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Avram Alpert. *Global Origins of the Modern Self, from Montaigne to Suzuki.* SUNY Press, 2019. xv + 435 pages $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-7385-7.

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This impressive book argues that modern conceptions of the self are deeply rooted in the responses of a wide range of thinkers to global encounters, especially those between Europeans and the people they colonized. A central question for modernity is what kind of selves and institutions are necessary to understand and live with awareness of global connectedness. Avram Alpert's sweeping intellectual history begins with Michel de Montaigne and interprets canonical European thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, and Marx. He also discusses colonial encounters as seen from non-European perspectives—Frantz Fanon and Leopold Senghor—and by American pluralists Ralph Waldo Emerson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and bell hooks. The final chapter discusses D. T. Suzuki, reframing recent critiques of him as a Westernizer and instead presenting him as a global thinker who responded to a pluralistic world offering challenges and opportunities. Rather than summarize Alpert's analysis of each thinker, this review will explain the book's main ideas and examine more closely the interpretation of Suzuki.

Like Michel Foucault's *The Hermeneutics of the Self* (1982) and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), this book constructs a history of conceptions of the self that reveals cultural, philosophical, and political beliefs and values. In contrast to these influential works, Alpert does not focus on Greek, Roman, and Christian sources or the impact of the scientific worldview, but rather on global encounters since the sixteenth century. He begins with Michel de Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals," which describes a meeting in 1562 with three Brazilian Tupi people brought to France. While postcolonial theorists since Edward Said have analyzed how Europeans defined themselves in contrast to non-Western others, Alpert thinks that this perspective remains too narrowly focused on European thinkers and on philosophical ideas, especially a conception of Western metaphysics that remains isolated from its global context. Alpert presents figures such as Du Bois, Fanon, and Suzuki not as outsiders but as full participants in a global debate about self-making in pluralistic contexts. The crucial question is not the problems with West-

ern metaphysics, but how thinkers from around the world have understood the relationship between the individual self and a world with many conflicting values and orientations.

Montaigne is also a groundbreaking and paradigmatic figure for Alpert because he pioneers the use of the essay in his construction of global subjectivity. A common writing style, "essaying the globe," reflects a shared practice of writers who followed Montaigne's example as they tentatively explored how they might inhabit a world recognized as radically pluralist, that is, made up of differences among and within selves and cultures. Radical pluralism means that the world cannot be comprehended in a single theory or vision, and the essay form is well suited to explore the implications of recognizing this. Alpert delineates five modes of essaying the globe: "skeptical (in which the essay leaves us in a state of doubt with regard to all given cultures), teleological (in which the essay tries to move us toward a singular, global vision), alternating (in which the essay enjoins us to move back and forth between different visions of the world without attempting to synthesize them into a single whole), revolutionary (in which the essay attempts to intervene in and transform a given reality—ideally through pluralistic alliances) and emptying (in which the essay seeks, through silences, nonsensical asides, anecdotes, repetitions, and other means, to undo the ego of the reader and provoke an enlightenment experience)" (p. 6).

Albert's argument has a strong ethical thrust marked by a basic contrast between "unbearable identities" and attempts to find a radically pluralist alternative. Identity may become unbearable in several ways: when one person or culture dominates another; when one finds that inherited knowledge cannot accommodate newly discovered others; when an attempt is made to found a universalism that negates the world's diversity; and when one must shoulder the burdens of occupying a subordinate or oppressed position within someone else's universal system. Alpert both criticizes and finds positive value in various attempts to deal with unbearable identities. Certain figures in Western culture—such as Descartes, Hamlet, and Heidegger—embody the "evasive mood" that turns away from the challenge of self-transformation posed by recognizing global connectedness. He assesses other responses to global consciousness more positively, such as Montaigne's skepticism, Kant's universalism, the radical pluralism of Emerson and Du Bois, and Suzuki's Zen mysticism. Alpert's own position is somewhat elusive and slippery: "This kind of radically pluralist response, one that insists on the plurality of all ideas, peoples, individuals, and cultures and thus can engage with different ways of being at different moments without dissolving into infinite particulars, is what I suggest as the most fortuitous method of overcoming the unbearable identities found in history" (p. 9). Pluralist values, he asserts, can foster a vision of global subjectivity that will not result in unbearable identities for oneself or others. Alpert's radical pluralism tries to affirm as much value as possible in the authors he discusses, while also being vigilant about how they all, in various ways, deny the richness of identity of both the self and others. His version of globalism is defined against other understandings of it that insist that one way of life is best for everyone. There is an unresolved tension—not necessarily a bad thing—between Alpert's drive to formulate a coherent normative position and his reluctance to insist that any one view, even a pluralist one, is required or even best for everyone.

The last chapter of the book analyzes D. T. Suzuki's approach to global essay writing, which tries to undo the ego of the reader and provoke an enlightenment experience. Alpert says that his book began as a study of Suzuki's work and expanded to encompass the earlier figures with whom he was in dialogue about "the question of the globe—that is, the question of what kinds of selves and institutions we should form to confront our global connectedness" (p. x). This fresh perspective on Suzuki alters our views of him and of

those who influenced him. Suzuki has long been criticized for "Westernizing" Zen by reducing it to an ideal of emptiness, loss of ego, and freedom of anxiety while ignoring the historical actuality of Zen in Japanese culture. Suzuki is said to have read Zen through Western eyes, projecting on it the ideas of German idealism and American transcendentalism. Instead of this, Alpert asks, why not see Suzuki as engaged in a global dialogue about the nature of the self in the modern world? This question, as much as anything else, is what defines modernity, and Suzuki makes a compelling contribution to the debate. Alpert thus enunciates a vision of Suzuki similar to the one Richard Jaffe and David McMahan have proposed.[1]

Alpert's reading brings out Suzuki's indebtedness and creative responses to earlier thinkers. His version of *satori*, or awakening, resembles the "instinctual reason" of Rousseau, Hegel, and others who tried to reconnect rational reflection with the instincts, habits, and supposedly more "natural" way of life that they projected on "primitive" and non-Western peoples. For Suzuki, too, conceptual thought brings problems, but his method of correcting this was not to seek a singular synthetic global perspective or to alternate back and forth between different visions of the world, but rather to renounce concepts altogether by finding an experience before intellect began to divide reality into subject and object, self and world. Like Rousseau, Suzuki seeks a way of being that unites conscious intellect and sense experience.

Alpert shows Suzuki's indebtedness to Emerson's essays, the model for *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1952). Building on Stanley Cavell's writing, Alpert sees the American sage and the Japanese thinker as describing an experience that unites having and not having a self, a quality that Suzuki called transparency. Without asserting that everyone should seek this experience, Alpert suggests, more modestly and vaguely, that "it can be one of the moods of truth that helps to positively construct a pluralistic world" (p.270). Satori is not necessary for everyone because to argue this would make it unbearable. Alpert's resolute pluralism shapes an ethical orientation whose highest norm or principle is that possibilities for many kinds of experience should not be foreclosed by any norm insisting on a single right way to be a self in the modern global context. He examines two thinkers influenced by Suzuki's version of Zen: John Cage and bell hooks, both of whom develop practices that by undercutting the ego have a suggestive if ambiguous political dimension as they try to open an individual to the world.

This is an original and masterful synthesis of diverse sources and intellectual traditions. It is massively learned (ninety pages of endnotes) and engages in technical debates with other scholars, yet never loses the thread of the author's own central argument about the global context of modern ideas about the self. Alpert's writing is clear, incisive, and lively. For those interested in Buddhism, his interpretation of Suzuki responds to several recent critiques and makes him a central participant, indeed the culmination, of a long tradition of thought from around the globe. Alpert is a forceful and engaging thinker, and I eagerly await his forthcoming *A Partial Enlightenment: What Modern Literature and Buddhism Can Teach Us about Living Well Without Perfection*.

Note

[1]. See the introduction to Richard Jaffe, ed., *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki, Volume I: Zen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); and David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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