

Madhavi Menon. *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism*. Minnesota UP, 2015. Pp. 176. US\$25.00.

Madhavi Menon's *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* offers postcolonial, queer, critical race, decolonial, and feminist theorists a new vantage point from which to survey the notion of Enlightenment universalism. Menon begins her stark critique of universalism with an anecdote of an immigration officer who takes note of her professorial occupation in English literature. The officer questions Menon's Indian identity as he expects she reads and teaches Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul rather than Shakespeare. The officer's assumption that an Indian woman must teach Indian literature to Indian students is negated by Menon's multiplicitous identity; she, in turn, disrupts the "belief that identity should be immediately and physically recognizable" (1). Menon's vignette posits that identity is multifarious and unable to be homogenized into a static way of being. Instead she reads identity as an ontology of fractures and intersections, ruptures and expansions without a fixed point of reference. Menon's anecdote is the nebula around which this text emerges in so much as "lived reality is [always] at odds with identity politics" (3). *Indifference to Difference* sets out to "rethink the line of predictability that gets drawn from the body to identity, and from desire to the self" (1). Menon aligns herself with a range of theorists including Lee Edelman, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Frantz Fanon, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and, most prominently, Alain Badiou to re-theorize how we think of universalism through the drive(s) of desire, broadened beyond merely the sexual. By asking readers to think about how power demands and prescribes identity through interpolation, Menon argues that a Hegelian reading of universalism posits a "pure negativity out of which emerges an anti-philosophy and an anti-ontology" (7). She highlights the contours of the state—how it is defined by politics and how our "state of being" is hailed in a similar fashion (98). Enlightenment universalism is too caught up in the chain of signifiers that produces essentialist identities of multicultural and neoliberal politics; according to Menon, identity is not a heterogeneous rhizome, as conceived by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, but rather a "minus one" that allows for a transformation between the body and the psyche, between desire and knowledge—a type of opening that allows an Indian woman to teach and know Shakespeare. Menon thereby argues against multicultural universalism by noting that although it objects to monocultural assimilation, it also simultaneously cradles its primary agent. By investing in embodied or visible difference as universal truth, albeit raced, sexed, or gendered, we counterintuitively mimic systemic violence(s) placed upon us by the state in

creating such categories in the first place. To give my own example, I look to Canada's reconciliatory mantra of "nation-to-nation," which seems benevolent in its promises of multicultural recognitions over bodies of land, water, and persons, though it has quickly disintegrated into a means, in Menon's words, of "engender[ing] conformity rather than revolution" and consuming Indigenous sovereign nations in order to bolster the nation-state; the promises of multiculturalism are only a veneer for the maw of universalism (2). Instead, Menon reformulates universalism in two steps: firstly, she undoes the imperative to think of universalism as signifying "all things at all times" (6), and secondly, she recapitulates this now emptied signifier "with competing and successive differences so that the status quo cannot reenter" (7). Menon calls this newly branded universalism queer universalism.

I was assuaged by Menon's own ruminations on the desire for queerness—a desire, she argues, that is always fleeting and in movement and flux, a travel that is always trawling. Menon self-reflexively asks whether "queerness is a particular or a universal" (123). Pondering the ethics of queerness and her own concoction of universalism, she observes that "we are all marked by a superabundance of desire that might be termed queer" (17). Her argument for queer universalism departs from an Enlightenment view and asks how the benevolence of multicultural neoliberalism is in itself violent. In what ways are particulars, or the "essence" of identities, pathologized as ontological realness? "Particulars," Menon argues, "are universal—we all have them" (125); with such a statement she expands the possibilities for how our bodies desire and shows that such desires cannot be contained within simplistic identity categories such as sexuality, gender, race, class, etc. Desire queers us all in ways that move us closer to her queer universalism—one that does not describe universalism as wholeness in the way identity politics often seek to create "the part *as* whole" but rather "refus[es] to make difference coherent, self-identical, or the [very] basis for identity" (125; emphasis in original). Menon's universalism notes that raced, classed, gendered, or cultural differences do not "take away from the reality that we are all different even from our 'own' differences" (125). Her arguments thus side with the aforementioned theorists to generate a revolutionary politics brought about by a negation of the particular that seeks to confine and an embracing of the universalism that queers through webs of desire. Desire, she argues, binds and breaks us, "unground[s] the self," and is "the event [that] divides the subject from ontology" (77). We enact queer universalism by becoming indifferent to a difference bound up in constructing essentializing particularisms.

Menon develops her queer universalism by surveying a broad range of theorists, artists, writers, and characters through three case studies: Yinka

Shonibare MBE's artistic oeuvre and the politics of museums; William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello*; and the historicization and revitalization of *dastangoi* performances in Delhi, mainly *Chouboli*. In each chapter, Menon uses queer universalism to carefully and thoughtfully deconstruct how desire fosters indifference in varying identitarian contexts.

In her analysis of the work of Yinka Shonibare MBE, an African-British curator, for example, Menon points out the varying particularities of his identity: a decidedly "un-British" name conjoined with a British title given to him by being a member of the "Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" (MBE) that he has since incorporated into his name (25). She also emphasizes the context of his work, particularly his 2002 *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*. Shonibare's work often focuses on morality and sexuality, and the installation discussed features a horse-drawn carriage and headless mannequins posed in sexual acts. Her analysis of Shonibare's work posits that "desire travels; it demands extension into time and space" (31), and the signifiers of identity, whether black, queer, or classed, all fracture our conceptions of an essential particularity. Desire fractures and creates a queer universalism. Such a universalism, she notes, means being "indifferent to cultural and sexual specificity [while] not acquiescing to the state's formulation of categories of knowledge" (41). Questioning the ethics of desire in museums—what she calls "monumental" desire (53)—she theorizes how such spaces showcase formulations of queer universalism.

Menon's range of readings is large: mannequins without heads in Shonibare's exhibitions; characters without bodies such as the changeling Indian boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and bodies interchanged, intertwined, and interspersed such as the switching of Rajput and Jat's heads and bodies in *Chouboli*. Each reading brings us to the heart of Menon's argument: that "the id in id-entity insists that the entity we like to call a self is always haunted by the id, always shaped and unshaped by it: our desires cannot be contained by us; we are undone by desire" (120). Through each of her persuasive and intelligent readings, Menon strongly points us toward the capabilities of an indifference to difference, one bound up within the disentanglement of identity particularisms through queer universalism, a queer universalism that "does not belong anywhere" and is "owned by no one" (127).

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