his fundamental reliance on the language of his Algerian translators as third parties in the room. By not critically engaging with these third parties and *their* language as translators, he produces a theory of the colonial psychopathology through the erasure of these vital "third" linguistic figures. In reading his patients, he is invariably also always reading the translator, whose translations necessarily alter, build on, adjust, and elide the language of the patient. Foreign language in this analytic context necessitates a palimpsestic reading of language as an impossible plurality, as that which is always mediated and dispersed, as always in translation—in other words, as thoroughly unmasterable. His own practice reveals already the impossibility of language mastery, just as the presence of a literal third body in the room signals the always present social body therein, even in the more traditional frame of two—patient and analyst—engaging through a "common" language.

While Fanon props up the idea of language mastery as that which affords remarkable power, in the colonial context he dwells on the impossibility of language mastery for the educated colonial subject. He binds linguistics to racism, emphasizing how the European holds a "fixed concept" of the Negro that irrevocably confirms his inferiority. The result is that the mastery of the French language for the colonized subject is strictly and finally impossible, regardless of the fluency of the colonized speaker. Yet the colonial subject is driven by this impossible pursuit of language mastery, which produces in him "paranoia" and physically deforms his body. For this subject, colonial language is both a mobilizing and subjugating force. On the one hand, "the Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is" (Fanon 1967f, 38). French is the "key that can open doors" historically barred from the colonial subject (38), but it is a power that is contingent and comes at a vital cost. In his characterization of this quest for mastery over the colonizer's tongue, Fanon turns to its absolutely bodily aspects, to how the pursuit of language mastery produces both psychic and physical alterations to the colonized subject: "The Negro arriving in France will react against the *R*-eating man from Martinique. He will become aware of it, and he will really go to war against it. He will practice not only roll-

ing his *R* but embroidering it. Furtively observing the slightest reactions of others, listening to his own speech, suspicious of his own tongue—a wretchedly lazy organ—he will lock himself into his room and read aloud for hours—desperately determined to learn *diction*” (21). Going to “war” against his historico-political location (Martinique) and his racialized body (that “eats” the consonant *R*), this split colonial subject violently cultivates himself as a new man. In Fanon’s “verbal performance” (Pellegrini 1997, 97), speech becomes a site of self-embattlement because the colonial subject must prove his likeness to his colonizer through fluency. Going to war against his “lazy organ,” Fanon ties the tongue to the phallic virility of the colonized black body. While the black man is cast as a hypersexual and dangerous force whose active “organ” is threatening to the colonial regime,¹ here Fanon’s “lazy organ” reveals a bodily paradigm in which the black man cannot train his body into proper civility and is thus symbolically emasculated by its ineptitude. If he is seen as a body that poses a phallic threat to his colonizer, this other lazy organ betrays a cultural impotence because of which he can never come to pass himself off as properly civilized. The colonized subject thus becomes attentive to his speech to the point of paranoia, hyperaware of how his own sounds register to/through his colonial masters. Seeking relentlessly to master French, his education in the colonial language becomes a process of locutionary exile in which his body—through its particular relation to colonial force—becomes impotent, paralyzing, imprisoning.

The speaking subject in Fanon is saddled with the burden of a civilization that language beholds, and in the colonial context this requires taking on the weight of an alien civilization. For the colonized speaker, his power over the colonial language will remain insufficient: he will be perpetually bound as slave to his colonizer’s language. While Fanon provides a fascinating psychoanalytic account of the kinds of psycho-dynamics and what Ann Pellegrini (1997) calls “performance anxieties” produced through the colonial language relation, his argument hinges on an actual potential of language mastery, one that refuses the colonized as a language master. Abiding by Derrida’s (1998) formulation that language is never a human possession, we see a tension arise in Fanon’s thinking: he claims language mastery as factual as opposed to fantasmatic before turning to the colonial context. In framing the problem of language in the colonial context, he upholds the possibility of language mastery beyond the colonial context in

order to emphasize how racism disables certain subjects from becoming themselves (language) masters.

In *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1991), Memmi anticipates Derrida's formulation by insisting that the colonizer must always understand himself as a "complete master" and must in turn enact mastery over others. Responding to his master, the colonial subject's first ambition is "to become equal to that splendid model and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him" (1991, 120). For Memmi as for Fanon, colonization and the acquisition of the colonial language in particular forms and deforms colonial bodies, resulting in the devaluation and "disappearance" of the self. Like Fanon too, Memmi argues that regardless of how well the native speaks the colonizer's language, his linguistic skills are always marked as deficient because of his racial difference. Memmi places critical emphasis on race and education in the deformation of colonial subjectivities; in order to succeed, the educated colonized subject must participate actively in this devaluation by succumbing to the colonizer's tongue: "If he wants to obtain a job, make a place for himself, exist in the community and the world, he must first bow to the language of his masters" (107). By "bowing," he sets out to discard his own "infirm language," concealing his native tongue while he diligently pursues that of the colonizer. Here again, as in the preceding chapter, we find the language of disability in discourses of decolonization, positing in this instance an abject native tongue against a robust colonial language. Rather than being a "polyglot's richness" or a form of coexistence between native and foreign, colonial bilingualism for Memmi is a "linguistic drama" that creates in the colonial subject a "permanent duality" (108). Within the play of this drama, the colonized speaker engages in a "wholesale subjugation" of his native language and erodes its vitality. In essence, his attachment to pursuing the master's tongue leads (perversely) to the complete subjugation of his own.

Memmi argues that language must be the primary site of decolonization, and that native language reclamation and revitalization are key to cultural "self-discovery": "To this self-discovery movement of an entire peoples must be returned the most appropriate tool; that which finds the shortest path to its soul, because it comes directly from it" (1991, 134). Embracing the limited vocabulary and "bastardized syntax" of the native tongue is an act of accepting the linguistic debasement that the bilingual colonial subject has himself helped to produce. While this language cannot yet re-

flect “higher mathematics or philosophy,” it cuts directly to the “souls” of the people, and by articulating those subjectivities it can lead toward other forms of critical discourse. As we shall see imminently, Gandhi shares this conception of a debased language that can be mobilized and revitalized.

Memmi concludes his meditation on the role and necessity of language reclamation by turning to the construction of a “whole and free man” who at last speaks his own revitalized language: “Having reconquered all his dimensions, the former colonized will have become a man like any other. There will be the ups and downs of all men to be sure, but at least he will be a whole and free man” (1991, 153). If native language reclamation is an act that Memmi insists will redirect the colonized subject away from the “permanent duality” created by his bilingualism, he does not pose this act of reclamation outside colonial discourse. Rather than to embrace his lost dimensions and to enable the emergence of other forms of (human) being, the colonial subject must instead “reconquer” them. Here, the language Memmi uses to think about the primordial dimension of language reclamation and revitalization gives way to a colonial mindset in which particular (male) subjects continuously engage in a linguistic practice of conquest. This language reveals the abiding structure of mastery at work in the formal colonial relation and in the act of decolonization. Becoming “a whole and free man” remains in Memmi’s thought bound to conquest, and through acts of self-conquest (as we saw in the previous chapter through my discussion of Gandhi), mastery is reoriented against a colonized subject that has already experienced the force of mastery by another. His fantasy is that conquest—which I have argued necessitates splitting—can lead to wholeness. As such, he imagines that colonial language’s mastery over the colonized subject can give way to another form of conquest in which the colonized man becomes “whole and free” through the masterful reclamation of those “dimensions” taken from him through colonial violence.

Gandhi’s (Inter)National Languages

The urgent need to restore native languages to colonized subjects is likewise prominent in Gandhian thought. While he would insist that the question of language was not as critical as that of truth and nonviolence—in other words, that *swaraj* (self-rule) could be attained even if the English language prevailed (as it has) in India—it is clear that Gandhi could not

think liberation without repeatedly returning to the problems that language posed for Indian independence.² Like Fanon and Memmi, Gandhi attends to language as a crucial aspect of India's decolonization movement. He argued repeatedly that Indians had impoverished their "mother tongues" as a direct result of colonial India's love of the English language (1965, 1997). What was needed in order to achieve an independence worth its name was twofold: the mobilization of a *rashtrabhasha*—a national language of the masses that would unite the Indian nation—and the restoration of mother tongues that had been sacrificed through the colonial encounter. Gandhi would ultimately envision "Hindustani" as India's national language, one that would combine Hindi and Urdu to create a language aimed at uniting the otherwise divided Hindu and Muslim parties by reflecting the linguistic intimacies of both in the quest for national liberation.³ Yet, as Sumathi Ramaswamy reminds us, it was finally Hindi that rose to national prominence and displaced other regional languages: "Hindi, the putative 'official' language of India, is but the tongue of one region masquerading as the language of the nation" (1997, xx). If Hindi finally emerged as India's "official language," it did so through the subjugation of other languages made marginal through its rise to national prominence.

Gandhi wrote often about language, repeatedly issuing the figure of the mother in relation to language politics. His formulations of language as feminine and maternal reflect a broader political discourse characterizing the relation between the speaking subject and language. In her study of Tamil language devotion, Ramaswamy "opens up for critical scrutiny the feminization of languages in modernity, a feminization that has been so naturalized as to have sealed off the 'mother tongue' from history" (1997, 17). Ramaswamy asks us to consider the political implications of a "naturalized" formulation of language-as-female through her attention to Tamil. Teasing out the ways that Tamil devotees evoke the language using "mother's milk," "mother," and "mother tongue" as synonyms (17), she illustrates how language devotion is "multiply manifested, as religious, filial, and erotic, and struggling for prominence and domination" (21). In the case of Tamil, while the language was posed as female, its speaker was invariably a masculine devotional subject. Gandhi participates in this discourse, insisting that "language is like our mother. But we do not have that love for it, as we have for our mother" (1965, 12). Here language as mother is suffering and impoverished under colonial rule because the Indian body politic does

not love her as its subjects love their mothers. To bring language back to health, to resurrect the mother as the nurturing figure she is expected to be, Indians (cast as male children) must love her appropriately.

Following the simile between language and the mother, Gandhi claims the milk one receives from one's native tongue as "pure" in opposition to the watered-down and poisoned milk ingested by Indians who spoke the colonial language. From this historical vantage point, we would do well to take pause at Gandhi's claims of purity, given how often the politics of purity in the South Asian context has continued to lead to the violent control of bodies marked as "impure." But here, rather than to take aim against an "impurity" marked by gender, caste, or sexuality, Gandhi critiques Indian elites for refusing their own "pure" languages. He argues that the educated classes had developed a profound "distaste" for the milk of their mother tongues, spellbound by the insidious lure of the English language. In his refusal of the power of English language over India, Gandhi declares, "This slavery to an alien language has kept our millions deprived of a great deal of necessary knowledge for many long years" (1965, 131). Undoing the mastery that English holds over the colony and liberating its "slaves" therefore requires the restoration of the primary bond between the mother (as language) and the child (as both educated elite and as local native subjects). Such a return to the linguistic bond characterized as properly maternal and wholly nourishing would lead directly to the achievement of swaraj (self-rule) and would give rise to relations not predicated on the politics of domination.⁴

For Gandhi, there was nothing intrinsic about a particular language that made it powerful. If English was a language of power, this was so only because the British had committed completely to their mother tongue: "No language is intrinsically all that the correspondent says. A language becomes what its speakers and writers make it. English had no merit apart from what Englishmen made it. In other words, a language is a human creation and takes the colour of its creators. Every language is capable of infinite expansion" (1965, 64). English had therefore failed as the lingua franca of India because, like French for Memmi, it did not reflect the cultural spirit of the people. What's more, the English spoken in the cities was a "broken English," a substandard version of the language that was incapable of producing a liberated subject (23). In the postcolonial moment, it is precisely these forms of "broken English" that come to be politicized

by writers like Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien (2005), who engages “weird English,” and Ken Saro-Wiwa (1994), who mobilized “rotten English.” But for Gandhi at this historical moment, there was no recuperative potential in speaking “cast-off” forms of the colonial language. The only path to freedom was to give English its proper place, to abandon its use as the language of Indian politics and social engagement, and to turn back toward the local Indian languages as mothers who had been abandoned by their children.

Reflecting on the eager adoption of English by India's colonial elite in their desires to mimic their masters, Gandhi turns to English-language use as a practice of dehumanization: “In slavery, the slave has to ape the manners and ways of the master, e.g., dress, language, etc. Gradually, he develops a liking for it to the exclusion of everything else” (1965, 101). Aspiring to become like the master, the slave works alongside his master in order to dehumanize himself. Not merely does the slave desire to become *like* the master; the slave *apes* his master and in so doing is rendered animal.⁵ Until the educated elite consciously returned to their native languages, freedom was not possible. Since for Gandhi all language is “capable of infinite expansion,” he also insisted that languages—even those that have deteriorated because of the fetishism of the colonial language—could become evocative, powerful systems of expression if only we bound ourselves to them. In this respect, the resurrection of native language is a process both of becoming human, of restoring one's humanity through the refusal to “ape” the master, and of returning to the primary site of the mother-as-language in order to grow toward individual and political freedom.

In Gandhi's thinking on language, the nuanced dynamics of mastery appear in his own relation to language acquisition, in the relation of the Indian masses to language, and in the relation of the language teachers to the new *rashtrabhasha* (national language). As David Lelyveld (2001) has illustrated, Gandhi was not someone for whom languages came easily even though he was well versed in several. A native Gujarati speaker, his broader experience with Indian languages came during his tenure in South Africa, where much of his critical philosophy about the achievement of *swaraj* was likewise developed. There he studied Hindi, Urdu, and some Tamil while in and out of prison for his activism, insisting on the importance of uniting Indians through the medium of language acquisition and developing a *rashtrabhasha* that would mobilize the nation (Lelyveld 2001, 69). What is key is that for Gandhi knowing languages gave one access to others and

opened the possibility of dialogue, but it was not his personal aim to become a language master. While he apologized repeatedly for his flawed spelling and grammar, even in his native Gujarati, he himself did not aim for complete control over language.

Of his own verbal style, Gandhi declared, “My language is aphoristic, it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations” (qtd. in Chatterjee 1986, 85). Asserting the malleability of his language, the importance of being able to make it speak by others within and across multiple contexts, Gandhi’s rendering of his own use of language posits it as fundamentally open-ended. That he aims to speak “openly” suggests his refusal of a master discourse, one that declares the right and the proper and in so doing subjugates other interpretations. Yet for him, language was not merely an open-ended form, and the language one used to articulate one’s thoughts had critical political consequences: “When I find myself able to express my thought with more facility in English than in Gujarati, I tremble” (1965, 2). If for Gandhi English most readily expresses his thoughts, it is a sign that he has internalized his subjection by the colonial master. English in this sense speaks *for* him, rehearsing its mastery over him as it reveals his enslavement. Yet his relation to English is certainly not one of mere animosity: “It is necessary to say that I do not hate the English language. I myself have benefited from many of the precious gems of the great treasury of English literature. We have also to acquire a knowledge of science and such like through the English language. Knowledge of English is, therefore, very necessary for us. But it is one thing to give it its due place, and quite another to make a fetish of it” (16). Here Gandhi reveals that English was a benefit to him, something that contained the “precious gems” of the English literary tradition—or what Matthew Arnold (1993) called its “sweetness and light”—and that therefore enriched him with artistic beauty. English for Gandhi was not merely the language of conquest but also vitally of art and knowledge.

As such, Gandhi refused to “drive out the English language” from his other languages (1965, 130). While at times he admitted his great love of the English language, at others he revealed his intense struggles with it. Of his various languages, English was the most frustrating for him to learn. Gandhi claimed for this reason that it is “a huge waste” to spend years studying English, a notoriously difficult language, when native languages were more easily and swiftly learned. Excising English as a prospective

language of the Indian masses was not therefore merely a political and philosophical position but an entirely practical one toward mobilizing the country: "If we spend only half the effort we do in learning English in the learning of Indian languages, there will be born a new atmosphere in the country and a good measure of progress will be achieved" (1). Gandhi cites his own experience with English, having spent seven years "mastering" English in order to pass the matriculation examination. In his native language, he insists, he could have passed the exam in a year. This, to Gandhi's mind, was a great "misfortune," a squandering of precious time that could have been used toward other ethico-political efforts (94).

Just as English was the language of India's enslavement for Gandhi, it was also because of British imperialism an essential world language, indeed the language of global commerce, and could not merely be discarded. It holds in this respect an ambivalent position in Gandhian thought. Within the pages of *Hind Swaraj* (1997), his manifesto on Indian self-rule, Gandhi advances his most vital declarations about the achievement of Indian independence. What he insists repeatedly therein is that Indians have been complicit in their own subjugation. The key to independence, then, is not to overthrow the colonizer but to change radically the colonized self and its relation to society at large. If, as he declared in an earlier work, "the character of a people is evident in its language" (1965, 2), their use of English at the expense of their native tongues signals their own self-devaluation and reveals how at the most intimate level of thought and speech they have enabled themselves to be subsumed by an outside force. To refuse English as the language of the educated classes and to mobilize the native tongue to speak of politics and liberation were necessary steps toward the psychic transformation of the colony into a liberated nation-state. English held a wealth of information that Indians needed, and scientific and commercial discourses needed to be "translated" or infused into the *rashtrabhāṣā* that did not yet contain it. Like Memmi, Gandhi figured the native language as that which had been debased by colonization yet also needed the colonial language to infuse it with those forms of knowledge it lacked.

For artistic and practical reasons, then, Gandhi desired to preserve his own knowledge of English and encouraged other Indians likewise not to "give up or abandon" their English. While he defended his right to communicate in the colonial language, he also insisted that English must not be allowed "to transgress its rightful place" (1965, 131). English should

never emerge as India's national language nor should it become, as Thomas Babington Macaulay advocated, the language of Indian education.⁶ Macaulay's call to enforce English-language education in the colony aimed famously to produce hybrid subjects—Indian in appearance but English in every other way—whose familiarity with English language and culture would enable them in turn to “enrich” vernacular dialects with Western thought. This new class of Indian subjects would infuse local dialects with Western ideology, rendering them “by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population” (1835, 8). For the native, learning English was the best way toward civilization: “Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth, which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations” (3).

Gandhi explicitly refuted Macaulay's claims about English and argued that Indians had enabled the impoverishment of their own languages and in so doing enslaved themselves (1997, 103). While he agreed with Macaulay's insistence on the central importance of bolstering India with “modern” knowledge, he understood that Macaulay's vision would confirm the subjugation of Indians well beyond the achievement of national independence. Instead, Gandhi advanced and worked toward the idea of an India that employed the new Hindustani to serve intra-Indian political exchange while bolstering native dialects with the language of modernity. Both Hindustani and the native dialects would then shift and advance through proper use and increasing education.

Gandhi became the leader of the Hindustani Prachar Sabha, an organization aimed at mobilizing and spreading Hindustani across the country. In order to accomplish this task, he set out to create a fleet of *rashtrabhasha* workers across the nation whose advanced language training would then enable them to educate the masses in Hindustani. These *rashtrabhasha* workers, Gandhi insisted, should have “perfect mastery over both Hindi and Urdu.” Only once they had mastered these two languages could they hope to be “true *Rashtrabhasha* workers” (1997, 55). Yet for those students who would be taught Hindustani, mastery was not the aim. They simply needed an “All-India heart” or an “All-India will” and Hindustani would come to them, not as a language that they would aim to hold dominion over but as a language that would unite them with others through a mutual and noncoercive devotion to the nation. The teachers of Hindustani would

thus be Hindi and Urdu language masters, but their mastery would serve to establish an abiding unity among Indian communities through the ability to speak a common national language. The mastery practiced by some would lead, then, to the decolonization of others.

Across diverse geopolitical contexts, Fanon, Memmi, and Gandhi share a conception of colonial languages as holding mastery over the colonized. They also each, in very different though intimately connected ways, advance forms of linguistic “countermastery” as gateways to undoing the psychodynamics of colonization. Perhaps the fact that Gandhi, the world’s most renowned practitioner of *self*-mastery, never considered himself a master of languages can serve as a valuable touchstone. Recalling the discussion in chapter 1 of Gandhi’s inability to define the practice of *brahmacharya*, I suggest that here too Gandhi’s practice exceeds his political conceptualizations. Mastery recurs in Gandhi’s writings on language, but his own language practices present an unmasterful approach that might well be more radical than his stated politics.

Language and Literature in the Postcolony

As we have seen so far, language was a central problematic in the political discourses of anticolonialism. It was likewise a contentious debate in colonial and postcolonial literary production where writers theorized the vital work of literature in the realm of decolonization. The Francophone theorist and poet Aimé Césaire (who was, importantly here, Fanon’s teacher) describes his use of French as innovative: “Whether I want to or not, as a poet I express myself in French, and clearly French literature has influenced me. But I want to emphasize very strongly that—while using as a point of departure the elements that French literature gave me—I have always striven to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage. In other words, for me French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression. I wanted to create an Antillean French, a black French that, while still being French, had a black character” (2001, 83). Césaire begins with a sense of removal, a lack of agency—“whether I want to or not”—that is part of the subjectivization of any linguistic subject, and which marks his relationship to French as the language of his poetry. Like French literature, French language is also a “point of departure” for Césaire, who envisions his poetic use of language as a means of

developing new forms of expression through surrealism. The fact that they are rooted in the colonial language reflects the historicity of French colonization in the Antilles, but surrealism works to undo the character of the language in order to shape it anew. Poetry breaks the “stranglehold” that the standard French form held over him, and surrealism offers a mode of summoning unconscious forces within the postcolonial subject and finding within the French language a fundamentally black character (82). Far from holding mastery over him, he envisions this new “black character” of French as a “weapon”—like Gandhi’s practice of *satyagraha* discussed in chapter 1—that can be wielded to express colonial and postcolonial black subjectivities. Here we see the force of language, articulated through the metaphor of weaponry, yielded against itself: the French once used to colonize will now return through the colonized pen with a vengeful, recuperative force aimed toward decolonization.

The Martinican writer and poet Edouard Glissant draws on Césaire to contend that language itself cannot limit human expression even when it is an imposed or inherited tongue. To those who insist that the colonizer’s language cannot reflect the colonial experience, Glissant retorts: “To say that is to dignify a language beyond its due. In our present world, the equivalence between self and language is an aberration that disguises the reality of dominance. Let us challenge the latter with the weapon of self-expression: our relationship with language, or languages, that we use” (1989, 171). What Glissant proposes is that power is more fundamental than both “self” and “language.” These two latter categories “disguise” the reality of dominance that underlies them. The self and language come into existence because of already existing power relations, which following Glissant’s thought means that unmasterful politics will enable the formation of new kinds of selves and new forms of language. I will turn to these new forms of language and subjectivity in the second half of this book, but for now what I want to emphasize is the “equivalence” between the self and language as an equation that for Glissant mischaracterizes the relation between them. Language for him is a “weapon” that can be wielded by the self regardless of the historical stakes that have led to its utterance by the speaking subject. The writer, then, who uses language as a mobilizing force need not be unduly hindered by the historicity of language. Extending Audre Lorde’s (1984) famous assertion that you cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, Glissant suggests that it is not the

tools that pose the problem but the relations that precede and give rise to the tools as such.

In the postcolonial moment, we have witnessed a continuation of colonial language debates in literary production that hinge on metaphors of violence and weaponry. Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, both participants at the 1962 Conference of African writers of English Expression at Makerere University College in Uganda, illustrate the oppositional positions of this debate. In tracing their positions, however, we can see a fascinating affinity across both writers for seeking unmasterful relations to language at the same time as they continuously rely on violent metaphors to seek them out. With the publication of *Things Fall Apart* ([1958] 1994) and its rise to global popularity, Achebe's aim was to speak of "African experience in a world-wide language" (1965, 29). For him, the fact that this worldwide language is English is almost incidental: realizing that a "world language" is critical for cross-cultural exchange, Achebe concedes to English as the language of his literary production even while he acknowledges that there is both "good" and "evil" that accompany this inheritance (28). Speaking of the flourishing body of literature being produced by African writers in the midsixties, Achebe identifies a "new voice" emerging from Africa that articulates a particularly African experience through English prose (29). For him, the English language must accept its "submission to many different kinds of use," and in this sense English offers itself to a practice of antimastery in which new forms of English emerge from within it (29).

For the serious postcolonial writer, argues Achebe, the task is to use English pragmatically. As a world language, writers must carve it in ways that make it speak to their own postcolonial cultural experiences. Here I employ the metaphor of carving intentionally, since Achebe goes on to suggest that "a serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering" (1965, 29). For Achebe, this "animal" is the English language, and a skilled writer can sacrifice it through the manipulation of its grammar, its syntax, and its style and in so doing render the postcolonial literary text as global offering. (I return explicitly to the complex relations between language use and animal sacrifice in chapter 4 through my reading of J. M. Coetzee's lecture-narrative *The Lives of Animals*.) The metaphors of sacrifice and offering here return the violence of the English language back unto itself: If English was first a violent imposition on the colonized

tongue, its sacrifice by the (formerly) colonized writer is redemptive in the Fanonian sense, giving voice through violence to new forms of expression and being. Achebe declares that English is a “world language which history has forced down our throats,” but rather than banishing English he envisions a counterassault on language that will reflect other forms of being (29). On African writing in English, Achebe declares: “My answer to the question, Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use” (29). Using English as a nonnative speaker, then, should not be an act aimed at language mastery. Rather, the use of the colonial language in postcolonial literature should aim to produce new forms of English that reflect the colonial and postcolonial experience and the cultural traditions from which they emerge. What is critical for Achebe is that in creating these new forms of English, in subjecting them to “sacrifice” and “submission,” the writer always maintains the capacity of English as a “medium of international exchange” (29). The sacrifice of the colonizer’s tongue is therefore only ever partial, because it insists on a sustained relation to Standard English that while potentially destabilizing to a global readership remains accessible to them. What emerges through Achebe’s prose is a narrative in which the colonized writer must sacrifice, carve up, and consume the colonial tongue in order to digest it, and in so doing produce (or excrete) a new living language that would nourish a postcolonial body politic.

Implicitly evoking Shakespeare’s wayward “savage” Caliban, Achebe declares of English that “for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it” (1965, 30). Like Caliban, to whom I turn again in the coda, Achebe can decry colonization and its ongoing effects precisely through the language that has been thrust on him. Through language, he can curse his masters. Yet Achebe continues to express his great hope that there will be those who continue to carry on their ethnic traditions by writing in their native tongues, even while he himself reaches toward the global through his use of English prose. These ethnic literary traditions, he hopes, will “flourish” alongside the national ones that are being reflected through the colonizing language.

For the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Achebe’s hope for a thriving ethnic literature appears willfully to forget that the language of the colonizer is inextricable from the colonizer’s ongoing economic and political power. In his chapter “The Language of African Literature,” Ngũgĩ recalls his experience at the Makerere meeting of African writers. There, he recalls, “the only question which preoccupied us was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them ‘prey’ on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore” (1986, 7). Against this ideological tendency in African writing, Ngũgĩ famously abandons his “Afro-English” writing in 1977 in order to write in his native Gikuyu. By this time, of course, Ngũgĩ had established himself as a significant name in postcolonial African writing, and his notoriety as such ensured that his writing would be translated to circulate globally. For Ngũgĩ, writing in one’s native language enriches the language and reflects the experience of one’s own community, one’s own history, by refusing the physical and mental shackles of colonization. Implicating Achebe, he provocatively asks: “What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?” (26). Since the fact of English as a “global language” cannot for Ngũgĩ be extricated from the fact of its colonial mission, he refuses Achebe’s logic of writing in a language that is decipherable by a world audience, since that world is a direct reflection of colonial mastery. Ngũgĩ concludes “The Language of African Literature,” however, with this declaration: “We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavors” (1986, 29). While Ngũgĩ rehearses colonial discussions about language recuperation and revitalization, he does so in an interesting twist that situates European literary “masters” as models for what African writers are “bound” to replicate. If the European literary giants of the last centuries are models for African writers through what they have done for English and Russian languages, Ngũgĩ runs the risk of remaining bound to a logic of literary mastery that may well efface some of the critically unmasterful potentialities of African languages, literature,

and imaginative capacities. What would it mean to turn away from European writers designated as “literary masters” toward African artists and storytellers whose own worldviews and cultural deployments could alternately become antimasterful models of imbuing native languages with new potentialities?

If brute European force confirmed the physical subjugation of the colony, language for Ngũgĩ marked its “spiritual subjugation” (1986, 9). To redress this subjugation, to reclaim African identity and to refuse the subsuming nature of colonial languages, in 1968 Ngũgĩ famously called for the abolition of the English department at his then home institution at the University of Nairobi. Responding to proposed developments of the English department and its ties to other departments, the justification for the necessity of English is articulated by way of a need to study “the historic continuity of a single culture” (1973, 145). If this is so, Ngũgĩ asks, “Why can’t African literature be at the center so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?” (146). To answer this question we must recall Macaulay’s stance on Sanskrit literature and the vernacular languages of India: they are simply too unrefined, too void of elegance and too inept at expressing the more profound and philosophical subtleties of human existence. Ngũgĩ insists that the continued centrality of English language and culture in Africa is neocolonial, a pedagogical device to ensure the ongoing supremacy of the Western world and its traditions. Instead, he summons a course of literary study that would move from the local toward the global regardless of whether the local includes works that have been subjectively bestowed with titles of literary excellence. For him, it is urgent to study oneself from the point of view of one’s culture first and to expand from this point toward other linguistic and literary traditions.

While Achebe and Ngũgĩ appear as opposing figures in the postcolonial language debates, their own uses of language similarly rehearse the violence at stake in claiming or recrafting language in the postcolony. Employing animal metaphors of “sacrifice” and “prey” to think the relation between humans and their languages, both writers take for granted human mastery over the nonhuman world. Language is repeatedly figured as something to hunt, to kill, to subject. Yet this metaphorical attachment to human practices of mastery is also challenged through their mutual insistence on thinking postcolonial language *beyond* mastery, as a relation of human reconfiguration and entanglement that does not necessitate mastery. Achebe

does not long for African writers to master the languages of his colonizers; he envisions instead an African literary landscape that implicitly engages newfangled forms of the colonial language that redraft rather than master the colonial linguistic tradition. Even while he wants English to “submit” itself to various uses, this submission does not for him entail wholesale domination. In turn, Ngũgĩ articulates a desire for writing in African languages that reflects specific historical, cultural, and spiritual realities, even while he looks back to European literary masters as inspiration for African language revival and literary production. Postcolonial literary debates are, like the discourses of decolonization, fundamentally concerned with language politics. Yet quite unlike the colonial-era debates that continuously returned in more and less explicit ways to the need for language mastery, these writers take up a relation to language that is ambivalently situated between masterful and unmasterful forms. While there is much disagreement in these debates, the will toward language mastery begins to dissipate and is replaced by the possibilities that languages embody—or can be crafted to embody—through the pens of colonized writers. Anticolonial thinkers tended to insist (even sometimes despite themselves) on language mastery as a crucial practice aimed at undoing the force of colonial rule in the colonies without theorizing the inextricable relations among forms of mastery. Postcolonial writers like Achebe and Ngũgĩ, while positioning themselves in opposition to each other, share a desire for unmasterful ways of formulating the relation between language and the postcolonial imagination.

World (Literature) Mastery

In *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language* (2008), the Moroccan writer Abdel-fattah Kilito asks: “Can one possess two languages? Can one master them equally?” Although Kilito’s central concerns are with translation and with the problems that mastering multiple languages poses for translation, he steps back to ask:

Can one possess any language? I remember hearing something, the source of which I have not yet been able to find, about one of the ancients who described his relationship to language in this way: “I defeated her then she defeated me, then I defeated her and she defeated

me again.” His relationship with language is tense, and the war between them has its ups and downs, but language, this ferocious creature that refuses to be tamed, always has the last word. The battle always ends with her victory, leaving one no choice but to make truce and to surrender, however reluctantly. (21)

If today the discourses of world literature remain preoccupied with the problems and politics of translation—as Emily Apter (2005) signals by beginning her “manifesto” with the declaration that “everything is translatable” and ending with the assertion that “nothing is translatable”—Kilito reminds us that an engagement with translation must first and foremost attend to the power relations between the speaker and language itself. Here the unidentified “ancient” characterizes his relation to a notably feminine language as an unending battle with a “ferocious creature” who continues to win. Although Kilito does not answer his own query, he foregrounds that language has a long history of being framed as the enemy. Indeed, the problem of translation often misses a step that inhibits the inquiry. The ancient’s formulation of language rhymes with Heidegger’s assertion that “man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man” (1975, 146). Despite this, contemporary language discourses continue to think language as that which must be mastered or subjugated, as something that we chase after in order to conquer, to own, to use at our own wills.

To be in a position to study language, as Edward Said (1994) insisted, means to be in a position in which one must contend with the power of the act and its relations to the nonlinguistic power relations that the pursuit entails. To vie for mastery is to ignore these relations and to isolate oneself in the “ivory tower” without recourse to the real world effects that intellectual engagement produces. To believe that mastery (of texts or of languages) is possible, and to desire such mastery, solidifies our complicity with the very sources of imperialism that so many intellectuals and activists are wont to resist. For serious students of language, for those who continue to struggle toward a nuanced understanding of multiple languages, or even one’s own native tongue, and who believe that language learning is always inevitably a lifelong pursuit, the concept of linguistic mastery should seem perverse. When you study language, any language, you learn quickly that you do not possess it. To the contrary, the study of language and literature is precisely

the study of how language escapes, evades, and crystallizes differently at different times and through different speakers.

In the history of my own language learning, Hindi is one at which I have remained woefully (even shamefully) novice. After years of graduate school struggle to possess it, like Kilito, I found myself defeated. Almost as if in reverse of Gandhi—who as we have seen claimed to have failed to master his colonial tongue—I was a child of the Indian diaspora raised and educated as a speaker of colonial languages (English and French). As an emergent postcolonialist—and a comparative literature student no less—I found myself vying to become “fluent” in a language that symbolized (albeit perversely) my heritage. Hindi was so heavily loaded with historical significance and a personal desire to become “properly” Indian (identity politics haunts even those of us who eschew it) that I could not in any sense relax in relation to its learning. It pained me deeply that the white peers with whom I studied soared so quickly and so far beyond me in their language skill, while I punished myself unrelentingly for not having *already known* what felt to be “rightfully” mine.

In Hindi, one commonly expresses one’s ability to speak the language as follows: *Hindi mujhe aati hain*, or “Hindi comes to me.” I do not possess the language. Rather, the language brings itself to me. Somewhere between my summoning, my calling it forth, and its own mobility and malleability, it arrives—almost agentially—and I speak it. It is as though when we speak to another *through* language, we are always also in conversation *with* language itself. What I could not concede during those years of torturous language training was that language moves the speaking subject; it is not the speaker who controls it. I could not let language come to me precisely because I was too busy trying to claim Hindi as my own, which was also an act of covering up my historical losses and my inadequacies as a hybrid subject. Mastery here turns out to be a fantasy, and its rhetoric is used to justify ever more mastery—of language itself, but also of my own body (like Fanon’s tongue), of perceived enemies, of whole and diverse collectives. What would it mean to refuse the rhetoric and pursuit of mastery? Could such a gesture dramatically alter the ways that we conceive of ourselves as scholars? I am suggesting that it is false to imagine ourselves as masters of languages, authors, bodies of texts, areas. We must abandon mastery in order to give ourselves up to wider and less hostile horizons. It should be clear that I am not insisting that we all avoid a skilled relation-

ship to our intellectual fields. Rather, I am advancing a practice of vulnerable engagement, a practice of opening ourselves up to our dependence on other discourses, peoples, beings, languages (that we know and do not yet know), and things that give rise to the ways that we think and the claims that we make.

The current popularity of world literature sweeping literary studies has often abandoned the more vulnerable approaches to language and literature that began to emerge through the postcolonial language debates. *Weltliteratur*, a resurrection of an old concept with newly defined aims, emerged initially in the early nineteenth century in the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1973) to describe a universal conception of literatures around the world that together form a whole. Later, Marx and Engels (2002) recycled the term to describe the global circulation of literatures as part of a capitalist network. These early evocations of world literature characterize the “universal” in a thoroughly Eurocentric sense, understanding Western Europe—with perhaps a smattering of Asian languages and literatures—as the true heart and value of literary studies. After the decolonization struggles of the mid-twentieth century and the upsurge of multiculturalism in the later part of the century, world literature has resurfaced with an aim toward a self-consciously non-Eurocentric focus. Today, studying Kikuyu should be no less relevant than studying French, and rather than to approach literary studies through a politics of linguistic supremacy, many scholars aim to redress the damages done by linguistic dominion and to read the intricacies of all linguistic and literary traditions as uniquely valuable and contributing to a global literary landscape.

The central problem facing world literature is therefore how to conceive of world literature scholars, since they cannot possibly attain linguistic fluency in every world language. David Damrosch correctly refuses a construction of the world literary scholar as one who strives in vain to master the whole breadth of world literary traditions. In *What Is World Literature?*, Damrosch urges us away from “a possessive mastery of the world’s cultural productions” (2003, 303). Instead, he envisions “collaborative work” among “broad-minded specialists” that will lead us toward a more fully global practice of literary study (286). This vision of collectivity attempts to turn a prospective disciplinary crisis—the impossibility of truly being a scholar of all world literatures—into a communal intellectual enterprise. Across keynote addresses in the last decade, however, Damrosch has at times ar-

ticated this as a collectivity among specialized “language masters.” This irresistible return to mastery from one of its outspoken opponents signals the pervasive logic of mastery that underscores the fields of world and comparative literature.⁷

Of course, comparatists such as Damrosch employ the term “mastery” to signal not straightforward domination but rather great skill. Yet, as I argued in my introduction to this book, such skill can never be detached from the relations of power that make it possible. Skill and power are both rhetorically and economically linked to the mastery of other peoples and places, and to forget this fact is to abandon the foundations of the practice of world literature itself as a movement to bring all languages and literary traditions together in a dialogue that is not contingent on domination and subjugation. The demonstration of our skill and power, our “mastery” of texts and languages, should not be thought outside its referential connection to the “dominion,” “superiority,” and “control” that both the term and the practice also entail. A renaming of our pursuits as literary scholars would miss the point altogether: This is not a problem of semantics, of substituting one noun for another. What we must critically consider is our own discourse as language scholars in order to examine the contradictions and slippages that define our work. (This would be true of all scholarship, which relies in every way on language.) The radical gesture of giving up mastery is imperative because, whether implicitly or explicitly, our work bears on a world of power relations that exceeds our attention to language. The postcolonial language debates encapsulated by Achebe and Ngũgĩ took the question of language in the postcolony seriously by attempting to engage language in unmasterful ways. This movement toward the unmasterful approach to literature is what is lost in the discourse of world literature today.

Damrosch’s notion of collective intellectual engagement is certainly compelling—even necessary—at a moment in which every aspect of intimate and intellectual life is being increasingly privatized and corporatized. Yet his vision of a scholarly commune of masters forgets the complexity of language and literature as entities that, as poststructuralist and postcolonial discourses have encouraged us to recognize, themselves refuse mastery. The study of world literature in this sense signals the problem of mastery that is at stake in literary studies and, critically, for intellectual thought more broadly. As I will illustrate in chapter 4, literary studies is governed by its will toward mastery and despite itself continuously returns to this aim.

If what distinguishes world literature today from its early iterations is its particular drive to undo the ideological supremacy of a Western European literary tradition—what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007) refers to as the gesture of “provincializing Europe”—the rhetoric of mastery that grounds the field reveals its own misleading aims. The notion of mastery therefore needs urgently to be reconsidered as the driving force and the aim of the field. At a moment in which the language of mastery sounds so harmoniously with the discourse of U.S. imperialism and the global reach of neocolonialism, it is essential that we redress the aim of literary and linguistic mastery even of the smallest bodies of authors or texts.

Edward Said echoes the necessity of this gesture by summoning Friedrich Nietzsche’s formulation of the truth of history as “a mobile army of metaphors and metonyms” whose meaning is to be ceaselessly interpreted without the drive to solve the riddles of the past (2004, 58). Indeed, Said gives rise to a postcolonial thinking that is driven by the intersections between language and colonization, and that is concerned with how the hybridization of languages speaks to or against neocolonial forms of domination. Aligned with the anticolonial thinkers who came before him, Said makes frequent claims about intellectual mastery without giving pause. He famously argued in *Orientalism* that the “unremitting ambition [of Orientalism] was to master *all* of a world, not some easily delimited part of it such as an author or a collection of texts” (1979, 109). Here he points to the *limitless* scope of Orientalism, the absurdity of imagining that the Orient could be mastered as such. Yet to Said’s mind, the absurdity of this ambition was less in the drive toward mastery itself than in the notion that knowledge of some far-flung and nebulous place called “the Orient” *could* be mastered. The central problem of Orientalism as both intellectual practice and ideology is that in order to gain so-called mastery over the orient, it had to conflate and regurgitate common narratives about vastly different cultures and histories. If Said proved this body of knowledge to be both racist and absurd, we must in turn consider the role that mastery itself plays in this intellectual practice. As scholars, what we learn from Orientalism (the text and the scholarly practice) should not be that we must limit our reach as masters over our fields. Selecting “easily delimited parts” for mastery, or knowing how to “limit or to enlarge realistically the scope of [our] discipline’s claims,” binds us to more limited, precise forms of mastery. Rethinking what we do as something other than mastery—whether

over vast or miniscule, human or inhuman terrains—pushes us toward different forms of scholarship and different relations to our practices—indeed, toward different relations to the worlds we engage.

The writings of activists, political theorists, and literary scholars that I have engaged in the first half of this book form an archive of resistance to and engagements with mastery in anticolonial contexts. These thinkers passionately sought to resist colonial mastery while remaining entangled with other iterations of masterful practice and thought. While a majority of my attention has been centered on the ways in which “alternate” forms of mastery are unthinkingly reproduced in efforts to disengage colonial mastery, I have also gleaned from their writings the crucial seeds of a dehumanist practice. For the remainder of this book, I am going to be illustrating how postcolonial literature opens us toward dehumanist subjectivities, practices, and politics. My aim will be to approach literature with an unmasterful method of engagement, reading vulnerably the ensnarements of mastery in figures who, like me, desire and fail to resist it. My abiding interest in the postcolonial literary archive rhymes with Wynter’s assertion that we, as humans, are products of narrative (1984, 50). For Wynter, literature produces the humans we understand and feel ourselves to be, and it may well be that through literature, through the narratives it casts and questions, we can begin to produce ourselves otherwise. What kinds of subjects—and what kinds of objects—can we be for ourselves and for others if we loosen the hold of mastery?