Conclusion

*The Sovereign Self*

Audacious narrations represent an encounter with colonialism that goes well beyond the model of subaltern resistance. The insubordinate stances of the four raconteurs of this study have confirmed to me something rather fundamental about oppressive power: its limits are finite, and its claim to omnipotent sovereignty is at best presumptive. Undeniably, oppressive power performs various kinds of coercions, inflicts injury, denies economic well-being, and makes “others” out of fellow beings. But we have always known this about hegemonies. Audacious narrations, as I have argued in this book, project a counter-hegemonic sovereignty that is at once epistemic and resilient. Subjects of empire—or, for that matter, of any structure of domination—are not subjugated beings. They are instead sovereigns exercising power over territories of knowledge and experience that the oppressor may be able to enter but is never able to erase or conquer. The raconteurs exercise power in a variety of ways. They reject the supposed goods offered by the oppressor; they express perspectives that undercut the oppressor’s views; and they refuse, either implicitly or explicitly, labels and paradigms that belittle. They speak as critical insiders to their traditions: to imagine, to innovate, and to narrate is their crucial resource; it is their inalienable right. Thus colonial power could succeed in curtailing freedom of speech through policy and policing, but it could not contain the rambunctious imagination of Indian raconteurs. Such a freedom cannot be
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taken away. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the encounter between the raconteurs’ multilingual imaginations and the English language and its expressive genres. Anna Liberata de Souza dismissed outright the supposed superiority of English; P. V. Ramaswami Raju turned it upon itself through his literary ventriloquism; M. N. Venkataswami infused it with Indian languages and cultural imagery; and S. M. Natesa Sastri nimbly wove paths between English and a multitude of Indian languages. The brown sahib’s story, itself a checkered one about the adoption of English by bourgeois Indians (“Babu-log”), is not the only one about the arrival of English in India. Indeed, Indian writing in English from the early nineteenth century, with its layered maps and unmappable terrains, is an empire by itself.¹

And so, to look back, Anna Liberata de Souza chose not to go to England to serve English families, so that when she died, she could be buried beside her parents in Poona. For her, the modernity of colonialism was hollow, since it knew neither how to tell an oral story nor how to run an economy. Though Anna’s life was difficult, she was not destitute, because even in our last sighting of her, she “still” had her riches of stories and her dreams of travel. Sense reading gives us Anna on her own terms, as “a girl who can do anything.” P. V. Ramaswami Raju experienced a different sense of colonial alienation. He received a Western education in Madras, studied and worked in England, knew English etiquette and English versions of history. And yet these elicited from him the stories, the histories, and the gods of an Asiatic imaginary. Ramaswami Raju’s questions are the questions that his Jahangir asks Thomas Roe: “Sahib Roe, what kind of people are you? Do you brave danger? Love your homes and friends?” M. N. Venkataswami relies on his unflagging memory: he names and honors his parents, wife, aunts, and siblings, and draws us into their vibrant everyday worlds through photographs and family stories. These worlds echo his admonition: “The Reader might think that we brood over our lot of being of low status, but he is mistaken. We are not brooding over our lot.” He makes it clear that truths, both historical and fictional, can be approached only through the ethics and the art of acknowledgment, definitely not by evicting the subject as Europe’s scientism fancied it could, nor by discriminating against a particular subject as casteism preferred to. Finally, S. M. Natesa Sastri demonstrates the resolve of a translator drawing on the strength of his lived experiences. It is his erudition and creativity that shatter the mold of the “native scholar.” As he translates ancient inscriptions, recollects childhood tales, and invents new stories in Western genres, he shows not just a kaleidoscopic mastery over material but also a masterly overcoming of the material injustices built in to colonial employment.
So full of life are the voices of these raconteurs that the lack of biographical detail haunted me and sent me off on serendipitous ethnographic trails. Potholes, dead ends, and windfalls marked this journey. Years of search did not lead to Anna’s grave, but the search connected me to her living quarters—Main Building on the Pune University campus, my own childhood haunt. And it also connected me to others, some old friends, some strangers, who became intrigued by my description of Anna’s life. They shared with me the need to restore her person, however elusive the very idea of “restoration” might be. Perhaps here was my experience of Venkataswami’s conviction that history is a “connected form.” Stepping back, I find that the search for Anna has been an interrogation of the ends and means of historical narration; “just representation” has to be part of the answer. When Ramaswami Raju’s great-grandson told me about his initiation into the Ramayana by the bhikshu, I began to sense the person in the poem. I was able to see how mystical experience formed the very breath of his final work. The ethnographic journey also gave me insight into a surprising mutuality that underlies research. My search for Natesa Sastri initiated a commitment among his family who had gathered in his grandson Gopalakrishnan’s house in Chennai to discover and reclaim a fading legacy. How ironic yet fitting that this shared project of rediscovering Natesa Sastri was fulfilled through the coincidence of death: Gopalakrishnan passed away suddenly as I was writing the last few paragraphs of the chapter on Natesa Sastri. The ethnographic process of this book leads me to one final meditation: how extraordinary is the palpability of presence. I wonder whether we make too much of the distinction between non-things and things. Just as Gopalakrishnan saw his act of translating Natesa Sastri’s novel as a palpable telling of his own life, so did Lakshman Rao believe that Venkataswami’s old desk and almirah would help him tell his children who they are. This creative, generative threading of material and nonmaterial traces across symbiotic networks returns me to George Lamming, with whom I started this book. Lamming reflects:

The question of sovereignty then, particularly in the light of the definition of nation as being a particular space defined in terms of politics and laws, that sovereignty is limited. The sovereignty which literally means your freedom from external influence, external interference in your domestic affairs, that is limited in the sense that you may not always have control to shield or protect yourself from interventions. But what I’m claiming that is not limited is another kind of sovereignty, and that is the capacity you have for choosing and making and remaking that self which you discover is you, is distinctly you. And which in a way
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is always unfinished, but it has a very special essence that is you, and its power is that it allows you to create the meanings that are to be given to what happens to you.

Above all, Lamming reminds us that “that area” for choosing and remaking, that “acre of ground,” should not be “abandoned, whatever the superiority of forces around you that call for its abandonment.”

I end with the story of Hanuman, whom I see as the most sovereign wielder of a tail in history. Hanuman, the son of Vayu, the god of wind, and Anjana, the beautiful monkey-princess, is an integral character in the ancient epic of the Ramayana, the story of how the god-prince Rama battles the demon-king Ravana, who has abducted his wife, Sita. We have already encountered Hanuman in M. N. Venkataswami’s folktale in chapter 3, where Hanuman strings a garland of golden flowers between two hilltops to mark a place for his beloved Rama and Sita to rest on their return to Ayodhya. Hanuman, paradigmatic devotee of Rama, leads the transoceanic quest to recover Sita, who is being held captive in the lavish gardens of Ravana’s kingdom, Lanka, an island in the Indian Ocean. I see the story of his visit to Lanka as an allegory of audacious narration. Indeed, I am one among the hundreds and thousands of storytellers across India and her diaspora who have for centuries recognized Hanuman as the archetype of a sovereign narrator. In his lively analysis of Hanuman’s character, Philip Lutgendorf writes, “Gifted storyteller that he is, Hanuman, the original narrator of the tale of Rama, has something in common with historians, who construct narratives about the human past based on written records and surviving artifacts, albeit without, in most cases, the divine monkey’s advantage of having been an eyewitness to the events they describe.”

When Rama and his brother Lakshmana, in search of Sita, find themselves in the forests of Kishkinda, the kingdom of monkey-humans, the troubled monkey-king Sugriva instructs Hanuman to disguise himself as a mendicant and assess both the strangers and their motives. Hanuman is more than adequate to the task. His eloquence and intelligence win Rama and Lakshmana’s confidence. He reveals his identity, disclosing that he can change his form and his size at will. Also, like the wind, he can go wherever he pleases. It is small wonder then that Sugriva assigns to Hanuman the task of looking for Sita across the Indian Ocean in Lanka. “Not on earth or in the sky, not in the heavens or the abode of gods, nor in the waters,” he proclaims, “is there anyone to rival your skills. . . . Mighty monkey, your speed, power, energy, and splendor can be compared only to your father’s, the wind god’s. . . .
I find strength and wisdom, courage, knowledge of place and time, as well as familiarity with modes of diplomacy and negotiation in you alone."

Hanuman accepts the task but is unaware of his real powers. It takes the aging bear Jambavan to evoke self-recognition in Hanuman. Jambavan tells Hanuman the story of his birth and his childhood, of the gift of immortality bestowed on him, and of his deep, unmatched strengths. "You are the foremost among all those who can leap," Jambavan reminds him. Stirred by the stories and the encouragement, Hanuman becomes his full self in body and spirit. He exclaims: "I can go to where the sun rises with its garland of shining rays and return here without touching the ground. . . . My path shall be like that of the stars!" As Hanuman flies over forests and mountains, through caves and oceans, overcoming hurdles and encountering mysterious and magical lands, his journey becomes more than a physical feat; it becomes a voyage of self-discovery.

Landing in Lanka, Hanuman looks for Sita in its palaces, in its tree-lined streets, in its gardens with gold-paved walkways, and in the clear lotus pools. His eye takes in everything, his descriptions making Lanka’s wonders come alive for us. A first look does not locate Sita. Just when despair and doubt begin to dampen his determination, he sights a woman who fits Rama’s description of Sita. And gradually, as he recalls each detail, with remembered images blending into the person before him, Hanuman is overcome with joy and also filled with an immense sadness at Sita’s emaciated, forlorn state. He weighs how best to approach and talk to Sita. He considers the question of language. Should he speak to her in Sanskrit? Would that make him seem too much like Ravana, who also speaks in Sanskrit? If he uses a vernacular, which vernacular should he choose? He also struggles over the question of his own appearance. Should he appear as himself, a huge monkey, or should he change form? Would Sita mistake a talking monkey for Ravana in disguise? How could he persuade his precious listener of his mission and his person? Ultimately it is narrative that comes to the rescue.

Hanuman sits on a tree near Sita and sings in praise of Rama. “Once there was a king named Dasaratha,” he begins, sweetly, gently. He narrates the episode of Sita’s abduction in the forest. Sita listens, rapt. “Now I am sure I have found her,” he concludes and falls silent. But soon Sita retreats, terrified that it is yet another of Ravana’s disguises. Then follows one of the most moving exchanges in the Ramayana. There, in the enchanted and lonely garden, Hanuman and Sita earn each other’s trust by sharing stories. “Tell me the story of Rama,” she pleads, doubting Hanuman yet longing for Rama and her home. Hanuman is wise; he understands. He relies on the power of words, and his story of Rama flows from empathy. He describes Rama’s
grief at being separated from Sita—how he does not eat meat or honey, how he eats the produce of the forest sparingly, and how, lost in grief, he does not even swat the mosquitoes that bite him. Sita believes him. Hanuman enthusiastically proposes that she ride back to Rama on his back, but she tells him that it would be more appropriate for Rama to come and kill Ravana, then take her home. With a jewel from her hair to show Rama as proof of their meeting, and a plan in place, Hanuman leaves her.

Sita is eventually rescued by Rama. But Hanuman is not done with Lanka. How can Lanka be beautiful if it abets a woman’s abduction, and by its king? Furious with Ravana, he wrecks the garden, uprooting trees, upsetting animals and snakes, and destroying palaces and pavilion. Enraged, Ravana sends hordes of his demons and the best of his generals to fight Hanuman. Hanuman kills them all, making battle tools from Ravana’s own garden and palace—an iron gate, the huge rocks, the uprooted trees, a golden pillar. Hanuman cannot be reined in. Ravana, now amazed by this powerful monkey, wants to have Hanuman seized, not killed. At last, Ravana’s son Indrajit releases the powerful weapon of Brahma at Hanuman. The weapon traps him. As he submits to its power, he recalls what Jambavan has told him. “Even though I have been bound, I am not in danger, for I am protected by Vayu and Indra as well as by Brahma,” he tells himself. He knows that he has been captured only because he has displayed his might; he looks forward to his face-to-face meeting with Ravana. The demons bind Hanuman in ropes then take him to Ravana’s palace. There in the palace, Hanuman is struck by Ravana’s splendor and thinks: “He has all the signs of a great king! Had he not been so unrighteous, he might well have been the protector of the world.”

Self-infatuated Ravana, stung by the affront to his power by a “mere” monkey, subjects Hanuman to an interrogation.

Across India, oral tales of the Ramayana magnify this moment fittingly. They describe how Hanuman, demanding a stature equal to Ravana’s, grows his tail—and grows it long enough to wind it and form a chair that is higher than Ravana’s throne. Now, seated up high, he can look at Ravana eye to eye, or even cast a glance down on him, and speak as his peer or superior. In Hanuman’s tail is his sovereignty. “I am Hanuman, the son of the Wind,” he announces. Audaciously he begins to tell Ravana the story of Rama, and how immoral Ravana has been in stealing what was never his. Hanuman scolds Ravana for thinking that it was an act of magnanimity to grant Sita a year to consider being his consort and joining his harem as a prize jewel. It is instead nothing but a ruse, a self-serving rapaciousness disguised as righteousness. Hanuman lists the qualities that befit a true king but are lacking in Ravana.
Ravana is in no mood to listen. He orders that the monkey’s tail—the tail that has given him his high position in the royal court—be set on fire. As the demons bind the tail in cloth and pour oil on it, Hanuman makes it grow longer and longer. The demons run out of cloth and oil, but they manage to set fire to the tail anyway. Sita, who learns about this, prays to Agni, the god of fire, to grant the burning tail a magical immunity. Hanuman breaks free from the ropes and starts to fly around, setting everything in the city ablaze. As Lanka burns all around him, Hanuman himself stays cool, and Sita’s space in the garden is untouched by the fire.

Hanuman, the audacious raconteur, sovereign self, quenches his tail in the ocean, and flying through the sky high above the ocean, he returns to Rama, the source of his inspiration. His tail is intact.