

Book Reviews

R. Radhakrishnan. *History, the Human, and the World Between*.
Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008. pp. ix, 285. \$79.95; \$22.95
pb.

Critiquing logocentrism and binarism is certainly not new since poststructuralism came into vogue. Homi Bhabha's theorization of the location of culture, Gayatri Spivak's advocacy of imagining ourselves "as planetary subjects rather than global agents," among her other deconstructive scholarship (73), Tzvetan Todorov's articulation of the "middle ground between worshipping dogmas as immutable truth and abandoning the idea of truth itself" (180), Arnold Krupat's ethnocriticism that deems inevitable the dialogical contact across ethnic borders, James Clifford's comparative approach to the question of transcultural travel, Kwame A. Appiah's philosophy of "rooted cosmopolitanism" (213), and Yi-Fu Tuan's humanist geographical concept of the "cosmopolitan hearth" (182) are only a few instances from various disciplines that illustrate the unanimous effort to challenge totalizing processes and to understand human existence in all its contingency and complexity. *History, the Human, and the World Between* is another contribution to this corpus of theoretical literature.

The book constructs the theory of "between," arguing that "the only place in which the human subject dwells is between" (8). Marking "a certain licit adjacency of some space to some other space" (8), Radhakrishnan's theory resonates with Bhabha's concept of liminality but differs from it in the way that his theory of "between" not only attends to the in-between space among different cultures, but also expands the signification of space to include a much broader range such as the space of scholarly disciplines, schools of thought, and systems of knowledge. The author's sensitivity to the closeness—or the inevitable connections—between different spaces commits to reconciling binary clashes on a more extensive level. At the contemporary juncture of globalization and the compartmentalization in many spheres such as culture, ethnicity, nation, and systems of knowledge, *History, the Human and the World Between* makes a timely ontological contribution by offering his vision of human existence caught in many "betweens": between identity and alterity, nature and culture, the ethical and the political, experience and system, temporality and historicity, being and knowing.

The basis of his theoretical approach is poststructuralist, although his revisionist return to phenomenology renders his methodology innovative. Phenomenology, for Radhakrishnan, has a “perennially enabling” virtue—its inherent deconstructive quality. When phenomenology claims itself as a philosophy, it “is always already called into question or played with by phenomenology as play, as performativity” (9, 10). Also valuable is phenomenology’s existentialist commitment seen in the belief that “there is more to life than can be dreamt of within the confines of any philosophical or scientific method, discourse, or terminology” (11). Radhakrishnan therefore advocates “heterological ways of knowing; nonprofessional, nonexpert, noninvasive, naïve, dialogic, and other modes of insight that owe as much to listening as they do to speaking or talking” (11).

Such a poststructuralist phenomenological framework embodies the concept of perspectivism that is essential to the theory of “between.” Perspectivism requires an understanding that each way of knowing has its own emerging context. The world, history, and human subject take on different meanings depending on the perspective from which they are studied, be it “phenomenology, feminism, postcoloniality, humanism and the variations thereof, subaltern history, nature, anthropocentrism, and deep ecology” (Radhakrishnan 14); each writer and theorist has access to different “pregiven realities” and represents them in the context of his or her own particular projects bearing different “human and disciplinary interests and desires” (Radhakrishnan 14). This is a significant point but often overlooked and even disregarded: do we not hear of a writer of children’s books claiming him/herself excusable from having to refer to, or have significant knowledge of literary theory? Do we not see individuals who consider less theory-laden texts, such as a graphic novel as “too simple” and “irrelevant”? I once witnessed at a conference the parochiality of a postcolonialist who was unable to imagine the usefulness of the subaltern historiography from South Asia, and here in Radhakrishnan’s book history’s accusation of theory is described as “fashionable and felicitous obfuscation” incapable of dealing with history in “empirically accountable ways” (5, 4). Perspectivism teaches us to see the contribution of one school of thought established from one unique perspective and, simultaneously, the limitation of its contribution because of its uniqueness. The organization of knowledge into disciplines assists us to explore the world in more specialized, profound ways, but a slavish obedience to our own discipline blinds our vision and kills our imagination.

It is not hard to understand “self-reflexivity and autocritique” as another essential aspect of Radhakrishnan’s theory: he observes that if “[n]o writer

can altogether escape the prejudices of his or her time,” then “any worthwhile writer or individual is expected to rise above and beyond the limitations of her or his historical period through self-reflexivity and autocritique” (173). Whether it is Friedrich Nietzsche, Adrienne Rich, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, David Harvey, or Ranajit Guha—the eight writers and theorists Radhakrishnan chooses to read in the book’s three massive chapters, his analyses of their work demonstrate, in different ways, how writers’ self-reflectivity benefits their work and how a lack of autocritique results in problems.

On the whole, Radhakrishnan’s book unfolds the epistemological cartographies that are symptomatic of “between,” charting the uneasy negotiations between the desire of naming, defining, representing, historicizing, and theorizing and the contingent, mutable, and rich human existence that is subjected to interpretation—interpretation that should always resist closure: “It is to that ‘between’ that symptomatically aligns our compulsion to name with our deeper but disavowed commitment to namelessness that this book is addressed” (29).

Rhetorically, Radhakrishnan’s book seems to be undermined by the conception of the “important connection between the complexity of expression and the profundity of thought” (2); it is laden with theoretical jargon, tends to articulate difficult questions in unnecessarily dense language, and is therefore hardly reader-friendly. The book, however, proves to be a work of noteworthy scholarship. Committed rigorously to the in-between space rather than “the comfort and security of a monologic home” (Radhakrishnan 24), *History, the Human and the World Between* emblemizes intellectual cosmopolitanism with the author’s existential respect for the particularity of humanity, poststructuralist critique of totalization, and a fervent pursuit of the dialogical relations between the compulsion to define and a learned conviction about the limitation of defining and definitions.¹

Note

- 1 I have in mind the cosmopolitanism represented in Appiah, 213–339, Tuan, 133–88, and Krupat 232–48. For the history of cosmopolitanism, see Anderson 265–89.

Works Cited

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Book Reviews

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Faye Hammill. *Canadian Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. Pp. 220. \$22.00.

The guide covers an immense range of events, and the supplementary reading and theoretical questions about Canadian writing are effectively divided into four precise and critical chapters. Through positioning theory that deconstructs stereotypes and juxtaposes the binary between city and forest, this is a literary approach that shifts structures of identity and location. The content as well as the introduction and conclusion are through the approach of a literary historian, and the details describe pivotal political and literary events within Canada. Faye Hammill focuses upon the English canon, and explores the topic of desire with both multiplicity and creativity. The guide is also helpful for the postgraduate student to become familiar with different histories of Canadian writing and a diverse set of texts. Hammill is determined to reflect upon the power structures of writing within the English form and frequently turns a critical gaze upon country, interpretation, and voice. In addition, electronic texts, questions for discussion, and a glossary are organized in a student resources section of the book, and an in depth chronology is provided at the beginning of the guide. Moreover, the citations of British French habitant writers and nineteenth-century literature are sufficient. These are just a few of the examples that are brought forth, and the sources are vast, for this space is also open for the academic to decide.