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Unthinking Mastery

Singh, Juliette

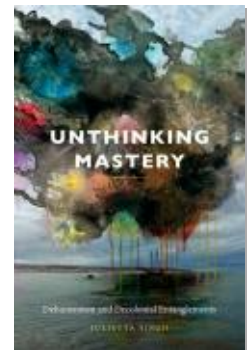
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Coda

Surviving Mastery

Toward the end of Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (*Une Tempête*, 1969), an anti-colonial play that rewrites and restages Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the slave-master Prospero articulates himself as a "prophetic scientist": "I am not in any ordinary sense a master, as this savage thinks, but rather the conductor of a boundless score: this isle, summoning voices, I alone, and mingling them at my pleasure, arranging out of confusion, one intelligible line. Without me, who would be able to draw music from all that? This isle is mute without me. My duty, thus, is here, and here I shall stay" (2002, 46). Against the experience of his "savage" slave Caliban, who characterizes him as a despotic colonial ruler, Prospero envisions himself to be engaged in extraordinary acts of magical mastery. He distinguishes his own practices from other "ordinary" forms of colonial mastery, casting his unusual masterful practices as works of art crafted from silence and chaos. Yet this exceptional mastery resounds with the more mainstream discourses of colonialism that likewise seek to replace "chaos" with something approaching (but always falling short of) civility. The violent occupation of the island and the enforcement of slavery become not merely the white man's burden but also an *artistic* act—a production of "one intelligible line" of music from voices that to him are otherwise "mute." To colonize for Prospero is to "mingle" for his own pleasure the forms of life that inhabit the island. His creative, magical mastery is for him not merely an act of domination but an act of *making sound* in ways that are pleasurable to and for him. Prospero is a self-designated artist whose artistic mode is enslavement, and what he needs is for his slave to understand—and to appreciate—his exceptional force.

In the final scene of *A Tempest*, after the other actors have departed,

Caliban and Prospero remain together on the now ostensibly “postcolonial” island. While no longer structurally master and slave, they remain firmly locked in the dynamics of mastery. Unrelentingly at odds and incapable of being together without coercion, their actions and sounds become mixed with the rest of the “natural” world that fully inhabits—physically and sonically—the island. If nature has always been living and sounding on the island, it is only now that we come to hear it as its own character, its own unfolding drama. A decaying Prospero, left only with the “magic” of his firearms, shoots arbitrarily into space as he impotently fights against the “unclean nature” that surrounds him, calling for Caliban to assist him (Césaire 2002, 65). Off set, the audience hears “snatches” of Caliban’s ongoing freedom song, gleaned only “in the distance, above the sound of the surf and the chirping of birds” (66). Will the need for this song ever cease? In this anticolonial restaging, Prospero has failed both to be master across the play and to relinquish his mastery at its end. So too has Caliban failed, having fought for a freedom that he still cannot feel or make Prospero recognize. Somewhere amid this decolonizing spectrum in which former masters and slaves remain locked in a struggle for recognition and power, we can envision the desiring liberal subjects of Mahasweta Devi and J. M. Coetzee, or the ambivalent autobiographical Jamaica Kincaid slipping between botanical awe and possessive desire. Somewhere therein we might also become able to position our own desires and pursuits, which often and despite ourselves remain deeply entrenched in a logic of domination we have yet to understand how to relinquish.

I am not uncritical of my recurring use of the term “we” across these pages, but it is one I cannot do without. At the start of *Unthinking Mastery*, Hélène Cixous’s desire for unmasterful forms of being became entangled with my own, and these allied desires shaped a “we” that hoped toward anti-masterful collectives. But “we” is not in any sense a given, nor is it exempt from its own masterful snares. Sara Ahmed, for example, sounds a cautionary note about the pronoun “we,” which she persuasively argues remains bound to a Eurocentric collective construct that includes only via a process of violent exclusion (2006, 17). The Bush administration’s rhetoric of “us” versus “them” in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, for instance, illustrates how dangerous such conceptualizations become when they materialize against thousands of civilians whose maiming and deaths are the necessary by-products of this form of political inclusion. This “we”

guards itself through particular dialectical political practices, ones that rely increasingly on mythical constructions of those-who-are-not-us, shaping whole worlds beyond us as dangerous and in need of submission.

But “we” is also necessary to collectivity, to imaginary and imagined futures in which “we” comes to include forms of being we have not yet learned to recognize, to hear, or to feel. Jeanne Vaccaro writes, “‘We’ is an idea and a problem, a shape to ask after” (2015, 273). “We” is indeed a problem, one often marked by specific forms of human being and human inclusion. But it is, Vaccaro suggests, also a “shape” that we continue to question, to envision, to amend. In his framing of utopia, José Esteban Muñoz argues that “concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential” (2009, 3). While these utopias can be “daydream-like” and exist in the “realm of educated hope,” they are guided by “the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many” (3). Here we can see in Muñoz’s formulation so many ways in which “we” moves between collectives and singularities, in which “we” is emerging and contingent rather than concrete and impenetrable. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us in fact that the question “who are we” is part of the pedagogical exercise, one that cannot be answered in advance of its asking (2003, 25). My own “we” across *Unthinking Mastery* is a question as much as it is a hopeful summons to the (always imagined) future readers of this text who might be or might become invested in collective reorientations in the world. It is also fundamentally a dehumanist “we,” one that arises not on the grounds of Western scientific discourse and humanist politics but from the promises of those subjugated and emergent worldviews that recognize life, feel energy, and hear rhythms where now there appear to be none.

This always inquisitive, always revising, always expansive “we” is as hopeful as it is necessary for survival. In the midst of global climate change, of vanishing rain forests and melting polar ice caps, of “natural” disasters across the globe, our masterful practices are perversely plowing the soils of our extinction. Mastery in this sense is a diagnosis of a certain form of human living that is—as *Unthinking Mastery* has sought to pressure—woven tightly into the fabric of our worldviews. Rather than to live by seeking out forms of mastery to correct damages done, or as though we have reached a palliative stage as a species, I am driven by a utopian hopefulness in the activities of unfolding mastery in all its aspects. To survive mastery,

we must begin to deconstruct our own movements (intellectual, activist, corporeal) that remain entangled with the violent erasures of other lives, and of things we declare insensate. Survival depends on new forms of living together, gathered in collectives that promise to astonish us.

Unthinking Mastery has pointed toward twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses that have aimed explicitly to disavow mastery and has illustrated how these discourses have often failed to theorize the absolutely vital links among these “historical” forms of mastery and those that continue to shape human subjectivities today. My aim has been to provoke a more detailed and sustained examination of mastery precisely in order to begin to understand the ways that, like Prospero, we engage unthinkingly in masterful acts that we firmly believe to be harmless, benevolent, or even works of art. Nonetheless, art can also open us toward forms of cohabitation and being with others that have been lost, suppressed, or have yet to be performed. The readings of postcolonial literary texts that I have offered across the book focus on a host of seemingly benevolent figures: the fictional writer’s more-than-human ethics, the humanitarian aid worker, and the impassioned gardener and ecotourist. These are subjects that are invested in a politics of “the good” but have remained locked within their own impulses toward and pursuits of mastery.

Like those anticolonial thinkers in the first half of this book who took seriously mastery but continued to issue its force, and like the various fictional (and semifictional) characters that surfaced across the second half of this book, we are failures. We are failures both in our masterful pursuits (“nature” keeps having the last word) and, perhaps most urgently, in our current capacities to recognize our abiding desires for mastery even as we might renounce mastery politically. Kincaid’s refrain from the previous chapter—“what to do?”—reminds us that we cannot rely on masterful prescriptions about ethics and politics, nor can we abdicate our responsibility to act even when we fear complicity and risk failure. In making the claim that we are failing in our “alternative” movements toward increasingly utopian worlds, I by no means wish to extinguish hope. On the contrary, I remain profoundly invested in envisioning and enacting utopias, through intimate and active imaginaries, in the work and wonder of even the most mundane and seemingly apolitical activities. I mean to suggest that in failure—and critically, in recognizing, reading, and becoming vulnerable to failure—we participate in new emergences, new possibilities for nonmas-

terful relations. Alongside Jack Halberstam, we might say that the undoing of masterful subjectivities can be located precisely in mastery's disappointments, in understanding failure as "a refusal of mastery" (2011, 11). The decolonial texts analyzed across *Unthinking Mastery* teach us that our "ways of inhabiting structures of knowing" are ways that obscure and legitimate the masterful fracturing of particular bodies, spaces, and things (12).

When we open ourselves to the ways that texts can teach us, what we begin to learn is our own undoing. If it is no longer au courant to claim as intellectuals our "mastery" over our disciplines (and I'm not sure that it is not), this change of language does not undo the drive to think of ourselves as the active subjects of reading and the texts we read as the inanimate objects that confirm our declarative knowledge. To distance ourselves from mastery is, first, an act of reframing our relations to *all* things, regardless of whether in the moment we bestow them with something currently called "life." From this point of departure, directionality becomes infinite and failure a process we might begin to meet with pedagogical delight.

Because our tendency has been to map history and time as and for the human (the histories of certain lives, certain collectivities, a certain "species"), we register only a shallow sense of embodiment and time. Edward Said (1979) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) mutually insist that we compile inventories of the infinite traces that history has left in us as subjects. Expanding Gramsci and Said, we must begin to understand that such "traces" far exceed human histories and the human subjectivities that history produces. While Fredric Jameson has famously urged us to "always historicize" (1981, 9), Christopher Breu compels us to look to histories far longer and more inclusively than we have done to date (2014, 28). The surface and deep traces that comprise us as beings are traces that entail not only other human lives that have touched ours but also and vitally the infinite forms of being that far predate and give rise to us as particularly formed subjects. At different moments across *Unthinking Mastery*, I have turned back to myself, sifting through some of those traces that comprise me. Those trees I have planted in clear-cut forests are still growing, amid words, affects, and footprints also left behind. I have also deposited traces in places I have never been, such as in the Arctic where polar ice caps are receding and through absence leaving behind their own devastated traces. Those traces left in me and those I leave behind constitute me as a subject. We live because we have deposited energy and matter into the world and because forces well beyond

what we can see or hear or touch have embedded themselves in us and have enabled and sustained our existences. The impossible historical inventory to which we might aspire includes those ecological and material entities that underlie our individual and collective forms of being.

If the failures at the end of Césaire's play resound in Prospero's collapsing but relentless worldview, and in Caliban's as yet unachieved freedom, there is also extraordinary promise in engaging with and beyond this human deadlock. To be sure, the play's end signals the ongoing fight for decolonization, a battle that has become increasingly muted by the more insidious processes of globalization. If colonization is masterfully coextensive with liberal globalized life today, our task is to take stock of their abiding connections and to begin to untether them. The end of Césaire's play draws us through sound explicitly toward *other* voices—voices that have always been there but that (as readers, audiences, modern subjects) we have been untrained to hear. The background noise of the “natural” world becomes foreground, and the sounds of humans become sounds that comingle with other increasingly more dominant sounds. The sounds of nature at the play's end are always already with and among us. Listening to these voices, we might begin to hear other songs of survival, and to sound differently among them.