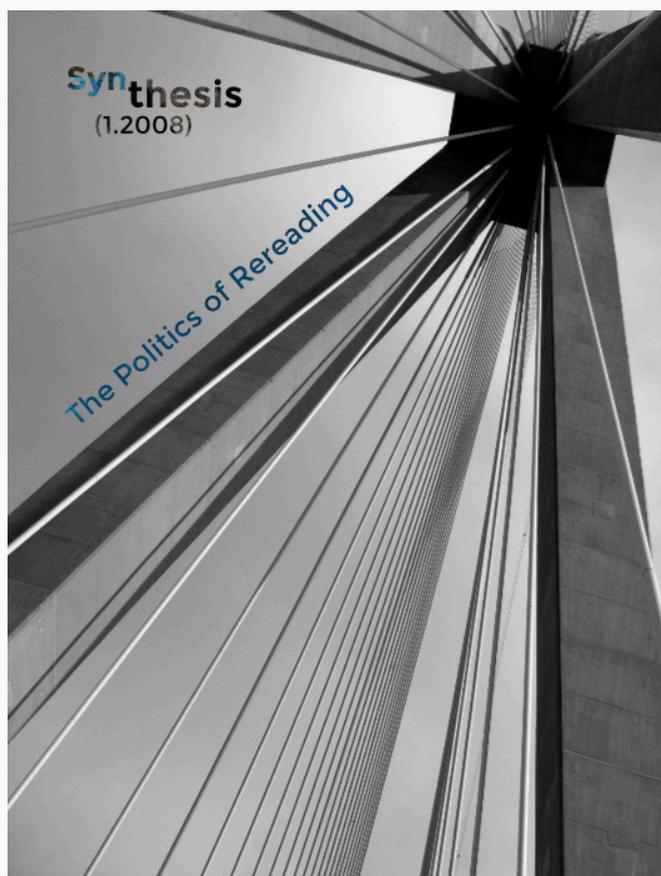


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 1 (2008)

The Politics of Rereading



Reading Contrapuntally, Living in the Present: An Interview with R. Radhakrishnan

Mina Karavanta, R. Radhakrishnan

doi: [10.12681/syn.16607](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16607)

Copyright © 2008, Mina Karavanta, R. Radhakrishnan



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

Reading Contrapuntally, Living in the Present: An Interview with R. Radhakrishnan

by
Mina Karavanta

Mina Karavanta: In a roundtable discussion entitled "The End of Postcolonial Theory?" recently published in the *PMLA*,¹ the debate focuses on the possibility that postcolonial theory is yet another "end-narrative" that may operate as a symptom of the "potential exhaustion of postcolonialism as a paradigm." Some of the arguments that articulate the pivotal points of the debate are that "postcolonialism failed to examine postcolonial empires as changing imperial formations" and, as Edward Said and others have argued, "failed to recognize the persistence of neocolonialism, imperialism, and the 'structures of dependency'" (Coronil 637). The other view, supported by Wenzel and Gikandi, is that the announced but not yet arrived end might very well be a moment of recognition and fulfillment of the term and its claims on history as a grand narrative of the West, and that if "the era of postcolonial studies is over, it ends just when the need for historically informed critique of imperialism could not be more urgent" (Wenzel 634; Gikandi 635). In *Diasporic Mediations*, you argue that postcoloniality (emphasizing upon the term as both an event and a critique as opposed to the "ism" in postcolonialism that confounds the two) is the name of the "relationship of historical continuity, however problematic, between colonialism and nationalism, and between nationalism and its significant Other, the diaspora" (159).² Is this relationship now transformed in the era of globalization, which only means, as Wenzel puts it, that the term has not been exhausted but is in fact needed more than ever? How does your work respond to this debate?

R. Radhakrishnan: The pronouncement of this end narrative does not cause me much concern. The question is more about who is making such a pronouncement and on the basis of what credentials rather than whether the end narrative holds true or not. The postcolonial itself has often been debated as a term; whether it is politically progressive or not, whether the very term is a form of capitulation to metropolitan academic avant-gardism or not, whether it elides, in bad faith, the on the ground realities of neo-colonialism, whether it really says anything more than terms such as "Third World," "Anglo-phone," "Franco-phone," and so on. The temporality of the post or its *postality* is purely a theoretical concept. But, what is a theoretical concept and what is its relationship to history? Why, for example, and Homi Bhabha's work comes to mind, does postcoloniality privilege "temporality" at the expense of "historicity"? Postcolonial theory is the result of the limited collaboration between certain political and intellectual needs and the advent of poststructuralist theory into thinking in general. Spivak's work is crucial in this regard. Postcoloniality became postcolonial not in response to political agendas but in response to a certain intellectual need and a coalition formed between poststructuralism and postcoloniality. This was an extremely exciting correlation but the important question is what it signified then and what it signifies now. If postcolonial theory represented anyone in the world, whom did it represent? Who is being designated as the end of the postcolonial?

Partly the question is about the category itself. If it is a theoretical construct, then what is its historical referent? Is the category itself a theoretical construct of the First World that seeks to de- and re-territorialize the so-called Third World? Is there, and should there be, an exemplary card-carrying subject of postcoloniality? If postcoloniality really is a world-historical category, then is everybody in the world *now* a postcolonial subject? Wouldn't such a global definition dehistoricize that which is postcolonial within postcoloniality? Postcolonial theory has also been lambasted for a certain lack of definitional clarity, but on the other hand, this very lack of definitional clarity is perceived to be a positive trait; not being specific, it can be made available to a broader interchange among different constituencies rather than operate merely as a substitute for Anglophone or Francophone or Third World or Commonwealth studies.

The answer to these questions regarding the end narrative is partly yes and partly no. It is not easy to tell, empirically or historically, if something has come to an end. As Raymond Williams reminds us, any synchronic moment is simultaneously dominant, hegemonic, residual, and emergent. It is certainly a matter, *à la Gramsci*, of compiling an inventory of multiple historical traces. *But the fascination with the post is in fact a fascination with breaks and epistemological coupure.* To this day, for instance, some people think that the term postmodern does not make too much sense for it too has been imbued by this end-narrative debate and has undergone the same interrogation, if we stop here to think of Habermas' analysis of modernity as an "incomplete project." Hence, the term "postmodern" has not been more stable than the term postcolonial, as it means so many different things for many different people. In that sense, we need more distance to make such pronouncements. What does the pronouncement of this end mean? Does it mean that a certain theoretical paradigm has been exhausted, and certain content has been once and for all spoken for and resolved? Can a break, for example, be only in theory, but not in practice or in reality? Would this then mean that theoretical thinking has gone ahead, non-representationally, ahead of lived history? What then happens to this lag? Is theory then in bad faith or is theoretical thinking yet another name for the utopian critique that has the obligation to acknowledge a certain immanence without being paralyzed by it? But the most important thing to remember in the context of postcoloniality is the critical category of asymmetry.

M. K: When something is invented as a theory, it may already be ahead of history. And then there are other moments when the contrary holds true and the theoretical may be a belated narrative that lags behind history. If we uphold the claim that postcolonial theory begins with theorists like Said, Bhabha, Spivak, the subaltern group, we perceive this theoretical straddle to be always already lagging behind politics. Some of the postcolonial critics like Said come from politically troubled territories and are bringing their complex involvement in the history of postcoloniality into the West and its intellectual terrains where they continue the strife. But in the western intellectual terrain, the effort involves staying in touch with the multiple registers of the event of postcoloniality and bridging the gap or contrapuntally sustaining the relationship between event and narrative. In this sense, the postcolonial operates as a network of discourses that do not operate after, *post*, the event but sometimes behind it. This double register of the postcolonial posits the question of the kind of work that is at hand for people like the subaltern group in India and the ways this work differs for the postcolonial critics working in the West, reproducing the postcolonial by wrenching it from its context as a textual event in the West. *Postality* then harbors the contradiction between the event and its representation; it is an act of writing and representation, an act of rereading history and an act of reproducing this rewriting that, for instance, takes the subaltern work out of its context and reconstellates it in other debates and discourses of the West. Your work, and especially your recent book *History, the Human, and the World Between* focuses on the act of rereading as an act of revision that is embedded in the politics of representation both as a return to the past and as a movement in the present with a view of the "yet-to-come." You call this a "performative contradiction" that inheres in the relationship between text and event.³ How does this contradiction mark the relationship between the act of reading as an event and the act of reproducing it and making it marketable? Can we say that the link between event and text is stronger at least in the case of the field of postcolonial studies that has afforded space to a politics of intercultural translation and has contributed to the production of what Joan Anim-Addo calls "shared knowledges"?⁴

R.R.: This question really posits the problematic of postcolonial theory becoming an academic formation (to invoke Raymond Williams term of "formation" and distinction from the concept of the project). The real question is what exactly *Orientalism* did achieve that had not been done prior to Edward Said's text; there are people and other kinds of work who resent the fact that the inauguration or the shift of the field is often identified with the publication of *Orientalism* for other work had already been done in the field. While some people might agree to the evaluation that posits *Orientalism* at the beginnings of the field, they also argue that there had been a lot of work going on long before the publication of Said's work. What was unique about *Orientalism*? It takes a certain kind

of academic theory seriously and combines that with questions of political perspectivism. This raises another question: who was Said's addressee? Was he speaking for the Orient or for the oriental critique of the West? Said's own agency is complex as his position is a position of a multiply informed in-between. Does he speak for the non-West? Abdul Jan Mohamed recognizes in Said the specular, border intellectual. A lot of people will say that of course he does not and he cannot do so; the best thing that Said does is to activate the West for itself in ways that the West has not yet imagined for itself. This is a gesture that constitutes the postcolonial as a double performance: as the construction of the colonial as an affirmation of itself and as a critique of its colonial past. If one were to say that all that the Third World offers as a possibility is critique, it would be a partial statement. However, any potential affirmations of the Third World for its own behalf could not be cut off from this critique. The question remains as to how you can critically articulate the act of critical negativity with the act of affirmation. You live in a space that is neither the one nor the other and this is partly what is happening. Hence the critical nature of Said's work that focuses not on identity or the essentialist politics of authenticity, but the politics of secular representation. This is where Said's work has extraordinary valence for it has come to confront the West with a specific position that can be formulated in the following question: Can you be an academic, a professor of literature, and talk about certain historical, political and not alone aesthetic issues, and how can you gain and sustain your legitimacy to do so? For a generation of postcolonial critics in the West, Said's effect is incalculable for his extraordinary and inteventionary erudition that was indissolubly related with the political. Said's ability to play the game both as an academic act and a political activist act, to be able to engage the political as a professor while reading certain texts not only on non-western but also western grounds has radically transformed our fundamental understanding of certain terms like modernity. No longer can we simply say modernity without saying "colonial modernity"; it is almost obligatory to do so not only to be politically correct but because it is an epistemological imperative. Or take a term like the "West" for instance; we know that it is differentiated and there is no such thing as a homogeneous "West." Even the non-western and formerly colonized subjects can argue that, and yet, while that is true, this term "West" has been used as the name of a systematic and systemic exploitation and abuse of the colonized others. Failing to take into account its differentiating dynamic of course results into essentialism but it is this essentialism that has traveled over to the colonies. Such an example invokes the Achebe and Conrad debate. For Said, Conrad continues to be one of the progenitors of postcolonial thought while for Achebe, Conrad is a completely different case: Conrad's text is the body of "the horror, the horror."⁵

M.K: And while being sympathetic to Achebe's abomination at Kurz's "the horror, the horror" and his critique of Conrad's contribution to the long history of Africa being misrepresented as the "heart of darkness," Said does insist on Conrad and the need to reread his text, especially in view of Achebe's rejection.

R.R.: To Said, the coevalness of the colonized with the colonizer is of utmost importance. But while this is true, he is mindful of the fact that Conrad is giving hell to the white hegemony. Achebe does not recognize this as part of his constitutive plan. And such a reaction is understandable for Achebe's response marks the extent to which Third World writers see themselves as part of the other mission, which is a critique of the West within the West. So the question is how far you choose to participate. For Said, there is a constituency that is constituted at the heart of what I would call the counterpoint. The contrapuntal for someone like Aijaz Ahmad, with whom I disagree, sees that as ambivalence. To Ahmad "ambivalence" is a flaw, a form of temptation that has to be avoided in the name of the single-mindedly political. Whereas I would like to believe that "ambivalence" can be made to work productively, historically, and agentially. But this also means that a distinction has to be made between ambivalence as "given" and ambivalence as a product of historical-theoretical labor. The word postcolonial is partly a matter of who the "we" are; if this "we" refers to the theorists and the activists, where are they located? Are they in the West or out of the West? What do you mean by the West? As regards the end narrative that we addressed earlier, rather than deflect the interaction of the

question and not take a position, we need to engage it. When someone says that he or she is a postcolonial critic, the real question is this: What work are they doing, and *in the name of* what axiology are they valorizing and legitimating their work? Said says he is doing postcolonial work, I say and you say that. How does the postcolonial get constituted as a category in all of these claims is the real question. In a typical philosophical fashion, what are the designated objects of its analysis? What kind of practice does it involve? Is it concentrated on certain texts that geopolitically refer to the postcolonial area? Hence, in the name of postcolonial studies, we are studying political formations, certain texts, pursuing a certain analysis. That I think is the clash; you might perceive that you are doing postcolonial work and I might say that it is not. Is the postcolonial addressed to some referent or signified or to a set of practices, a way of doing things? History and theory come together in certain ways: is postcoloniality happening in one place or in any place? The tension lies right there between the postcolonial as perspective and postcoloniality as an event. Take, for example, gender studies: operating as a category, it provides you with the space to read whatever and not necessarily texts that relate to women. The postcolonial is opened up as such a perspective; it is de-categorized and in a sense generalized. In that light, you can be doing postcolonial work in reading Edmund Spenser and people have been doing that all along. What should then be the property of the field of postcolonial studies or of the postcolonial itself? If you are wrenching it from its context and allegorizing it, you may not be doing something wrong but then again you may be doing something politically challenging or even improper. The tension here is between postcoloniality as allegory and postcoloniality as history.

A similar questioning applies to the concept of the postmodern. At what point do you draw the distinction between those texts in which the postmodern as an element appears earlier before its institutionalization and a certain moment in time when postmodernism has become a full-blown thing? Is there a certain event that names the inauguration of the postmodern versus the idea that potentially everything is postmodern? Is Melville postmodern, or is Sterne postmodern? When is the postmodern merely episodic and when can it be said to have come of age as a coherent epistemology? The same way you can be a feminist and read Shakespeare. When is something a perspective and when is it a substance, a determinate content? We need to think through the strange and estranging, non-dialectical relationship between the content of the area from which a methodology springs up and the field where the methodology goes beyond its proper historical boundaries.

M.K: What you make clear in your response is that, in all of these narratives, there is always an incommensurable difference between event and narrative, between postcoloniality and the postcolonial. I think that there is always the danger of reducing the one to the other. On the one hand, we have an event, a very heterogeneous event, and on the other hand, we have a network of discourses and narratives that represent, revise—to invoke here your beautiful reading of revisionism in the second chapter of *History, the Human and the World Between*—and reproduce the event(s). And this network is not only a web of representations that reread and revise history and politics but also a site for the production of the historical and the political. This invokes Walter Dignolo's idea that all the non-western productions of terms exhausted in the West—like the term modernity—are conducive to knowledge production, new modernities, new "border gnoseologies" that take place where the West considers to be the non-western world.⁶ The reconstellation of terms in foreign terrains and contexts produces a proliferation of texts that propose acts of rereading that are neither nostalgic nor revisionist. Said engages Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a text that can be critically reread; in opposition to Achebe's austere, albeit justifiable rejection—an act of rereading itself—Said offers the possibility of recognizing the human question through the complicity of the colonial and postcolonial cultures with the metropolitan culture. You argue that this act of revision is not a nostalgic act of rewriting or rereading the past in order to clarify, correct, and fix it to a single interpretation but an affirmation, a statement, a new vision of the present, a vision that articulates the political event of what Derrida's "imaginative grammar"⁷ names as the "yet-to-come." Could you elaborate on the connection between the return to the past and the turn to the present?

R.R.: The idea of the return, and here I invoke Fanon, Adrienne Rich, and Nietzsche non-identically, the notion of the return, is part of the question as to where everything is happening. Is the event a singular event tied to history? Is there something to return to? Is a return necessarily nostalgic, and if so, in the name of what? Or, is the return purely modal and methodological without guarantees? Nothing may be found, or what is found may not be what one thought one was going to find. The theme of the return is the classic theme of historiography. Why indeed return? Does every subject have to return, or are some subjects more tied to the imperative of the return motif? Is the return ontic, ontological, historical? I have discussed this topic at length in the first chapter of my recent book from Duke. Let's switch to Said, who for example returns to Conrad obsessively. France is postcolonial and so is Algeria, England is postcolonial and so is India, but with a difference. Following Said, we could say that the question of the return concerns the extent to which you want to keep the doubleness alive. And to see the doubleness as historically valid means to establish coevalness rather than to assert separatism. Should India return to Colonialism for ever as it endeavors to historicize itself? It is certainly the context in which globalization is happening. Something called the West is being reproduced all over the world not in any kind of normative way as the world is being hybridized. The West after all is not necessarily the property of the West.

I think that Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" can be critically operative in the problematic of the postcolonial. The word postcolonial characterizes a variety of countries, and there are different accountabilities involved. The term "post" retains the colonial and the tension between the two, as the "post" does not rid of the colonial. This does not imply a "forgetting of" but rather a "keeping in tension." The "post" after what? The moment you posit this question, there is colonialism looming large. Then we negotiate in what different ways this double contingency is realized, whether in the form of a macro location or a micro-political subject position. This is exactly what Said refers to as an irresolvable asymmetry in his beautiful essay, "Intellectuals in the Postcolonial World." Said's work is very important in this respect for he engages the following questions: How do you maintain a contrapuntal reading and mobilize each memory politically? Is the counterpoint a primarily aesthetic figure that contains opposition or is there a "real" in the counterpoint?

M.K.: I think that you are absolutely right. Said's proposition for an engaged contrapuntal reading in and of the world, what he offers as the essence of secular criticism, is an important act of rereading, an act that brings together temporalities that remain irreducible to each other and yet are forced into a co-existence with each other. This is of course a critical co-existence that complicates rather than resolves the praxis of secular criticism, a complexity that drives Aamir Mufti to aptly invert the terms and name this kind of critique "critical secularism."⁸ This act of contrapuntal reading shades a terrain, a territory of secular contradictions and affiliations that come to the fore through this act of reading.

R.R.: And this brings us to wonder about the contrapuntal and the counterpoint. Is the counterpoint a primarily aesthetic figure that is intrinsic to the text? Does it contain opposition within itself or does it emerge from a really antagonistic act? What do we make of the effort of the counterpoint to secede from the text or its context and inaugurate its own project of critique and exercise? If a certain work is contrapuntal, is it contrapuntal essentially? In other words, is the counterpoint an essentially structural element? Suddenly you encounter the counterpoint at a particular moment in Bach's text but it is not necessarily manifested throughout the text. But if the counterpoint is a structural element and not a mere synecdoche, then once it is removed, it makes no or little sense. A connoisseur of music, Said is interested in the contrapuntal as a fundamental structural element that offers an analytical, hermeneutic, even world historical way of understanding the differential. It is also a question about the relationship of reciprocity to antagonism. Which founds which? How does "recognition" operate within the aesthetic figurality of the counterpoint? It is the space where the work of collaboration, even impossible togetherness can operate. The same element is manifested in the debate between Gandhi and Tagore. Tagore, a polymath, a musician, a philosopher, turns to

Gandhi to whom he gives all the credit for his political and intellectual effort to claim India's right to independence, and offers him the gift of critical solidarity. "Yes, you are the man, we follow you," he seems to be saying, but this act of embrace has to engage critique. To Gandhi's call for a forceful and unwavering political non-co-operation, Tagore offers the vision of fusion. Not that he denies the reality of colonialism, but he understands it differently, as a poet, as an artist who wishes to establish a different relationship to the political as such. Contrapuntality also has to do with issues of synchronicity: in which or in whose time is the counterpoint being performed?

M.K.: Tagore seems to be laying a claim on a politics of reading that will enable the subjects of the new independence to claim and formulate their history through a persistent deconstruction of that history and its hyperreality. His position is the articulation of a hope for a kind of freedom and release that will not be reductive and oversimplifying. Dipesh Chakrabarty analyzes this concept of "hyperreality" in *Provincializing Europe* and produces a narration of that history that is responsible for consolidating the boundaries in the world, the history that produced its own structure by inflating the real and substituting it with the hyperreal. ⁹ The subject involved is forced to deal with it as a hyperreality, as a kind of fiction that cannot however be the only element that is constitutive of reality.

R.R.: Yes, it is an act of de-epistemologizing the effects and claims of colonialism. It is like the truth of racism, which, as Nietzsche would put it, is the truth of a lie. The racist discourse has actually made truth claims. How do you deal with it?

M.K.: I think that you deal with it as if this were not the only element constitutive of your freedom and your future. It reminds me of that moment in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where Baby Suggs takes the community to the woods for a healing ritual; right there, at the heart of the clearing, she asks them to celebrate the present and think of the future while helping them heal themselves and their bodies of the past that cannot be erased but has to be dealt with. So the past is present but the future of this community is the real imperative. Tagore seems to be asking for a kind of revision that in your work you have elaborated on as a kind of return that is not constituted by the past but is informed by the demands of the present and the future. But of course, there is a double gesture/register that creates the problematic. On the one hand, you have the performance of going back, a return that is nostalgic and painful, suggesting that you may not be able to overcome the always already return to the ruins, to those things that you are burdened with at the outset of your journey. Then there is what I read as performativity that produces a kind of journey out of this return and allows the subject to follow a trace not in the past any more but in the future. This reading of the ruin as both the wreck, namely, as something that belongs to another history that happened, and as the trace that now leads you to the present and the future, may be the actual work of tracing the trace that will lead you not away from the wreck in an act of self-willed oblivion but out of it. Again this double gesture of critique looks for the limit of the act of reading, and is caught between the praxis of theorizing and the strife for the political. Can we think of this return as a double gesture: as a performance operating as a way of rewriting and revision and as a performative gesture marking the present and the new?

R.R.: It is a doubleness that reveals the operation of a perspective. The question is to what degree the perspective is inevitable and to what degree one is capable of recognizing the limitations of this perspective; one names this as an act of freedom, that is, freedom from something that one can identify and name. If freedom is nothing but freedom from the master, then, the very value of freedom itself is in some sense mitigated and limited. Given the historical condition, how is the question of freedom asked? That is a doubleness of location; within location comes a certain finitude. For instance, I am envisioning freedom as a woman, a subaltern, an ex-slave, a lesbian; what is the semantico-ideological burden of the "as a" here? What is the relationship between freedom as such, the name-less and un-namable freedom, and the freedom that is wrested historically from a certain privation. Moreover, as Tagore would ask of Gandhi, is freedom something that the subject gives herself, or is freedom always a freedom *from* a certain historical master/oppressor?

This strife reveals some of the different ways by which history is problematized. The truth of history itself, one might claim, is a generic truth. In my forthcoming book, *When is the Political*,¹⁰ I discuss history as a genre and the way in which history as a fact returns home and unsettles it. It will be interesting to investigate this doubleness of history and see why, for instance, Morrison returns to the history of slavery. It is a case that reveals the contingencies of the doubleness to the past: on the one hand, the past enables you but, on the other hand, you are up against the hex, the nightmare of history. This posits the question of how you experience history under different conditions, how history affirms or denies subject positions and realities, and how this is distributed around the world in different geopolitical locations and different subject positions. This is symptomatically revealed in the doubleness that constitutes the counterpoint. The first question that is posited is the statue of its limitations. Lynching, for instance, has to be narrated and remembered. Then a question emerges: at which point do you say that there is an original moment, like the Middle Passage, that constitutes slavery and how do you reconcile that impossible moment with the present? W.E.B Du Bois offers the path of "double consciousness" as a way of reading history contrapuntally intertwining the historical with the political. The contrapuntal and "double consciousness" can be inaugural principles of a politics of rereading that tries to attend to the text and the event without abiding by invested political interests. And of course the most difficult challenge is how to read the future anterior in the present moment. The Gandhi and Tagore debate symptomatically reveals that challenge. Gandhi may be sympathetic to Tagore's proposition for a politics of fusion that allows the poet to be as transgressive as possible thus keeping multiple possibilities open. It is a kind of deferment that the poet may be able to afford but Gandhi claims his position as the position of the politician dealing with a specific event called colonialism. In that context, they are debating in the semantics of affirmation and negation. And, of course, Tagore is not saying "yes" to colonialism; instead, he is saying "no" to a politics of negation. As a mystic poet, he is saying "yes" to life and to the possibility of foreclosing negative misrecognition. That is the status of the affirmative: let his be a "yes" as a state of being, for at some point the negatives will not add up to a positive.

M.K.: It is a debate that unconceals the problematic of critique, as a problematic informed by the complexity of this "ay" and "nay" politics. Critique is tied to the limits of epistemologies; it aims at finding the breaks, producing close readings that are attentive to fissures and margins, and operates as a gesture that is both analytical and envisioning. Critique is caught too much between the two and the praxis of affirmation often appears to be overwritten by the return of critique to these breaks and fissures. As much as we like Derrida, the possibility of critique that is offered through his "imaginative grammar" does not always appear to be adequate to the conditions of neo-colonialism. The impatience that critique produces seems to be counterproductive to its ability to envision the "yet-to-come" and the impossible possible in an affirmative way. Do you see a rupture in this problematic, especially in view of your work that I find it to be always already attentive to a "conjunctural articulation" of the political, the literary and the theoretical?

R.R.: One of the first questions you pose and Derrida poses too is whether critique can have a corporeal referent; to what extent critique is heteronomous and to what extent autonomous. It is autonomous modally but heteronomous ideologically. For a critique to be truly effective, it has to be heterogeneous with its object, but heterogeneous semantically, ideologically, paradigmatically, and modally. The problem of critique is the question of situatedness and how you mix in a certain heteronomy with a certain autonomy. In that light, Said's concept of secular criticism is very important. There are some cases in which the secular does not sit well with some people and then it is a matter of historicizing or de-historicizing it. The real question is whether you can separate the advantages of secularism from the conditions under which it has been introduced. It may be good but it was introduced to you at a moment when it inferiorized your other subject and ideological positions. How do you separate out that particular historical moment which has a certain hegemonic force? If only you could forget the fact that it is indissolubly related with the praxis of colonialism, then it would be a fantastic moment (utopic as it sounds). There were writers who wanted to write like

Virginia Woolf in India, despite their profound awareness of the colonizing and hegemonic force of English. But in a strange way and crazy way, they were able to be attracted to Virginia Woolf and appreciate the superb writer that she is. It seems to me that in the postcolonial context the secular becomes the site of critique: and when something becomes a critique, in a strange way it becomes unmarked. Endorsing and questioning secularism; the critic becomes a referee in an endless game.

M.K.: In *Theory in an Uneven World*, you define globality as a *utopia sans politics* or actually as the "utopian resolution of the problems of the world" that has "bracketed away once and for all questions of representation and ideological perspectivism" (99).¹¹ This is a clear position against Hardt and Negri and other theorists of globalization, who embrace the positive possibilities of globality as the empire of the multitude, as the site where new alliances and coalitions between the peoples not of nations any longer but of the world can be formed. How can this "multitude" be conceptualized in politically operative and heterogeneous ways?

R.R.: Allow me to answer the question with a story. In Madras, there is this plaza called Spenser Plaza. Fancy staff, expensive...high tech promo at the heart of the city. To be able to spend money there, you have to be rich, internationally rich. You have to have really transcended affluence in local terms and be rich universally. One of my good friends used to own a bookstore in that Plaza and I used to hang out every time I visited Madras. On the sidewalk, there was an amputated person on a little platform on wheels that he would move with his hands. He is a beggar person, a beggar human being. And I would see him every day and we would talk about politics. Maybe you would here say that this is my middle-class morality taking a guilt-free ride: he would come to say "hello" and I would talk to him to alleviate myself of guilt. And yet, here we are, two human beings talking to each other. In those days, I would give him a thousand rupees (which is about two and a half dollars). So here we are in the center of this affluent place forming a relationship: he is a fellow human being and at the same time he is not. Can I deal with the unevenness that globalization perpetuates? In this immense Spenser Plaza, he is sitting there and there are people going by; two incommensurable realities co-exist and are non-dialectically juxtaposed. I am part of that scene and I am interpellated by globalization just as he is. After the bookstore closed, I stopped going. I went by the last time I was there with my son, Surya, and this person saw me and came up to me to greet me. He came to say "hello" and I was dumbfounded that he even remembered me. He wondered why he had not seen me for a long time and tried to start up a conversation with me. In which language do I talk to this person? How do you deal with the situation? How do we talk to each other? That is the real question. Globalization permits these adjacencies, as there are no concepts or constituencies and subject positions completely isolated from each other.

M.K.: There you have a contrapuntal moment before which even critique remains speechless.

R.R.: This is a human situation though. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler says that we all know loss.¹² And as much as I attend to that position, I also argue that there are losses and losses. How do you deal with loss? The Iraqi mother losing her child and the American mother losing her child are equal in a human sense, but the human itself is the result of a certain unevenness and sovereign bearing. How do you then create a calculus that will regulate and measure bearing, suffering, and pain? Given that moment of human suffering, there is a contradiction in terms of how one is taught to bear that suffering. As an American, you might be taught that one American life is worth a thousand Iraqi lives, and that your life is above a Palestinian's life, or that a Palestinian is less than human. So there is really a problem in saying loss to conjure all human loss at once, for loss too can be engineered.

M.K.: Or we can say that they speak the same—loss, suffering, pain—but they always already experience the same in different ways, sometimes radically different ways. But that difference does not privilege the one over the other for, as you say, who can measure this? Do you then think that precisely because of this incommensurable sameness and difference, we are in need of a kind of

critique that is open to critical affiliations yet unimagined and maybe unimaginable? A kind of critique that is attentive to the literary and the political concurrently?

R.R.: Your question really posits the question of the collective "we" that is at stake. I am not advocating a politics of the oppressed but when two singularities are thought together, then all kinds of different temporalities emanate. But who is the collective subject? Who is mourning for universal loss? Even if we ask this question on the level of the subject, the position is very complex. It is both a person as well as a certain citizen or unconstituted constituency. Foucault, for instance, is interested in non-sovereign ways of engaging truth even as he advocates that there can be no exit from interpellation. But the question is how do we go beyond the "shadow lines," to invoke here Amitav Ghosh's beautiful novel. I would say, by working through them. The shadow lines are borderlines, the lines of nationalism that separate people. They are real but you need to render them shadowy by eviscerating them of their legitimacy. You do not thus bypass the metaphysical or the vicious hermeneutic circle but you go through it in a certain way. There is a moment when you come out not in the sense that you will find the answer but in the sense that you will arrive at a more nuanced position.

M.K.: Can we then say that this way is a multiply informed politics of rereading, a contrapuntal critical praxis, and the more nuanced position is the time of the political, as the time of the present as it is happening and not as it is inherited?

R.R.: Yes, critique in the name of the right here, the right now, always already challenging us in the present, always already ahead of discourse, ahead of us.

DECEMBER 2008

¹ See Patricia Yaeger's "Editor's Column: The End of Postcolonial Theory? A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurar Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, Jennifer Wenzel." *PMLA* 122. 3 (May 2007): pp. 633-51.

² R. Radhakrishnan. *Diasporic Mediations. Between Home and Location*, (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

³ See R.Radhakrishnan's *History, the Human and the World Between* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁴ See Joan Anim-Addo's *Touching the Body. History, Language & African Caribbean Women's Writing* (London: Mango Publishing, 2007).

⁵ For a further analysis of this position, see Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* and especially Chapter One, "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories" (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). See also Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1989. 1-20).

⁶ For a further analysis of "border gnoseologies," see Walter D. Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷ I am borrowing this term from Nina Morgan's powerful analysis of Derrida's "grammar."

⁸ See Aamir R. Mufti's "Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times." *Critical Secularism*, a special issue of *boundary 2* (ed. Aamir R. Mufti), 31. 2 (2004): 1-9.

⁹ For an analysis of Europe as a "hyperreality," see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ See R.Radhakrishnan's *When is the Political?* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

¹¹ See R. Radhakrishnan's *Theory in an Uneven World* (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

¹² See Judith Butler's analysis of the human in *Precarious Life* (New York & London: Verso, 2004).