



PROJECT MUSE®

Unthinking Mastery

Singh, Juliette

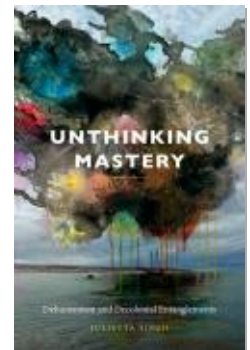
Published by Duke University Press

Singh, Juliette.

Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements .

Duke University Press, 2017.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/64085.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64085>

Access provided at 28 Jan 2020 05:01 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

NOTES

Introduction

- 1 I capitalize “Man” in keeping with Sylvia Wynter’s differentiation between Man and the human. For Wynter, Man designates the particularly Western, secular, imperial version of the human.
- 2 Some of the major thinkers within this stream of posthumanism insist that taking the human’s animality seriously not only calls into question humanist traditions but also allows us to imagine alternative forms of political being. Jacques Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), for instance, which was originally a series of lectures in 1997, traces how a wide variety of philosophers, including Aristotle, René Descartes, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, and Emmanuel Levinas, all insist on the human difference from other animals (Derrida calls them *animots*, partly to call attention to the absurd flattening of difference enacted by the word “animals”) by rehearsing some version of a distinction between reaction (which all animals can do) and response (which is supposedly reserved for humans). Although Derrida does pressure how humans, based on this dogmatic division, conceptualize animals, he is also interested in how this division has caused the human to misunderstand itself (downplaying, for example, how it also reacts more often than not). Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2008) picks up on Mary Louise Pratt’s (1992) concept of the “contact zone” to think about spaces (the scientific laboratory, the home where multiple species make mess mates, the dog show) where different species of animals come into contact, and about the politics and ethics that inhere in those contacts. Haraway insists that “people can stop looking for some single defining difference between them and everybody else and understand that they are in rich and largely uncharted, material-semiotic, flesh-to-flesh, and face-to-face connection with a host of significant others” (2008, 235). Brian Massumi’s *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (2014) turns to the animality of the human that is operative in play, drawing on the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze to see play—which is found among many animals—as the condition of possibility for language, art, and creative forms of political relation.
- 3 New materialisms tend to assert that matter is neither inert nor passive but rather active, agential, and, to use Jane Bennett’s (2010) term, “vibrant.” Mel Y. Chen builds on Bennett’s general conception of vibrant matter in *Animacies*:

Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (2012), exploring how nonhuman agencies (of animals, rocks, and words) are deeply implicated in the human politics of race, gender, ability, and sexuality. William Connolly (2013) puts new materialist ontology to work in thinking about ecological politics within neo-liberal capitalism.

- 4 The term “queer inhumanisms” is the title of a 2015 special issue of *GLQ* edited by Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen in which Nyong’o’s article appears.
- 5 See, for example, Timothy Brennan’s *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (2007), Neil Lazarus’s *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), and, most recently, Vivek Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013).
- 6 In his review of Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Terry Eagleton suggests that “post-colonial theorists are often to be found agonising about the gap between their own intellectual discourse and the natives of whom they speak; but the gap might look rather less awesome if they did not speak a discourse which most intellectuals, too, find unintelligible” (1999, 3).
- 7 Giorgio Agamben’s political philosophy is articulated around the concept of the “state of exception,” which he elaborates from Schmitt’s theories. For a sense of how far-reaching and influential Agamben’s reworking of Schmitt has been, see *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s “Homo Sacer”* (2005), edited by Andrew Norris.
- 8 For a more detailed account of the temporality of the master/slave dialectic, see Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* (1978).
- 9 The asymmetry in recognition is the starting point for Glen Sean Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014). There, Coulthard refuses recognition’s snare, arguing that “instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of *reciprocity* or *mutual* recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (3).
- 10 A postcolonial reading of Hegel will insist on a tension within this dialectical play, wherein the slave has always already been imagining a future in which he will become free.
- 11 Bernasconi writes: “Hegel was certainly justified in criticizing the travel literature of his day for tantalizing readers by appearing ‘incredible’ and lacking ‘a determinate image or principle’ . . . but the manner in which he himself used that literature opens him to the charge of sensationalism as well. The accusation is sustained by the evidence of major and widespread distortion in his use of his sources” (1998, 45).
- 12 According to Hegel, Africans had a “sensuousness” developed through their geographic location that disabled them from a “fully developed mastery of reality,” and they were thus excluded from the drama of world history (Berna-

sconi 1998, 52). It was Hegel's attempt, in fact, to prove that Africans had not yet reached a capacity for fixed objectivity.

Bernasconi explains, "Hegel's claim was not just that Africans lacked what 'we' call religion and the state, but also that one could not find among them a conception of God, the eternal, right, nature, or even of natural things. In consequence, Africans could be said to be in the condition of immediacy or unconsciousness. This is the basis on which Hegel characterized them as dominated by passion, savage, barbaric, and hence, most importantly for his discussion of history, at the first level" (52–53).

Such radically slanted declarations about "Africa," employed by Hegel in his choices to dramatize, selectively cite, and elide the cultural practices of Africans themselves, are what enable Bernasconi to declare that while Hegel may not have directly developed colonial practices, "he certainly contributed to the climate in which there was relatively little scrutiny of the conduct of Europeans in Africa" (62). Indeed, Bernasconi argues, Hegel's endorsement of African slavery did not hinge on an argument of their natural inferiority but rather on the fact that being subjected to slavery by European colonial powers would benefit Africans by bringing them into the fold of world history.

- 13 Between the fall of 1804 and the end of 1805, the journal *Minerva*, founded by the German publicist Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz, published a continuing series about the Haitian revolution "totaling more than a hundred pages, including source documents, news summaries, and eyewitness accounts, that informed its readers not only of the final struggle for independence of this French colony—under the banner Liberty or Death!—but of events over the past ten years as well" (Buck-Morss 2000, 838). While Archenholz was critical of the violence of the revolution, Buck-Morss argues that he came to appreciate the leadership and vision of Toussaint Louverture, and that there is evidence that Hegel was following this series. It is odd then that in Hegel scholarship "no one has dared to suggest that the idea for the dialectic of lordship and bondage came to Hegel in Jena in the years 1803–5 from reading the press—journals and newspapers" (Buck-Morss 2000, 843–44).
- 14 See Chen's *Animacies* (2012), which offers a new materialist account of the politics of objectification, dehumanization, and thingification through disability studies and queer of color critique. The *GLQ* special issue "Queer Inhumanisms" also makes this critical link between race and materiality through a series of persuasive articles.
- 15 The modern human understands itself by way of its mastery. Even Heidegger (1982) (via Friedrich Nietzsche) anticipated the moment in which the human as master of the world would come to crisis when our innovative technologies had advanced in ways we were not yet prepared to manage.
- 16 Radhakrishnan situates himself in opposition to scholars like Aijaz Ahmad, who argues, for instance, in his critique of Edward Said that Said's work is "self-divided . . . between a host of irreconcilable positions in cultural theory" (1992,

168–69). If we follow Ahmad’s critique of Said as a selective thinker whose highly influential thought is founded on “irreconcilable positions,” it is precisely here in these irreconcilabilities that we can begin to *read* rather than repudiate the subject and its ways of producing knowledge (to read Said himself, and to read the canon of Western literary history that Said reads with us).

I. Decolonizing Mastery

- 1 See especially Ann Pellegrini’s chapter “Through the Looking Glass: Fanon’s Double Vision” in *Performance Anxieties* (1997).
- 2 I discuss Robert Bernasconi’s, Susan Buck-Morss’s, and Caroline Rooney’s work on Hegel’s “reading” of Africa in detail in the introduction of this book.
- 3 Fanon offers definitive readings of white women’s desire for black men in “The Man of Color and the White Woman” (1967e).
- 4 T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (1998) seeks to bridge Fanon and feminism by illustrating how to her mind the male revolutionary fight against racism and imperialism does not necessarily entail an antifeminist politics.
- 5 In his examination of the concept of the “proper” in Gandhian thought, Ajay Skaria argues that the Gujarati word *veshya* (prostitute) “marks the moment when a certain tension within *Hind Swaraj* over the question of the proper becomes especially fraught” (2007, 219).
- 6 For a more thorough gloss of the wider scope of Roy’s book, see my review of *Alimentary Tracts* (Singh 2011). For a reading of Gandhi’s vegetarianism as a student in England and his alliance with radical anti-Imperial groups in late nineteenth-century Europe, see Leela Gandhi’s “Meat: A Short Cultural History of Animal Welfare at the Fin-de-Siècle” (2006).
- 7 Roy points to Swami Vivekananda’s “prescription of ‘beef, biceps, and Bahavadgita’” as the best known of India’s curatives to the colonial characterizations of Indians as “feeble” and “effeminate” (2010, 79). Contextualizing his early draw toward carnivory, Gandhi tells his readers in the autobiography that “a doggerel of the Gujarati poet Narmad was in vogue amongst us schoolboys, as follows: ‘Behold the mighty Englishman / He rules the Indian small, / Because being a meat-eater / He is five cubits tall’” (1993, 21).
- 8 Gandhi states that the force of satyagraha could be best translated as “love-force, soul-force, or more popularly but less accurately, passive resistance” (1997, 85).
- 9 Derrida builds from Søren Kierkegaard’s reading of the story in *Fear and Trembling* (1983).
- 10 I have discussed Gandhi’s “animal experiments” elsewhere (Singh 2015a), but for readers less familiar with Gandhi it may be useful to note here that his experimental practices were at the heart of this political action and included experiments with sexual abstinence and diet. Often, his experiments necessitated a

break with or modification of his commitments to ahimsa and to brahmacharya in order to sustain life or to create the least possible harm in a given situation. These experiments and modifications, Gandhi concedes, were not always successful in their aims, and he often invoked his failures and revised his actions according to them.

- 11 Desai and Vahed point to South African political figures like Nelson Mandela who have made a point of propping up the image of a South African Gandhi that ignore some of the more troubling historical facts about his time there (2016, 23–24).
- 12 Desai and Vahed's figures are from Jeff Guy's *Remembering the Rebellion: The Zulu Uprising of 1906* (2006, 170).
- 13 For a detailed history of this text, see the Cambridge edition of *Hind Swaraj* (1997, lxiii–lxiv).
- 14 Desai and Vahed (2016, 20) remind us that in the aftermath of his South African life, Gandhi would serve twice more as a stretcher-bearer for empire in 1914 at the start of World War I and again in 1918, revealing that Gandhi's commitment to empire could not be simply relegated to the South African part of his political career.
- 15 For a more detailed account of Gandhi's thinking of the animal in relation to abstinence, the formulation of hospitality in relation to animal consumption, and animal friendship, see "Gandhi's Animal Experiments" (Singh 2015a).
- 16 I dwell on the question of serving meat to carnivorous humans in more detail in "Gandhi's Animal Experiments" (Singh 2015a).
- 17 See Anurudha Ramanujan's "Violent Encounters: 'Stray' Dogs in Indian Cities" in *Cosmopolitan Animals* (2015).
- 18 Other men too—even Algerian men—are excluded from Fanon's bod(il)y politic of anticolonial liberation. Drawing on the biographical work of Irene Gendzier (1985), Fuss (1995, 161) considers how in 1953, when Fanon was appointed director of the hospital at Blida-Joinville (the largest psychiatric hospital in Algeria), his psychoanalytic practice required the use of Arabic and Kabyle translators to treat Algerian patients. I will return to this scene in the next chapter, where I attend specifically to language mastery in anticolonial politics, but here I want to note that these translators—educated Algerian men employed as nurses—are disabled from pursuing advanced medical degrees under colonial rule. They are instrumental to Fanon's practice (because he cannot understand his patients without them), and they are virtually erased from Fanon's own psychoanalytic accounts.

2. The Language of Mastery

- 1 See Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (1993) for more on the discursive emphasis on colonized masculinities as perceived threats to white British women. Although Sharpe's study focuses on

- the Indian context, she illustrates how the fantasy of dark-skinned male bodies as “dangers” to white women was a critical mechanism of colonial control in the colonies.
- 2 For an important Derridean account of Hindustani that takes up Gandhi’s language politics, see Pritipuspa Mishra’s “The Mortality of Hindustani” (2012).
 - 3 As David Lelyveld illustrates, for Gandhi the name for this *rashtrabhasha* shifted across his writings, beginning with a declaration that the national language should be Hindi, which to Gandhi’s early mind subsumed Urdu and thus included both Hindus and Muslims in its scope. Later, Gandhi would modify this to calling the *rashtrabhasha* “Hindi-Hindustani” to signal the inclusion of Persian or Arabic words, and finally he shifted the name to “Hindustani,” moving away from Hindi altogether because the term “had become irretrievably bound up with hostility to Urdu” (Lelyveld 2001, 73).
 - 4 This simplified account of the purity of the mother will come to be complicated through Melanie Klein’s feminist psychoanalytic readings of the maternal relation, in which for her there is no “pure” relation between mother and child that is not always already caught up in destruction (1964). The aim for Klein, unlike Gandhi, is not to find a way out of this destruction but rather to understand that affection and aggression are not separable affects.
 - 5 I return to this idea of the “aping” and being “like” the human in chapter 4 in my discussion of *Animal’s People* (Sinha 2007) and *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee 1999). There, we will see how being “like” becomes in *Animal’s People* a critical and political generative difference, and how this “aping” gesture in *The Lives of Animals* becomes for the protagonist Costello an act of self-dispossession and a hopeful movement toward her animality.
 - 6 Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Indian Education,” delivered to the British parliament in 1835, formulated language as a central problem in the goal of producing semicivilized colonial subjects. Macaulay argued that the dialects of India “contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are, moreover, so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them” (1835, 2). Here the ineptitude of the native language inhibits the transformation of the colonial subject into fruition as “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (8).
 - 7 The mastery of languages is an explicitly stated goal in the 1965 Levin Report on the state of the field of comparative literature. While this language disappears in the 1993 Bernheimer Report, at least two of the respondents to this report—Michael Riffaterre and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese—take issue with the shift away from language mastery toward what they see as the encroachment of cultural studies. All these texts can be found in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (1995), edited by Charles Bernheimer.

3. Posthumanitarian Fictions

- 1 Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007), to which I turn in the next chapter, can be read as posthumanitarian fiction. For my discussion of the novel in this frame, see Singh 2015b.
- 2 See Lisa Smirl's *Spaces of Aid: How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism* (2015) for a nuanced account of the forces "in the field" that impede humanitarian aid practices. Smirl argues that "almost every aid worker comes to 'the field' with the intention to improve other people's lives. But as aid dollars become ever more scarce and aid workers are increasingly the target of violent attacks, a careful examination of why it seems so difficult to merely 'do good' is drastically needed" (xv). In the documentary *Assistance mortelle* (2013), the Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck wades into the complexities of humanitarian efforts in the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010. Peck's film illustrates how workers, despite their best intentions and despite the record-breaking international aid funds sent to repair damages, quickly become ensnared in bureaucracies that render their work ineffective.
- 3 In *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (2002), Sanders addresses the role of the intellectual in apartheid by theorizing complicity as that which is enfolded in every act and articulation of opposition. He therefore casts opposition as nondialectical.
- 4 In *Identification Papers* (1995), Diana Fuss charts the function of identification as a concept within psychoanalysis and identity politics, detailing how identification is simultaneously part of how a subject is *formed* and a crucial force that "calls . . . identity into question" (2). Lynn Hunt's (2007) account of the invention of human rights deploys a much less nuanced version of identification, attending only to the identity-building function of identification to think about what happens between readers and texts that generate the emotion she calls "empathy" (see especially chapter 1, "Torrents of Emotion").
- 5 Over and above this double identification produced by the form of these texts, in my own reading of "Little Ones" it becomes virtually impossible to ignore the uncanny repetition of Singh's name, which calls me into an uncomfortable proximity to the story's protagonist. His descent into madness at the end of the narrative thus compels me toward a radical revision of the narratives that have shaped me.
- 6 For an extended discussion of friendship and its relations to politics within Western philosophy (from Aristotle through Nietzsche via Michel de Montaigne), see Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* (1997). Derrida explores the tension between an "equality" among friends posited in what Aristotle calls "primary friendship" (23) and friendships, such as Nietzsche's "philosophers of the future," structured by certain kinds of dissymmetry (36) that are, nevertheless, characterized by forms of reciprocity or responsibility that are in no sense at play between the medical officer and his patient.

- 7 While the emphasis here is on how government programs and the actions of Singh and other bureaucrats are implicated in the distribution of resources that produces the differentiated bodies of Singh and the adivasi, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) allows us to begin to consider the food *itself* as agential here: "Food, as a self-altering, dissipative materiality, is also a player. It enters into what we become. It is one of the many agencies operative in the moods, cognitive dissipations, and moral sensitivities that we bring to bear as we engage the questions of what to eat, how to eat, and when to stop" (51).
- 8 Agamben (1998) develops the concept of "bare life" (a phrase he borrows from Walter Benjamin) in order to account for what he calls, after Foucault, biopolitics. His theory depends on thresholds or "zones of indistinction" that separate the properly political from its outside. This zone of indistinction passes through the human itself: "There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (8). Agamben, following Arendt, principally builds his account of this "bare life" through analysis of concentration and refugee camps, where humans are reduced to being "bare life."

4. Humanimal Dispossessions

- 1 I am inspired by and indebted to the work of my extraordinary former student Kerry Boland, who in her evocative undergraduate senior thesis teased out the vital links between the novel's treatment of the human/animal and its queer sexual politics (Boland 2014).
- 2 The reading I offer of Coetzee's text here was originally published as "The Tail End of Disciplinarity" (Singh 2013).
- 3 In the preface to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, which would become a highly influential series across the social sciences and humanities, the South Asian historian Ranajit Guha begins with a declaration that the aim of the subaltern studies project is "to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies, and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area" (1982, vii).
- 4 It is important to note here that the dominant interpretation of the story has been one that reads the ape as a figure for the Jew. In this sense, Red Peter becomes a symbol of Kafka himself, as an intellectual whose Jewishness marginalizes him within the academy. This is precisely the kind of reading that obscures the other particularities of Red Peter, his animality, and our abilities as interlocutors to think/feel our way toward him as (another) animal.
- 5 Homi Bhabha's (1994) formulation of (post)colonial mimicry comes to bear explicitly here on animal studies. It is not simply that Red Peter "apes" his human

masters but that in the act of this aping he performs humanity in a style that begins to unfold the always performative aspects of humanity itself. We come to see the performativity of the human through the performance of the ape-as-human. In this sense, we become mimics of our own species.

- 6 See chapter 1, in which I illustrate through analyses of the language of Gandhi and Fanon how the animal emerges as a split, contestatory site in the framing of properly human subjectivities.

5. Cultivating Discomfort

- 1 I came to Jodi Byrd's *The Transit of Empire* (2011) in the late production stages of *Unthinking Mastery*. Her work is informed by indigenous perspectives as they challenge and redress settler colonial logics and postcolonial studies. Byrd emphasizes the concept of transit as it functions as a foundational settler erasure of indigenous peoples. I see her work as a vital site for unmasterful intellectual and political engagements, and as a sister text in the desire to redress and mobilize postcolonial discourse.
- 2 I am thinking here with the beautiful work of José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (2009).
- 3 Radhakrishnan's work departs from a refutation of Aijaz Ahmad's (1992) critique of postcolonial studies, in which he reads ambivalence as a problem for the postcolonial project that registers its ineffectuality.
- 4 J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) becomes an interesting novel to pair with Kincaid's garden prose. While at its surface Kincaid's bourgeois garden appears opposite to Coetzee's depiction of the abjection of the gardening subject under the force of apartheid, both offer "alternative" readings of the subject in relation to gardening practice that complicate the Eurocentric legacies of this subject. For a reading of Coetzee's novel in relation to ecocritical discourse, see Anthony Vital's "Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K*" (2008).
- 5 Recent critical works on the intersections between postcolonial studies and environmental politics include Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010); Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt's *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (2010); Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011); and Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).
- 6 DeLoughrey and Handley's argument resonates with a body of literature looking to expand Foucault's project by pressuring his avoidance of the colonial project. See Ann Laura Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's "History of Sexuality" and the Colonial Order of Things* (1995) and *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002); Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Femi-*

- nist Theories of the Human* (2014); and Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument" (2003).
- 7 Thus "sovereignty is antiecological" (Smith 2011, xiii). Rejecting the common thought that "without sovereignty . . . nature cannot be preserved from being treated as a resource" (xiii), Smith turns to anarchist politics to think about an ecology that rejects territorial sovereignty.
 - 8 Kincaid's critique of the imperial politics of naming rhymes with Jacques Derrida's (2008) critique of the French word "animaux," which forcibly erases differences between myriad animals into a single concept. Derrida's critique and his proposal of "*animot*" as a way to signal the violence of naming are discussed in chapter 4.