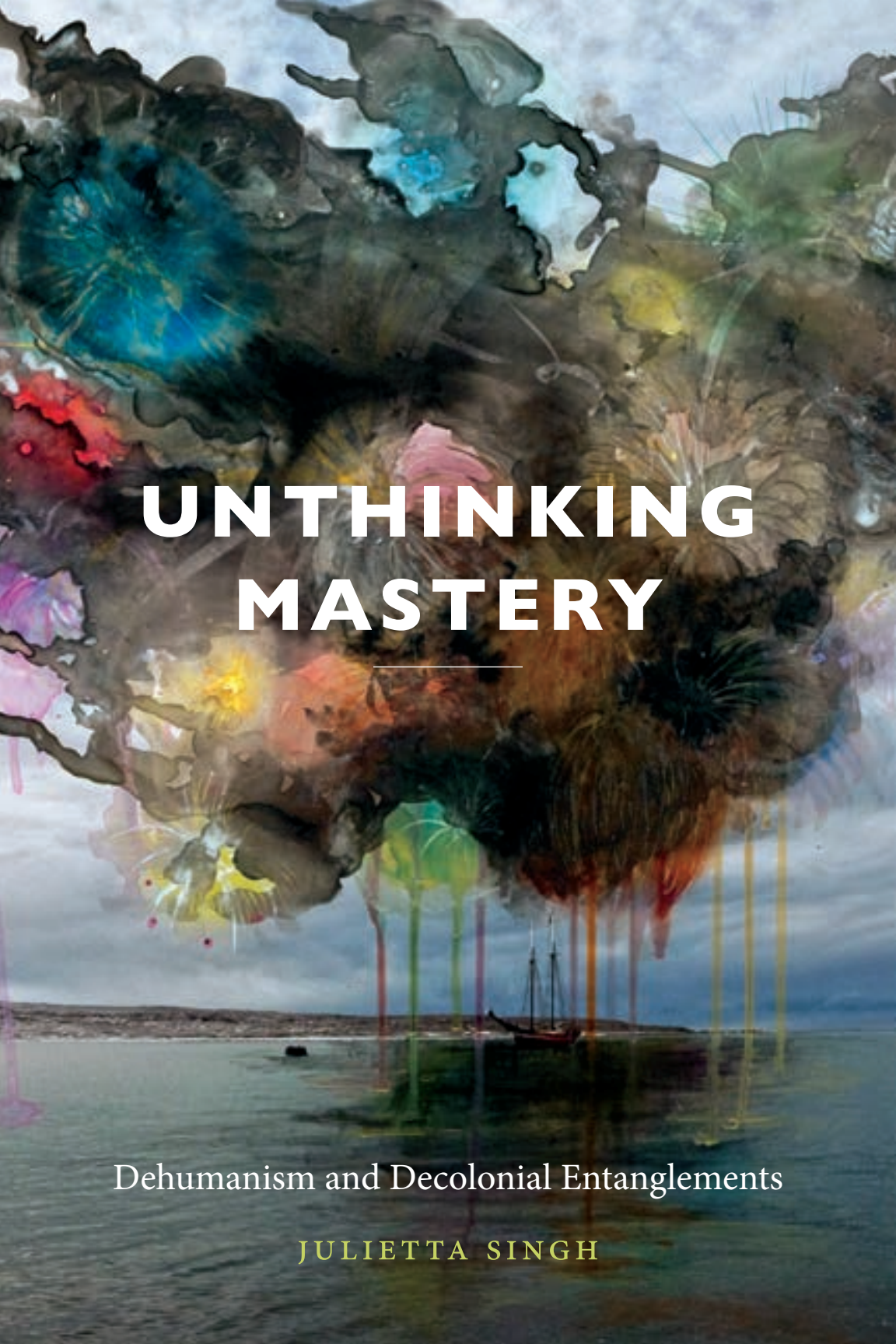
UNTHINKING
MASTERY
Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements
JULIETTA SINGH

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Introduction

Reading against Mastery

Everywhere I see the battle for mastery that rages between classes, peoples, etc., reproducing itself on an individual scale. Is the system flawless? Impossible to bypass? On the basis of my desire, I imagine that other desires like mine exist. If my desire is possible, it means the system is already letting something else through.
—HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, *Sorties* (1986)

What different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?
—ALEXANDER WEHELIYE, *Habeas Viscus* (2014)

"Mastery," Hélène Cixous laments, is "everywhere." In our world, "the battle for mastery . . . rages between classes, peoples, etc., reproducing itself on an individual scale" (1986, 78). Ubiquitous, reproductive, and beyond enumeration, mastery appears inescapable. And yet, Cixous declares, the very existence of her desire to live beyond mastery suggests that others too might share this desire. What she learns from her desire is that resistant collectivities are in reach, that in fact a seemingly impenetrable "system" of mastery has *already* been breached. Through my solidarity with Cixous's desire and through my own desire for forms of what I call *dehumanist solidarity*, this book reaches toward other modes of relational being that may not yet be recognizable.

Precisely because mastery is "everywhere," mine is an impossible project whose impossibility is what has made it inescapable for me. I attempt to unfold mastery rather than to foreclose it, and to dwell on its emergence where it is least expected. Rather than to define mastery (and in so doing to reproduce it), I aim across these pages to trace some of mastery's qualities,

drives, corollaries, and repetitions across two crucially entangled moments of decolonization: the anticolonial and the postcolonial. *Unthinking Mastery* is a summons to postcolonial studies and its interlocutors to attend to the persistence of mastery at the foundations of the field. I argue that mastery's obdurate presence necessarily affects how scholars within and beyond the postcolonial project envision their intellectual pursuits today. More expansively, it is an appeal to begin not simply to repudiate practices of mastery but, to borrow from Donna Haraway (2016), to "stay with the trouble" that is produced through attention to where, how, between whom, and toward what futures mastery is engaged. In this sense, I am interested in mastery not as something to be overcome but rather as an inheritance that we might (yet) survive.

Across anticolonial discourse the mastery of the colonizer over the colonies was a practice that was explicitly disavowed, and yet, in their efforts to decolonize, anticolonial thinkers in turn advocated practices of mastery—corporeal, linguistic, and intellectual—toward their own liberation. Within anticolonial movements, practices of countermastery were aimed explicitly at defeating colonial mastery, in effect pitting mastery against mastery toward the production of thoroughly decolonized subjectivities. For thinkers as diverse as Mohandas K. Gandhi and Frantz Fanon—key players in the first two chapters of this book—decolonization was an act of undoing colonial mastery by producing new masterful subjects. I argue that this discourse of anticolonialism, which was geared toward the future, did not interrogate thoroughly enough its own masterful engagements. It did not dwell enough, in other words, on how its complex entanglements with mastery would come to resonate in the postcolonial future it so passionately anticipated. Precisely because mastery served as a motive for revolutionary action *and* as an antidote for colonial domination, it is a vital site from which to analyze the work of mastery in "globalized" life today. Through discourses of decolonization that have sought to undo the dynamics of colonial mastery, we can begin to understand how pervasive and intimately ingrained mastery is in the fabric of modern thought, subjectivity, and politics. The task of this book is to begin—simply to begin—to trace some of the desires and aims of mastery across decolonization movements of the twentieth century through the intimately sutured discourses of anticolonialism and postcolonialism. My desire is to engage with revolutionary

and literary texts in ways that can reorient our masterful pursuits, ones that characterize global relations and continue to threaten our survival. The outright repudiations and reinscriptions of mastery across anticolonial and postcolonial discourses are vital places from which we can begin to address how drives toward mastery inform and underlie the major crises of our times—acts of intrahuman violence across the globe, the radical disparities in resources and rights between the Global North and Global South, innumerable forms of human and nonhuman extinction, and escalating threats of ecological disaster.

For anticolonial thinkers, engaging the logic of mastery that had long since governed over the colonies was critical to restoring a full sense of humanity to the colonized subject, to building a thoroughly decolonized postcolonial nation-state, and to envisioning less coercive futures among human collectivities. In the anticolonial moment, mastery largely assumed a Hegelian form in which anticolonial actors were working through a desire or demand for recognition by another. The mastery at work in this project was one whose political resonance resided in national sovereignty and the legal principle of self-determination, one that approached the dismantling of mastery through an inverted binary that aimed to defeat colonial mastery through other masterful forms. In postcolonial studies—which takes a decisively cultural turn in its attention to colonialism's lasting legacies—these Hegelian valences continue to dwell in articulations of mastery. The postcolonial literary texts to which I turn midway through this book represent mastery through an oscillation between the dialectical Hegelian mode and a deconstructive one. While these texts rehearse recognizably masterful forms of relation and practice, they also urge us—through their messy narrative play—toward mastery's undoing. Through my close attention to the possibilities entangled in the complexities of decolonial discourses both political and literary, I identify, in the company of Cixous, "something else" being let through the abiding and proliferating force of mastery. Within these discourses, these modes of articulation that often (as we shall see) betray themselves, we can begin to imagine—even to feel, and in feeling be transformed by—what Alexander Weheliye calls other possible "modalities of the human" (2014, 8). Weheliye turns us, through his black studies critique of the racial blinders of biopolitics, toward a critical engagement with the forms of humanity envisioned and practiced by those excluded

from the domain of Man as "the master-subject."[1] Alongside Sylvia Wynter, he signals "different genres of the human" that require us to attend to the always enfleshed alterities of being human (Weheliye 2014, 2–3).

Dehumanism

I am eager to dwell alongside these other humanities, to explore as well how such dwellings might enable us to become exiled from subjectivities founded on and through mastery. This is a practice I call *dehumanism*: a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others. Dehumanism requires not an easy repudiation and renunciation of dehumanization but a form of radical dwelling in and with dehumanization through the narrative excesses and insufficiencies of the "good" human—a cohabitation that acts on and through us in order to imagine other forms of political allegiance. To read the human otherwise, I draw from the interdisciplinary discourses of posthumanism and queer inhumanisms even while my dehumanist aims depart in more and less crucial ways from these projects.

Within the broad reach of posthumanism, two intellectual branches are essential to *Unthinking Mastery*. The first takes up questions of the animal, including the animality of the human, which will come into sharp focus in chapter 4.[2] The second falls under the heading of new materialisms, which, as I elaborate in chapter 5, emphasizes how matter actively contributes to and shapes environments, communities, and politics.[3] These trajectories of posthumanism insist that "the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy" (Coole and Frost 2010, 6). They also call attention to how humanism is structured by a separation between the ideological fantasies of the human's unique agency and the disavowed materialities that underlie it. While I am drawn to these particular trajectories of posthumanism, little attention is paid in its discourses to the specificity of neocolonial relations of power and materiality. Dehumanism, then, aims to bring the posthuman into critical conversation with the decolonial.

Posthumanism begins with a querying of the human through its most privileged points of departure, generally focusing on the philosophers and

techno-scientific innovations that allow us to trouble the category of the human as such. Following Wynter's insistence on the difference between the human and Man, we can say that Man has been the subject/object of posthumanist inquiry. Departing from posthumanism, queer inhumanisms aim to query the human from the position of some of its least privileged forms and designations of life.[4] Tavia Nyong'o, for instance, calls attention to the "continued liberal enchantment" in intellectual discourse with a subject that remains "transparent," unmarked by various categories of difference. He argues that in collusion with this liberalism, "posthumanist theory has tended to present the decentering of the human as both salutary and largely innocent of history" (2015, 266). Drawing on black studies, Nyong'o queries how such subjects can then work to decenter the human while remaining committed to the political projects articulated from these positions of (in)human exclusion. How, in other words, might the project of remaking the human happen from its outside?

In the hopeful spirit of queer inhumanisms, dehumanism begins with the dehumanized—"humans" and their others—as its critical point of departure. José Esteban Muñoz has summoned us toward the necessary labor of "attempting to touch inhumanity" (2015, 209), and Nyong'o insists that we pressure history in the making and unmaking of the subject. Indebted to queer inhumanism's ethical reach, I modify the concept of inhumanism, which (despite the desires of those committed to its potentialities) loses track in its own grammatical formulation of the histories, practices, and narratives that make some human and cast others outside its orbit. The prefix "in" of inhumanism points to a privation that does not intuitively signal the history of the making of nonhuman subjects and forms of being. Shifting *in*humanism to *de*humanism, I move away from a seemingly ontological formulation of Man and its others toward a more pointed formulation that implicates in its very utterance the processes of dehumanization through a term that signals clearly the imperial work of making humans and worlds. Dehumanism, then, is united with queer inhumanisms as it presses us toward an overtly global, imperial critique of the making and mapping of Man and its proliferating remnants.

The "de" of dehumanism also and vitally articulates the "de" of deconstruction, crucially foregrounding the particular force of narrative in the making and unmaking of subjects, and the "de" of decolonial ethicopolitics. Dehumanism is driven by the promises of vulnerability with the

aim of forming other less masterful subjectivities. As I argue across *Unthinking Mastery*, the act of reading is vital to this process of imagining otherwise and dwelling elsewhere, to the relentless exercise of unearthing and envisioning new human forms and conceptualizations of agency. Reading becomes not a humanizing process that rehearses the largely anthropocentric discourses of decolonization but a much more radical process of opening us to the possibility of becoming ourselves promisingly dehumanized. What possibilities live in these other "modalities" of the human? What vital hope is (still) lingering in exile when we are ready to open our borders? Even to become, ourselves, hopefully dispossessed of mastery?

Locating Mastery

Existing critiques of postcolonial studies have thus far not taken seriously enough the position of mastery at its foundations. Since its inception in the 1980s, subaltern studies (which holds a foundational role in the more diffuse intellectual body known as postcolonial studies) has been taken to task from within and by scholars outside its project. A central critique of postcolonial studies charges it with being an elitist intellectual fantasy removed from the Realpolitik of capital.[5] This critique accuses postcolonial theory of a blindness toward or a misrecognition of Marxism and calls for a turn from bourgeois nationalism toward a true proletarian nationalism (or internationalism). This turn necessarily requires a pruning back of the "excesses" of poststructuralist approaches to postcolonial history and political theory. My concern with this line of critique is that, while it attempts to become grounded in the facts of class struggle, it advocates a return to Hegelian Marxism and implicitly concedes to an ongoing dialectic of "mastering mastery." In effect, it returns us to a formulation of the master and slave in which the only way to undo their relation is through an overcoming, a mastering of that which masters. This logic of mastery superseding mastery remains continuous across Georg W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, and, as I argue in chapters 1 and 2, resonates in anticolonial thinking through revolutionary figures such as Fanon and Gandhi. Mastery has likewise made its way, often unthinkingly, into the discourse of postcolonial studies and its critiques. It is the task of this book to signal this inheritance of mastery and to illustrate that, by continuing to abide by the formulation of "mastering mastery," we remain bound to relations founded on and through

domination. In so doing, we concede to the inescapability of mastery as a way of life.

In contrast to other predominant critiques of the field that take aim at the postcolonial project for its treatment of Marxist theory or assail it as a bourgeois project riddled by too much intellectual jargon,[6] I approach postcolonial studies with an intimacy and enduring attachment to some of its most rudimentary aims: to explore how the cultural politics of colonialism remain intact and to trace the entanglements of ideological practice and material fact as they signal the legacies of colonialism. My own critique of the field returns to the inaugural problematic of mastery in anticolonial discourse in order to attend to its status therein and its legacies thereafter. This is not a gesture of repudiation but an invitation to approach the project of postcolonial studies with a new vitality. In complex and often unthinking ways, colonial mastery became politically disassociated from other masterful acts in anticolonial thought. The continuities among pursuits of mastery have, I argue, carried forward unreflexively into postcolonial studies and have crucial consequences for the intellectual project. In order simultaneously to tarry with mastery and to unhinge ourselves from its hold, I turn toward some of the major voices of anticolonial politics before giving sustained attention to readings of postcolonial literary texts. These literary texts take up masterful trajectories in thought, language, and practice that remain if not extolled then largely ignored and unchallenged within the dominant modes of knowledge production today. They complicate claims to goodness, civility, stewardship, and humanitarianism by emphasizing subjectivities that are, to quote Talal Asad, "beset with contradictions" (2007, 2). Asad's aim is to show these contradictions at work in relation to suicide bombings, in which the desire to distinguish between "morally good" and "evil" forms of killing reveals contradiction as "a fragile part of our modern subjectivity" (2). This fragile subjectivity emerges not only through extreme claims of good and evil killing but also and critically through practices of the quotidian "good" through which debilitating force is often concealed. In the second half of this book, when I turn explicitly to an exemplary archive of postcolonial literary texts, I aim to show how engaging with these texts can open us to finding mastery where it is least expected. In order to loosen the hold of mastery, we must learn to *read* for it. If we can do so, these texts, while in no sense offering guidelines for proscriptive future politics, ask us to open ourselves to reimagining ways

of relating to each other—to others human, nonhuman, and inhuman to which (even when disavowed) we are mutually bound.

As with so many of life's most abiding preoccupations, my interest in the status of mastery across anticolonial and postcolonial discourses began indirectly, with a discomfort I did not yet understand. While pursuing my doctoral degree in comparative literature in the United States, I was seeped in anticolonial and postcolonial critique and began to notice the uncritical reproduction of mastery within texts otherwise overtly critical of its colonial forms. In Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), a foundational work in postcolonial studies, he critiqued early Orientalist intellectuals "whose unremitting ambition was to master *all* of a world, not some easily delimited part of it such as an author or a collection of texts" (109). Said insisted not on the need to redress mastery altogether but on the need to *limit* its reach, to pursue mastery within reasonable, delineated parts. In turn, from those geopolitical regions of the world that have been marginalized by the Eurocentricism of intellectual practice, mastery continues to echo as a mode of inclusion. Ferial Ghazoul's vision of a future comparative literary practice for the Arab world, for instance, is one in which scholars will be "equally at home" in their native and foreign languages. She wishes that "a generation of comparatists be inspired who can master several literary traditions and speak about each of them with authority. It is only then that comparative literature will come into its own as an academic discipline that is credible and viable" (2006, 123). I sympathize with Ghazoul's refusal of disciplinary marginalization, with the desire to find oneself "at home" within disciplinary knowledge production and within languages intimate and once foreign to us. And yet one of the claims of *Unthinking Mastery* is that we must begin to exile ourselves from feeling comfortable at home (which so often involves opaque forms of mastery), turning instead toward forms of queer dispossession that reach for different ways of inhabiting our scholarly domains—and more primordially, of inhabiting ourselves. The intellectual authority of literary and area studies, its "credibility" and "viability," continuously relies on mastery as its target, as that which will produce authoritative, legitimate knowledge and in so doing resist the power of Eurocentrism.

Some may balk at my emphasis on the *language* of mastery that recurs in crucial postcolonial texts, insisting that this particular evocation of mastery should be cordoned off from the more overtly violent aspects of colonial

mastery. But let us not forget that these are each scholars for whom language and its resonances are absolutely critical to their intellectual pursuits, and for whom language speaks and acts through its connectivities and refractions. Although its history can be traced back to classical Latin forms, a perusal of the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the word "mastery" and its morphemes ("master" as noun, verb, and adjective) took hold during the period of early modernity. In its oldest meanings, a master is someone who had bested an opponent or competitor, or someone who had achieved a level of competence at a particular skill to become a teacher of it. It is, of course, this last valence that is being signaled and advocated by these leading intellectuals. Yet what postcolonial thinking has taught us (perhaps even most cogently through Said himself and through the extraordinary wealth of critical projects that have been informed by his work) is precisely that the mastery of colonization reveals the tightly bound connections between these two seemingly distinct registers: to "best" someone, to beat them and in so doing become master over them on the one hand, and to reach a level of competence in which one becomes rightfully pedagogical on the other hand. To put it crudely, a colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially *and* by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders "legitimate" the forceful imposition of his worldviews. The material and ideological, as postcolonial studies has time and again shown us so convincingly, cannot be easily parsed. The conscious and unconscious choices we make in relation to language (perhaps especially as scholars of languages and literatures) begin to reveal to and for us the ways that—often despite ourselves and our desired politics—we remain bound to structures of violence we wish to disavow. Conceiving of ourselves as intellectual masters over those bodies of knowledge (broad or discrete) that we have tasked ourselves to engage connects us to historical practices of mastery that our work seeks to explore and redress. We must with increasing urgency revise the very idea of (and the languages we use to describe) our work as intellectuals—with what resonances, and toward what possibilities.

The most contentious claim of this book, then, and the one that cuts to its core, is that there is an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous. To be characterized as

the master of a language, or a literary tradition, or an instrument, for instance, is widely understood to be laudable. Yet as a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate. It aims for the full submission of an object—or something *objectified*—whether it be external or internal to oneself. In so doing, mastery requires a rupturing of the object being mastered, because to be mastered means to be weakened to a point of fracture. Mastery is in this sense a splitting of the object that is mastered from itself, a way of estranging the mastered object from its previous state of being. Michel Serres insists upon this work of mastery when he writes that "he who likes to command can do so, but on one condition: the eyes of the producers, of the energetic and the strong, have to be poked out" (2007, 36). For Serres, the "condition" of mastery is precisely that the master must maim the formerly "energetic" and "strong"—he must debilitate in order to be master. Whether we desire mastery over a slave, an environment, or a body of texts, we are always returning to this primordial fracture—to the partial destruction of the object that the would-be master yearns to govern over completely. Mastery, as we will see across anticolonial discourse and postcolonial literary texts, also turns inward to become a form of self-maiming, one that involves the denial of the master's own dependency on other bodies.

The Particularities of Mastery

I conceptualize mastery as a violent problematic that includes but remains critically distinct from the more particular versions of sovereignty and dominion. As such, I will dwell here briefly on the entanglements and distinctions between these categories. Sovereignty, a concept that functions in the discourse of political theory, is primarily concerned with the state. As such, and unlike mastery, it depends on the state for its action and proliferation. "Sovereign is he," writes Carl Schmitt, "who decides on the exception" (2005, 5). While there is a great deal of literature written on Schmitt's notion of the exception,[7] what is important to my argument here is that Schmitt links sovereignty to the production and security of state borders. Although power has long-since mutated from the sovereign, Michel Foucault reminds us that within political thought and analysis we "still have not cut off the head of the king" (1990, 89). In Foucault's inaugural for-

mulation of biopolitics, he argues that it "focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (139). Returning to the earliest meanings of mastery, we could say that the politics of mastery shift from a focus on overcoming an opponent or adversary toward skillful management of the self and its others. At the surface a less violent and coercive set of practices, skillful management becomes mastery's dominant mode in the biopolitical moment. Through the emergence of biopolitics, mastery ceases to be localized in a sovereign power, instead becoming a network that is diffused and dispersed across a range of sites, institutions, and actors.

For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "the concept of sovereignty dominates the tradition of political philosophy and serves as the foundation of all that is political precisely because it requires that one must always rule and decide. Only the one can be sovereign, the tradition tells us, and there can be no politics without sovereignty. . . . The choice is absolute: either sovereignty or anarchy!" (2004, 329). This unremitting reliance on "the one" who must rule and decide (whether this singular entity is king or a ruling collective) is for Hardt and Negri a fallacy that limits a thinking and practice of contemporary politics. To supplant this notion of the one, they introduce the "multitude," which is not a social body precisely because "the multitude cannot be reduced to a unity and does not submit to the rule of one. The multitude cannot be sovereign" (330). While this formulation of the multitude intervenes in the dominant discourse of political philosophy and holds promise for less coercive forms of relational politics, it does not necessarily dismantle or escape practices of mastery that can and do continue to circulate and proliferate within the political formation of the multitude and "beyond" it. Mastery is always political but cannot be situated only within the realm of political governance. Even within collectives that refuse sovereign power, mastery can come into play through dispersed, impersonal forms of power that operate masterfully on and within particular bodies within the multitude. As Judith Butler (2015) reminds us, even when "the people" gather in protest, there can be forms of violence operational within and in relation to the collective. If the multitude promises alternative forms of political action, it is not immune to masterful dynamics within and beyond the multitude itself.

Similarly, the concept of dominion, which situates "man" in relation to the natural world, has entailed an interpretive practice of mastery over the earth. In Genesis, dominion becomes a particular human mode of relating to the world—indeed of caring for it—through practices of management and expertise that hinge on the human goal of mastering nature in order to let it flourish, to cultivate it, to submit it with the aim of maximum prosperity. When God gives Adam and Eve dominion "over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28), their first task is to name all that they will have dominion over. The question of language and naming recurs across *Unthinking Mastery*, specifically in chapter 2, where I dwell on the anticolonial language debates, and again in chapter 5, where the Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid wades through the colonial stakes of naming and possession. The concept of dominion clarifies how mastery is tied to language, and how in its power to name the human also gains authorization to particular forms of masterful consumption: because I have named you, I can consume you. I take up this relation between logic, mastery, and consumption in chapter 4 through my analysis of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999). Dominion is, as Mick Smith (2011) reminds us, certainly a relation where mastery plays out explicitly through the care of resources, land management, and animal husbandry. Both sovereignty as a state problematic and dominion as an ecological one are iterations of mastery—ones that reveal crucial aspects of mastery but without exhausting its machinations.

I have suggested that to define mastery would be a gesture toward mastering it. It would also risk foreclosing mastery in such a way that disables attention to the gaps and fissures of such a definition, where mastery may leak out and take forms that are not contained within its definitive script. I am concerned with instances in which mastery is reinscribed as another kind of act, appearing untethered from its origin. I approach mastery, then, not by defining the act but through tracing some of its enduring characteristics. At least three features of mastery circulate throughout my readings, offering us not a definition but *qualities* by which we can begin to think with mastery and against it—in the sense not merely of opposition but of dwelling alongside. First, mastery involves splitting in either the sense of carving a boundary or an infliction of mutilation—or, often, both at the same time. Consider the 1947 Partition of India, when the splitting of India to create an independent Islamic nation-state in the form of Pakistan was

entangled with the mass migrations and mutilations of various religiously coded bodies. Mastery in this political context illustrates other distinct histories of colonization, histories that likewise can be traced via the enforced creation of political spaces and the mutilation of bodies.

A second quality of mastery that follows from the first is that it involves the subordination of what is on one side of a border to the power of what is on the other. In the Hegelian formulation of the master/slave dialectic, to which I will turn in detail below, this means that by splitting the slave, and by splitting off from the slave, the master comes to hold (at least a fantasmatic notion of) an enduring mastery. The splitting that is inherent to mastery, the fracturing that confirms and inaugurates it, and the ongoing practices of subordination that drive it forward are inescapable in the foundational thinking of the subject of modern political thought. Therein, the very notion of the human relies on and is totally unthinkable without mastery. In the *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689), John Locke grounds the modern subject, the subject of the emergent nation-state and capitalist economy, on a mastery that confirms the subject as such. In a famous passage linking "Man" to private property, Locke writes: "From all which it is evident, that though the things of Nature are given in common, yet Man (by being Master of himself, and *Proprietor of his Person*, and the Actions or Labour of it), had still in himself the great foundation of Property; and that which made up the great part of what he allayed to the Support or Comfort of his being, when Invention and Arts had improved the conveniences of Life, was perfectly his own, and did not belong in common to others" (qtd. in Esposito 2008, 66). Man here is defined as the being who is, or who can be, "Master of himself." He is not thinkable without this practice of mastery that inaugurates him as "proprietor" of himself, who as Man becomes master of himself *as* property. This would mean that before "Man" can mark himself out and become master/proprietor of himself, there has to be something ("himself") more primary, more diffuse, that enables the mastering but cannot be reduced to it. For Locke, then, Man as the masterful modern subject is a privatization and appropriation of something *else*, something that precedes and perhaps always escapes or exceeds mastery—something within and around Man that, in fact, Man has to "master" in order to become himself, which is to say, in order to become free. While mastery here becomes totalizing and inescapable (one is either mastered by another or is master of oneself), its very emergence presupposes that

there is something outside of mastery, something that mastery feeds on but disavows. To unthink mastery therefore requires either a radically different understanding of what it could mean to be human or perhaps a thinking of the human that would not be human at all. Foucault reminds us, "Man is an invention of recent date" (1994, 387), and as such I am keen to imagine a subject or person who would not be human *in this way*, in this *style* of masterful Man articulated through political philosophy.

Finally, mastery requires that this split and hierarchized relation be extended in time. Hegel's conception of the master/slave dialectic so dominant in modern political thought is one that unfolds across time. That is, Hegel's account of mastery is fundamentally narrative.[8] A life and death battle for recognition (always, for Hegel, one that unfolds between masculine gendered subjects) produces a master who is willing to die for an ideal and a slave who wants to preserve his life and thus submits to another. In the beginning, there are "two self-conscious individuals" who face a "life-and-death struggle" (Hegel 1977, 113). At the end of the struggle, "one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman" (115). Hegel will come to show us that the lord-as-master is in fact dependent on the slave's recognition of him, "a recognition that is one-sided and unequal" (116) because one is "recognized" and one "recognizing" (113).[9] What is crucial to my argument here is the narrative form of this dialectic: what Hegel calls the "essential nature" of the master and slave are in fact the outcomes of a struggle that must unfold in time and come to be *recognized as permanent*.[10] In Alexandre Kojève's highly influential reading of the master/slave dialectic, man is never merely man but "always, necessarily, and essentially, either Master or Slave" (1980, 8). Kojève's reading presents a contingent outcome as a question of necessity and essence, in effect transforming history into myth.

And yet, as Marx would come to insist, like Fanon and Paulo Freire after him, the material labor of the slave—his work that transforms reality (Hegel 1977, 117–19)—holds the active potentiality of other relations of power not beholden to mastery. Joining Marx and Fanon toward a postcolonial pedagogy, Freire insists that the task of the oppressed is "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate

either the oppressed or themselves" (2000, 44). While Freire envisions this critical pedagogy as an urgent "humanistic" task, I would recast this liberatory politics as precisely a *dehumanist* necessity. If the masterful work of global imperialism functions through the dehumanization of those it aims to conquer, and if we can now argue that the human to which we have been aspiring is intimately bound to a logic of mastery, then looking toward those "other genres of being human" that have been lived and will be lived by those subjected by imperial force might offer us other performances of the human that allow us to begin to practice nonmasterful forms of politics. This dehumanist practice of "beginning" to unfold the human from its outsides necessarily takes place in a queer temporality, one that José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010) insist has already been happening, and has yet to come.

Postcolonial Hegel

If the Hegelian dialectic of lordship and bondage has been cast and accepted across much of modern thought as mythical, as that which can account for relations across time and space, it has been the task of decolonial thinkers to contextualize it historically. Examining Hegel's use of source materials in the making of his notorious claims about Africa as a place "outside" history,[11] Robert Bernasconi (1998) argues that Hegel was in no sense formulating a reading of Africans (as proper subjects of slavery) that was free from the colonial mode of thinking of his day. Rather, Hegel embellished and culled selectively from his source materials, producing claims he *desired* to make about Africans. Such desire, Bernasconi shows us, is tied to the philosophical production of a certain conception of the subject (and of subjectivity) in which the European must be thought by and through the European philosopher in dialectical relation to its others. Africa therefore had to be cast by Hegel in terms that would enforce its unintelligibility in relation to Europe.[12]

Caroline Rooney follows this critique of Hegel to argue that "Western philosophical and critical thought serves, in the first place, to prevent a reception of the thought in question. Most seriously, there are ways—be they crudely obvious, subtly muted or genuinely perplexed—in which a thinking of Africa becomes that which is given as unthinkable" (2000, 15). Unlike Said's notion of Orientalism, Africa emerges not as Europe's antith-

esis but as something so unthinkable as to be beyond the frame. Hegel's own contradictory claims *about* Africans, and his assertions about Africans *as* contradiction, begin for Rooney to blur the lines between the self and the other, between the subject who produces knowledge and the objects of that knowledge production. Colonial thought, within which both Bernasconi and Rooney firmly situate Hegel, has relied on certain fabulous and fabricated (and sometimes geographically distinct) conceptions of others, conceptions that come to reveal less about the "objects" of its control and much more about colonial subjectivity and the production of its alterities.

In "Hegel and Haiti" (2000), Susan Buck-Morss offers a historically grounded answer to a question that has long occupied scholars of Hegel: From where did the philosopher's conception of lordship and bondage originate? Buck-Morss locates Hegel's "struggle to death" between master and slave squarely within the facts of the Haitian revolution led by François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture that was taking place during the period of Hegel's formulating this seemingly ahistorical relation.[13] Hegel specifically discussed reading the newspaper during that historical period, even describing how the press "orients one's attitude against the world and towards God [in one case], or toward that which the world is [in the other]. The former gives the same security as the latter, in that one knows where one stands" (Buck-Morss 2000, 844). Hegel all but confesses to being "oriented" by the world events of his day, allowing Buck-Morss to declare that "Hegel knew—knew about real slaves revolting successfully against real masters, and he elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context" (852). Why, then, had scholars not picked up on the influence that Buck-Morss proposes is inescapable in Hegel's orientation, in the very formulation of the relation between the master and the slave?

I am especially compelled by the frame within which Buck-Morss situates her examination of Hegel and Haiti, bringing at the beginning and ends of her text the problem of disciplinary thinking through which we have inherited the past, and through which we safeguard ourselves against the threat of other modes of thinking, other possible forms of inheritance (2000, 822). Recalling how years after his shaping of the master/slave dialectic, Hegel would come to study Africa with more concrete, scholarly intention, Buck-Morss argues: "What *is* clear is that in an effort to become more erudite in African studies during the 1820s, Hegel was in fact becom-

ing dumber" (863). Beyond soliciting a chuckle from her readers (at least this reader), Buck-Morss shows us a Hegel who never understood Africa, who projected his desires onto it, and who would come paradoxically to know it less as he studied it more: "It is sadly ironic that the more faithfully his lectures reflected Europe's conventional scholarly wisdom on African society, the less enlightened and more bigoted they became" (846). And here, Hegel comes to reflect us back to ourselves in our own pursuits to master the worlds we study. Disciplinary thinking is practical: it enables us to frame ourselves as masters of particular discourses, histories, and bodies of knowledge. It safeguards us against the incursions of oppositional frames, or methods of understanding that might unhinge us from our own masterful frames. Concluding her study of Hegel and Haiti, Buck-Morss asks us: "What if every time that the consciousness of individuals surpassed the confines of present constellations of power in perceiving the concrete meaning of freedom, *this* were valued as a moment, however transitory, of the realization of absolute spirit? What other silences would need to be broken? What *un*-disciplined stories would be told?" (865). From a queer methodological standpoint, Jack Halberstam likewise echoes this deep concern with disciplinary knowledge production and its erasures when he argues that "disciplines actually get in the way of answers and theorems precisely because they offer maps of thought where intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results" (2011, 6).

Narrative and Matter

Mastery is a concept that is situated at the threshold of matter and narrative. As a fundamentally narrative problematic, mastery assigns particular roles (the master, the slave) and holds those roles in place (it "characterizes" them) in a temporal, narrative structure. To win a fight is not to become the master, unless both the master and the slave *recognize* that in the future, the outcome will be the same. The master is envisioned as the winner, then, whose winning comes to be taken for granted in a proleptic narrative account of the world that authorizes future action. Once instantiated, the narrative has to elicit the participation of both characters, master and slave, in ways that allow and disallow particular *material* actions (labor first and foremost in the Marxist-Hegelian version). This calls for a renewed attention to the material effects of narrative at stake in what

has been called recognition (in Hegelian terms), interpellation (in Marxist terms), and identification (in psychoanalytic terms). Through these material changes in a subject who "finds" him or herself in a narrative (either as master or slave), the subject's actions and affects are informed by narrative, even as these subjects must continually reproduce it. In other words, narrative and materiality are entangled in ways that cannot possibly be reduced to a unidirectional causality.

Once mastery is understood as an entanglement between narrative and matter, or "matter and meaning" (Barad 2007), it becomes crucial to recognize how the narratives of mastery are always fragile, threatened, and impossible. Indeed, the most basic lesson of new materialist thinking is that matter *itself* is aleatory, surprising, and "vibrant" (Bennett 2010). Matter is not stable and cannot be mastered, despite the narrative fictions that enable us to imagine and engage it as such. It is not inert in time; it evolves, shifts, mutates, surprises. What is true of matter is true of those forms of matter called humans, who come to resist the narratives of mastery that shaped their subjectivities in surprising and excessive ways.

What gets bestowed with agency and rights is a question central to both new materialisms and postcolonial studies, although the two fields have yet to join forces explicitly. Because postcolonial studies has been primarily centered on the urgency of policies and practices of dehumanization among peoples, it has been slower to see how the practices of dehumanization at the heart of its politics cannot be extricated from a deep concern with a broader ecological thinking. It is not merely that the subjugation of environments is intimately linked to the subjugation of peoples; rather, it is that the logic that drives the modern world cannot formulate the nonhuman world as one invested with meaningful, dynamic life. Equating colonization with the "thingification" of colonized peoples, Aimé Césaire (2001) argues that the processes of colonization require the commodification and objectification of other cultures and the people who comprised them.[14] To extend Césaire, I also argue that "thingification" vitally names a limit to our dialectical thinking of life itself: to be rendered a thing is to be placed into a whole world of other things that are not designated as valued life forms. Postcolonial studies needs to think with infinitely more care through its anticolonial foundations so as to approach the commonality of being among all these "things," however proximate or distant they may appear to the "properly" human subject.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent attention to climate change and the emergence of the human's "geological force" is among the most ecologically inclusive turns for the field of postcolonial studies to date. Chakrabarty explains, building on scientific research, that in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, humans have emerged as "geological actors" to the extent that we are now "a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species" (2009, 207). While as a species and as individuals humans have always been "biological actors"—creatures whose presence affected their environments—we have now emerged as a geological force that is changing the basic functions of the planet. The subject that has formed modern Western thought, the one inherited by postcolonial thinking, is one whose unequivocal goal of mastery has fractured the earth to the point of threatening destruction of its environment and itself. There can be no more urgent reason to rethink the subject and its desires than this. It is our charge, then, to explore the foundations of decolonial resistance to this subject, to see where such resistance remains entangled in its own inherited legacies, and to turn toward evocations of subjectivities no longer wed to an uncritical politics of worldly mastery. Indeed, such politics hinge on a fantasy and relentless enforcement of human distinctiveness, and a new subjectivity that is not beholden to mastery necessitates calling into question the very notion of the human that has been produced and enforced across modernity.

This is a moment in which human-induced ecological catastrophe is both in effect and imminent, in which human population displacement and species extinctions have become normative expectations. It is a moment, in other words, when human practices of mastery fold over onto themselves and collapse.[15] Mastery as the logic of a certain form of human being needs urgently therefore to be unthought and replaced by new performances of humanity. Dominic Pettman, urging us to recognize the "human error" implicit in our own self-conception as species, argues: "Considering ourselves as the source of that-which-we-call-human, and viewing animals or technics as mere conduits—as a means to that end—is a fallacy. It is to see mastery where a vital, complex, ahuman dynamic reigns" (2011, 127). Working through Agamben's (2003) notion of the "anthropological machine"—that logic that produces the human for itself—Pettman argues that the human is revealed to be nothing more than a provincial right to "conspicuous consumption." By now, every devoted environmentalist, every

activist for humans and animals, and everyone who attempts to tread the earth with more care has confronted the systemic monstrosity of human mastery over the earth. Staring at ourselves as a conquering force, our mass destructive tendencies appear unstoppable. The act of unthinking mastery is in response a vehicle through which we can begin to change fundamentally our thinking and practices of this style of being human.

I am curious about how anticolonial thought and postcolonial literature can lead toward a radical engagement with forms of worldly living that do not entail mastery at the center of human subjectivity. My critique of mastery dovetails with ecologically motivated discourses such as posthumanism and new materialism, discourses that seek urgently to displace the anthropocentricism of the human. In these discourses, "things" come to *matter*—objects we ordinarily consider lifeless are positioned as vitally linked to our selves, our species, our individual and collective well-being, and our ability to sustain ourselves on the planet. Jane Bennett's call to "enliven" matter, to see life where we have failed to recognize it, is a means of chastening her own "fantasies of human mastery" by emphasizing the materiality of being itself. By seeing matter as lively rather than inanimate, and as therefore intimately connected to us, we can "expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests" (Bennett 2010, 122). Likewise, Mel Y. Chen's (2012) aim toward "animating" the world we ordinarily conceive as inanimate is similarly preoccupied with a distribution of agency that exceeds the human in order to queer our own subject positions. We can see clearly how the discourse of new materialism has, among other things, poignantly ecological stakes that aim to extend drastically the rights and agencies that have long since been guarded as essentially and exclusively human (even as new materialism and biopolitics would push us to seek forms of politics not dependent on humanist rights). Like other discourses positioned on the intellectual left, new materialisms name mastery as a deleterious aim but have yet to engage a theoretical formulation and analysis of mastery as such.

New materialisms have also tended to eschew literature as its object of study. If new materialism has been in part a response to and against the linguistic turn (Coole and Frost 2010), this perhaps accounts for why scholars in the field have in their attentions to corporeality overwhelmingly avoided an emphasis on language, literature, and their complex and contradictory relations to materiality. A critical exception is Christopher Breu's *Insistence*

of the Material (2014), which reads the late capitalist literature of materiality, attending to precisely the ways that materiality and language cannot be parsed. Engaging directly with new materialist discourse as a literary scholar, Breu argues that "in order for us to fully attend to the materialities of our bodies, we need to insist on the ways in which the materiality of language (as well as the forms of subjectivity shaped by language) and the materiality of the body not only interpenetrate and merge but also remain importantly distinct and sometimes form in contradiction to each other" (9). Breu's insistence is precisely that both language and bodies are material and have material effects that are interpenetrating and divergent. While the linguistic turn emphasized how language and discourse crucially shape our conceptualization of materiality, new materialisms have sought instead to attune to how materiality affects discourse, and how there are material relations that exceed what we can capture through language. These ideas are crucial to *Unthinking Mastery*, which braids together theories from the linguistic turn with the materialist turn in order to trace relations between forms of narrative and material politics across discourses of decolonization.

Vulnerable Reading

Unthinking Mastery engages the politics of decolonization through deconstructive, feminist, and queer readings. If, as I have suggested, mine is an impossible project, it is also a profoundly hopeful one that gazes toward a future it still cannot see. Failure is absolutely crucial to my attempts, and to the ways that the texts I engage across this book invite practices of reading that confront and question our subjectivities. Following Halberstam's suggestion that we read failure as a queer refusal of mastery (2011, 11), I attend to mastery's recurring failures in postcolonial literature as promising, hopeful, even utopian. In failing to master, in confronting our own desires for mastery where we least expect or recognize these desires, we become vulnerable to other possibilities for living, for being together in common, for *feeling* injustice and refusing it without the need to engage it through forms of conquest. I am compelled by R. Radhakrishnan's argument that far from being a sign of the instability or weakness of the postcolonial project, ambivalence is its vitality. Radhakrishnan argues that "postcoloniality is always already marked by ambivalence and that the task is to politicize this given ambivalence and produce it agentially" (2000, 37).[16] To repudi-

ate the ambivalence of postcolonial studies is to disavow its full potential as a mobilizing system of resistant thinking. If our very subjectivities have emerged through modern legacies of mastery, how could we not in fine Freudian style play out the *fort-da* of refusing mastery and calling it back? From within the logic of mastery, I dwell on ambivalence across the pages of this book, and I attend to the productive ways in which failure across anticolonial discourse and postcolonial literature is absolutely vital to the project of shaping a dehumanist politics to come.

What I call *vulnerable reading* is a dehumanist methodology that inherits two crucial deconstructive formulations of reading as a politics: Derrida's (1988) insistence that one cannot simply reverse binaries but must displace them is vital to the task of disentangling mastery. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's attention to the essential unmasterability of literature allows for a reframing of reading and teaching that foregrounds "othering . . . as an end in itself" (2003, 13). Reading encounters can for Spivak "rearrange" our desires in ways that are not anticipatable, and thus are vitally antimasterful and lead us toward our vulnerabilities. Working within this deconstructive tradition, Sarah Wood, in her attempt to read "without mastery," summons a future reader who would not be beholden to mastery, one who can "be ready for all the things that happen to someone who doesn't read as if they belonged with, or to, the right side, the side of the master" (2014, 20).

Building on these deconstructive reading practices, and following Judith Butler's (2004) work on "collective vulnerability" as a mode of redressing sudden violence, I advance vulnerable reading as an open, continuous practice that resists foreclosures by remaining unremittingly susceptible to new world configurations that reading texts—literary, artistic, philosophical, and political—can begin to produce. Vulnerable readings resist disciplinary enclosure, refusing to restrict in advance how and where one might wander through textual engagement. Across *Unthinking Mastery*, I engage closely with thinkers and texts that I love. We might call this a queer love, following Elizabeth Freeman, who writes beautifully in *Time Binds* of her "queerest commitment" to close reading, to "the decision to unfold, slowly, a small number of imaginative texts rather than amass a weighty archive of or around texts" (2010, xvii). Like Freeman, my own book stays close to those thinkers and texts I cannot do without, and finds in them the messy utopian promises of dehumanism.

Vulnerability brings to the fore subjectivities that are shaped by the intimate awareness of relations of dependency. Dwelling on how the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, exposed America's own vulnerability in relation to the "outside" world, Butler theorizes vulnerability as a mode of resisting ongoing cycles of violence and retribution. The sociopolitical response of America at this moment revealed a particular and particularly American subject, one that sought to "maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations, its ties to the international community" (Butler 2004, 41). Instantiated at the national level, this subject "seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features 'other to' itself" (41). Urging us to move away from this dialectical formulation of identity, Butler pressures a thinking of dependency that can produce alternative forms of subjective being and collectivity that do not remain hinged to a politics of vengeance against and disempowerment of others.

Although in this text Butler is committed to a thinking of human relations in particular, her work exceeds the human realm since it reveals a mode of praxis in which the subject recognizes that every aspect of itself is dependent on every*body* and every*thing* around it. Even while the discourse of modernity has disavowed this vital dependency through its desire to render the human master of everything, the fragility of the human in the wake and anticipation of so many intercultural and ecological catastrophes can no longer afford to pretend that it is not dependent materially, bodily, and psychically on others, both human and nonhuman. Reading as a practice of unmasterful vulnerability can challenge the very foundations of being human that make possible everyday life in the "globalized" world, opening up other modes of performing humanity that can become habitual. The practice of vulnerable reading can move us "beyond" mastery, not in the sense of exceeding it but in the sense of *surviving* it in order to envision being otherwise in and for the world. By reading literature vulnerably—with a willingness toward undoing the very logic that constitutes our own subjectivities—postcolonial literary texts can open us to other earthly relations and assemblages.

While I devote considerable energy to a critical reading of how mas-

tery is unthinkingly reproduced within those very discourses that aim to reject its more overtly colonial forms, I do so precisely because of a haunting awareness that my own thinking, prose, and practices are riddled with forms of mastery I still cannot identify. Through vulnerable reading, I turn back to myself to let narratives (and my readings of them) unearth me as a desiring, historical subject. Vulnerable reading rewrites me. A critical engagement with texts that shape my own ethical, political, and artistic imagination is a way of also becoming other to myself, of becoming myself differently. Aligned with Cixous, who posits the fact of her desire for unmasterful life as pointing to a system that is despite itself "letting something else through," my critique of the limits of the thinkers and texts with whom I write is driven by an aim to unearth the (other) ethico-political possibilities that remain active within their thought—and within my own.

The Form of *Unthinking Mastery*

The first two chapters of *Unthinking Mastery* dwell within anticolonial discourse to flesh out the complex ways by which it aimed to undo colonial mastery through other masterful forms. In these chapters, I elucidate how colonial mastery becomes bound to other masterful practices of decolonization through the submission of both physical bodies and less tangible bodies of knowledge. In chapter 1, I examine the work of Frantz Fanon and Mohandas K. Gandhi to situate mastery in the theory and practice of decolonization according to two of its most discerning thinkers. While Fanon formulated corporeal violence against the master as a necessary act that would restore the humanity of the slave, Gandhi insisted on nonviolence as essential to the emergence of a truly liberated subject. Although Gandhi and Fanon appear to be diametrically opposed in their theories of decolonization, their strategies for liberation similarly employed mastery as a concept and practice that was vital to the emergence of a fully decolonized subject. Through a feminist-materialist reading practice, I argue that this reliance on mastery remains bound to dialectical thinking and produces within Gandhian and Fanonian thought a series of sacrificial figures—women, animals, the disabled, and outcasts, for instance—that haunt anticolonial discourse as its "remainders" and have a critical resonance for the politics and practices of decolonization in the present.

Forms of corporeal mastery that were so crucial to colonization and its undoing were likewise echoed through anticolonial formulations of less tangible linguistic bodies. In chapter 2, I dwell on the valences of mastery in the anticolonial language debates. Decolonization necessitated critical considerations of colonial and native languages in envisioning liberation struggles and postcolonial education and governance. Like the physical bodies mastered through colonization, so too were languages—both colonial and native—envisioned as bodies that needed either to be mastered or repudiated in the passage toward national independence. Tracing the discourse of language mastery in anticolonial thought through Gandhi, Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Albert Memmi, I then turn to how postcolonial studies and world literature have in turn claimed language mastery as an intellectual necessity. Language mastery, I argue, travels across intellectual currents and unites them through an indiscrete drive toward conquest. Across various discursive fields, these rehearsals of linguistic mastery are intimately tied to practices of mastery over other more tangible bodies.

In the final three chapters, mastery is supplanted by my emphasis on the potentialities of dehumanism through engagements with postcolonial literary texts. I turn to texts that traverse multiple genres—the novel, the short story, the lecture-narrative, and the garden and travel memoir. The progression of these chapters is marked by a widening frame through which to read the human and its hopeful reconfigurations. Moving from intrahuman relations to human/animal relations and finally to the relation between humans and their ecological habitats, *Unthinking Mastery* glides toward increasingly expansive frames for (re)situating the human. Across genres and geographies, subjects repeatedly emerge as those in contest and compliance with forms, desires, and practices of mastery in and beyond the postcolony. These characters struggle with the tensions between how they live and who they imagine themselves to be, with their material and psychic lives that come into unwanted conflict with the disavowed lives of others. I read these characters critically and sympathetically—not with a will to point out their weaknesses and contradictions but to see how narrative prose elucidates the complexities of postcolonial subjectivity and the possibilities for other psychic and affective forms of being that are mobilized when we abide by literary language and representation.

In chapter 3, I analyze representations of humanitarian workers in conflict with their putative objects through readings of J. M. Coetzee's novel

Life & Times of Michael K (1983) and Mahasweta Devi's short story "Little Ones" (1998). These texts play with what I call *humanitarian fetishism*—the process of obscuring the complicity of humanitarian agents with those systems of inequality they seek to redress. In these texts, the desire and practice of humanitarian workers to offer aid is revealed to be inextricable with a simultaneous desire to hold mastery over their objects of aid. They also emphasize the forceful work of narrative in the confirmation of the humanitarian subject as "innocent" or removed from politics. Pressing on how particular forms of aid remain inscribed by and complicit with colonialism, these texts usher readers toward a critique of liberal subjectivity itself. In so doing, they edge us toward a dehumanist ethics through which we, along with the protagonists, tarry with the fictions that have produced and enforced our own subjectivities.

Chapter 4 takes up readings of Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007) and Coetzee's "lecture-narrative" *The Lives of Animals* (1999), texts that in very different but intimately sutured ways refuse an easy division between the human and the animal. By emphasizing the double valence of "dispossession," I look to these texts as ways of both moving toward those beings dispossessed by the current global order and toward a dispossession of our own masterful subjectivities. I begin with a reading of Sinha's novel, based loosely on the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India. The novel's dehumanized protagonist Animal, whose body is crippled by toxic exposure, claims his animality and comes to mobilize a dehumanist, humanimal ethics by the end of the novel. In Coetzee's lecture-narrative, his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, an aging white female fiction writer, wishes to claim her animality and to convince, against Western reason, her academic audience to radically rethink their disciplinary refusals of animal subjectivity. Costello's failure in the face of reason becomes a call to imaginative horizons and to ethical possibilities of humanimal collective living. She presents us with a contingent ethics based on feeling, on ambivalence, and on the critical, even hopeful, necessity of human failure.

I return to failure and complicity in chapter 5, where I explore the garden as an ecological site rooted in (and uprooted by) histories of violence and promise. Through evocations of my own ecological pasts, and readings of Jamaica Kincaid's garden prose, I summon the productive potential of discomfort and entanglement in rethinking how we might re-earth ourselves as planetary beings. I examine what I call Kincaid's *vital ambivalence*

in the production of her American garden, in which we discover a subject that is at times blatantly contradictory, at times violent in her desires to master her garden, at others projecting on postcolonial subjects of the Himalayan region the same kinds of Orientalist configurations that she disavows explicitly in her critique of colonial mastery. These contradictory, disturbing, and provocative ways of writing the postcolonial subject are, I argue, a most promising gesture toward an earthing of human subjectivity in the wake of ecological disaster. Precisely by exposing the radical incongruities and "seedy" underbelly of the subject, Kincaid compels us to tend to our less masterful potentialities.

While mastery emerges somewhat differently across each chapter of this book, it does so in ways that are essential to think together. My readings of revolutionary discourse and literary prose repeatedly confront the ways that "coherent" narratives of self and mastery are always based on far more fragile materialities and psychic displacements than their narratives enable. In so doing, they urge us toward dehumanism as a political practice that can produce profound psychic and material effects. These texts, as though anticipating Halberstam, recuperate failure as a necessary condition of resistance, collectivity, and utopian promise in unmasterful relations among life forms. In the coda, I begin to think expressly about what it might mean to *survive* mastery, to live with mastery in such a way that lets other worldly forms of engagement resound. Through a brief reading of the final scene in Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (2002), the anticolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I dwell on listening as a critical mode of becoming vulnerable to the voices—human and nonhuman, audible and muted—that are always sounding even when we have not been trained or allowed ourselves to listen: Listening, as opposed to voicing that which we "know." Listening, as an act that might let each other in—psychically, physically—to another's ways of inhabiting the world; to being entities that are always touching and being touched by others, even when we are not aware of this touching, even when this touching is entirely unpredictable.

I once shied away from the critical charge of being "utopian," as though utopia had nothing to do with the politics of the present. In fact, utopic desire materializes in tactile and corporeal ways, and it does so in particular places—even while it reaches toward an elsewhere that is not yet at hand. The desire for utopia is always and already a failed desire, but the

real and contextual effects of its failure are precisely where we can find mastery's interstices. Now, in the face so many ongoing, firmly entrenched, and unthinking forms of mastery—over each other and over other worldly forms—it is a charge that *Unthinking Mastery* and its author will love to embrace.

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 neoliberal 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). Contexualizing 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