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ESTEEMED POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST HISTORIAN'S TALK, ENTITLED "ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE PRESENT," PROPOSES AN ALTERNATE ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

BY NASIA ANAM

MOST ACADEMICS WILL KNOW HISTORIAN LATA MANI by her seminal postcolonial feminist work, *Contentious Traditions* (University of California Press, 1998). This work analyzes colonial documents surrounding the controversial and oft-rehearsed topic of sati, or Hindu widow-immolation. It reads British policy documents against the grain, finding a complex arrangement of religious, communal, familial, and situational factors that determined each case of sati. Yet Mani's talk at UCLA on February 10, entitled "Once Upon a Time in the Present," had a decidedly philosophical, not historical, flavor. The talk, cosponsored by the UCLA "Cultures in Transnational Perspective" Mellon Postdoctoral Program, the Postcolonial Literature and Theory Colloquium, and the Center for the Study of Women, was a grand-scale proposition for an alternate ontological and epistemological orientation with the world at large. Mani's presentation was drawn from elements of a work in progress where she "weaves together contemplative writing, critical essays, and poetry." Indeed, the form of the talk—and the forthcoming book—reflect the sort of interconnected mode of being in the world she asks us to inhabit.

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The abstract of Mani’s presentation promises a lofty rumination that dwells on such abstractions as “disaggregation” and “wholeness.” “It would not be considered radical” it begins, “to propose that the world is an interdependent singular whole, of which everything is an integral, albeit complexly related, part. Yet the ways of thinking and being we have come to privilege tend to disaggregate self and phenomena from the multiple dimensions with which they are inextricably bound.” Though much of the argument of her talk was a response to the rather vague and large issue of “everything” being denied of its “inextricability” from everything else, her thesis slowly and steadily became clear through the duration of the presentation. Mani did this by anchoring her talk at a few important moments both upon concrete historical events and, more importantly, events from her own life.

Indeed, what was perhaps most remarkable about Mani’s talk was its very personal nature. She referenced the events that have occurred in her own life several times, citing a central traumatic event and its aftermath as the inspiration for this new interdisciplinary and interconnected approach to the world. In 1993, Mani suffered a major head injury as a result of a violent Southern California car chase. The process of her recovery “changed her perception,” as she puts it, somehow giving her a “palpable sense of being whole” and a sense of “communing with the essence of everything around her.” This sense of wholeness directly

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corresponded to her inability to concentrate, which made speech and the entire process of making meaning through language a challenge. Thus, in a sense, Mani’s entire semiological orientation to the world shifted as a result of her injury, and this led her to see what she understands to be a “strange malady” of contemporary life on Earth: that is, “disarticulation, disequilibrium, and dis-ease” that results from “proposing autonomy between things that are connected.” Though Mani did not site the separation of disciplines in institutions of higher education directly, one could very easily surmise that her presentation carried an implicit critique of the fragmentation and segregated disciplinarity that is a systemic part of American university.

Mani organized her talk in a non-linear fashion, punctuating it with two poems, the first entitled, “For Althusser with Love,” and the second, “On Days Like This.” Other foci included deconstructive linguistic analyses of key terms in her argument such as “inspiration,” “aggregate,” and “conscience”—all terms rooted in Greco-Roman etymologies. One audience member, during the question and answer portion of the talk, inquired as to whether her presentation might not have a different texture if she were to give it in Hindi or another subcontinental language and her answer was consistent with her overall sentiment. She noted that her argument is received very differently in different parts of the world. In Bangalore, India, where she is currently

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based, her audiences respond with ecological queries that concern the rapid industrialization of Indian agricultural and forested space, whereas her American audiences tend to focus on issues of community formation and academic disciplinarity. It is ecological movements that she finds to be most exemplary of an interconnected approach, “a refreshing exception to this rule” of separation between “self, other, majority, minority, urban, rural.”

One of the more intriguing moments of her talk came in Mani’s use of a historical phenomenon to demonstrate what she calls the “disaggregation” of contemporary life. Mani spoke obliquely about what Karl Marx deemed the alienation of the laborer from commodity by referring to “Taylorism,” a nineteenth-century model of production that split a task into its component parts in a series of “micro-movements to optimize efficiency.” This “linear” model of treating the human body as a tool like any other on an assembly line results, according to Mani, in a “denial of autonomy” for the worker. This, Mani argued, “crucially undermined what makes an activity satisfying” and created a “division between sentient worker and labor.” Thus, “creativity was disarticulated from work” and “what began as a way to discipline the labor process gradually became a way of life itself.” What Mani finds most problematic in this “disarticulated” relationship between product and labor is that in the post-industrial age, creativity comes to be articu-

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lated with leisure and work with drudgery. In her talk, Mani called for a renewed relationship between labor and product, expressing a desire to “slow down, notice,” and “savor our experience,” going on to say that the “natural world can be a mentor” and “ally in this experience.” She pointed to artisanship and craftsmanship as “practices that do not deplete or disappoint” but rather “nourish and sustain” the worker.

Though Mani’s argument ultimately shares a great deal with twentieth century modernist and postmodernist thought, she sought to distinguish herself from both psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Psychoanalysis, according to Mani, is not only a move away from a holistic understanding of the world it requires individuation and differentiation. She asserted that poststructuralism, on the other hand, concerned itself with the problems of fragmentary modern existence but does not propose an alternate ontological position. Mani’s talk was decidedly programmatic and her major point of distinction from previous modes of thought was her proposal of an alternative, concrete way of relating to the world and its inhabitants moving toward a full recognition of the interconnectedness of everything with everything else.

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