



November 2011

Michelle Voss Roberts' "Dualities"

Laurel C. Schneider

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schneider, Laurel C. (2011) "Michelle Voss Roberts' "Dualities", *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 24, Article 4.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1481>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Michelle Voss Roberts' *Dualities*

Laurel C. Schneider
Chicago Theological Seminary

DUALITIES is an important book. It represents a contribution to the field of Hindu Christian studies, but it also adds considerably to women's studies in religion and to the emergent field of comparative theology. Michelle Voss Roberts has managed to treat with sensitivity and creativity two enigmatic figures, each from long ago and far away (from us and from each other), and each from two dramatically different religious traditions. What is remarkable about this study is that Voss Roberts manages to introduce us to the basic shape of both of these women's thought while at the same time pursuing a very contemporary, sophisticated stream of theological reasoning relevant to postmodern concerns about multiplicity, relationality and change as constitutive characteristics of divinity. A dedicated scholar of either one of these figures—or of the tradition and time she inhabited—may object that Voss Roberts is dabbling in anachronism by putting her figures to work in a theological agenda that neither woman would recognize. This is true. But the same can be said of biblical texts, patristic figures, and other ancient writers who labor in the pages of contemporary theologies. The fact that such use seems more obvious in a comparative theological project—due perhaps to the inevitable disjunctures between the philosophical and religious presuppositions at work between the different traditions and cultures—does not negate the mining of ancient texts for contemporary projects, it just illuminates the challenges of doing so.

In a kind of poetic symmetry, Voss Roberts engages two main ideas in this project on two women from two different cultures and religions. One is a critique of the error of contemporary philosophical conflation of dualism with duality. Voss Roberts seeks to retrieve the notion of duality as a mode of differentiation that need not ossify into opposition, especially not into the insidious forms of oppressive dualist hierarchy that characterize patriarchalist gender formations and colonialist racial formations. Differentiation is necessary to valuations of difference and diversity and, more fundamentally, it is necessary to cognition. So the conflation of duality with dualism has put contemporary critiques (of Cartesian thought especially) into a “double” bind: they seek to heal the rift between mind and body, for example, at the expense of important distinctions between the two: a kind of miasmic swamping of differentiation that frankly contradicts the world of meaningful distinction that we experience.

Secondly, Voss Roberts argues that duality can be redeemed from the clutches of dualism by virtue of its constitution in fluidity. Differentiations that recognize the co-constitutive character of difference itself, meaning difference's dependence upon relation for its coherence, necessarily constitute a flow of connection that cannot meaningfully be severed. This deep relationality in the very fact of difference eliminates dualism's charade of absolute opposition. And what her correction

Laurel C. Schneider is Professor of Theology, Ethics, and Culture at Chicago Theological Seminary. Her books include *Polydoxy: Theologies of Multiplicity and Relation* (Routledge 2010), *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (Routledge 2008), and *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology* (Pilgrim, 1999). She is the author of numerous articles and anthology chapters that variously work at the intersections of theology with Native American religious traditions and with race, sexuality, postcolonial and feminist theories.

offers to those of us who work philosophically in theories of multiplicity and relation is a means of thinking about the way that differentiation can occur in relation. It is the means of getting from the irreducible interconnection of everything (deep relationality) to the irreducible inexchangeability, or difference of everything (deep heterogeneity) without setting up an opposition. What I have been content to hold, in my own work, as a tensive relation between apparent, but productive contradictions, Voss Roberts has brought together by means of a pathway between them, a structure if you will, that makes the differentiation and relation between things both intelligible and non-contradictory. What is lovely about Voss Roberts' argument is her grounding of this theory in the work of two medieval writers, Lalleswari and Mechthild. Doing so keeps her work from losing its tether in tradition/s, even as she challenges traditional interpretation and presuppositions on so many levels.

Given the emphases of my own work in multiplicity, it is not surprising that I gravitate first to Voss Roberts' own thinking about fluidity, through which she connects Lalleswari to Mechthild and back again. Her attention to this theme in both ancient writers suggests not only a model for comparative theology but points to an innovation across at least two major religious traditions that show each of these women to be implicit (and at points explicit) critics of the theologies of their own traditions. It seems that Voss Roberts has uncovered, by way of a particularly feminist comparative theology, both a theological idea (fluidity) that can be fruitfully developed in a comparative mode, but also a peculiarly gendered idea that sets both women in positions of some tension with the dominant voices and ideas of her own tradition, tensions that limit what each woman can do with her own insights. I will pursue this intuition by way of a third comparison, from outside of either tradition with which Voss Roberts deals. I do this to remain, in part, in keeping with the comparative theological approach that Voss Roberts is using, and in part because there are a couple of important tradition-based presuppositions at work in both of her figures' writing and in her own that are

worth pushing a bit via, in this case, a "third way".

Both religious traditions—medieval European Christianity and medieval Hinduism—with which Voss Roberts must deal in her navigation of Lalleswari's and Mechthild's writing share presuppositions of an ontological externality or givenness to reality. Christian thinking grants an external, or objective, status to God and the cosmos, realities that persist before—and after—human perception. And so, for Mechthild, God possesses an ontological aseity and existence that is unperturbed by worldly affairs; God is the true reality and exists in serenity apart from the shifting, shifty world. In Lalleswari's case, this external reality is Siva consciousness. Human existence in its entanglements with delusion can only glimpse the solid reality, but misses again and again, prey to the ephemera of the world's false certainties. Voss Roberts finds in both writers, however, a possibility of permeability that she develops into an idea of fluidity. Fluidity via the duality that she is working out here is helpful for overcoming a reality-delusion or fact-fiction dichotomy that permeates the ontological presuppositions of both classical traditions. I wonder, though, about the effect of assumptions of an even more thoroughgoing relationality in reality than these writers seem to entertain, and what might it contribute to understanding them, and to the project that Voss Roberts is pursuing. In other words, might the possibility of fluid duality that Voss Roberts sees at play in these writers be limited by their own acceptance of the assumption that that reality beyond the individual self is somewhat set (though fluidly expressive and fluidly experienced) and is not ontologically dependent upon the participation of the individual? What effect might the introduction of a third assumption, namely that reality is the result of interactions and "agreements", co-constituted by events and by stories, have on duality?

If I understand Voss Roberts' treatment of both Lalleswari and Mechthild, the external reality of Siva consciousness or of God's love is available to the individual or community, and it infuses them, flowing through and animating them, even perhaps creating them, but divinity is

not in any way co-constituted or brought into being by the individual or community's interaction with it. Whatever dependence Siva or God has on the community is as an embodiment of divine expression. I assume that, in Lalleswari's case, this is saying a great deal more about Siva's relationship to individuals than Advaitism allows, and I know that, in Mechthild's case it is saying much more than classical Christianity would claim for divinity. Nevertheless, I wonder if fluidity runs into a solid wall at the base of the divine-human divide even in Voss Roberts' generous reading of them. What would happen if we entertained an even deeper sense of flow, a co-creative and co-constitutive dimension to the divine-world duality?

I come to this question aslant, from my own comparative theological work with Native North American ontologies. In particular, I have been recently working with Joy Harjo's poetry and Gerald Vizenor's philosophy as an avenue into this mode of theologizing. I don't want to take a lot of space and time for a third comparison here, but perhaps by saying a few things, I can contribute a question for reflection that may help us to engage Voss Roberts' important work in another way.

Harjo is a Muskogee poet from Oklahoma, though of course the Muskogee people lived for a thousand years in the southeastern woodlands of what is now Alabama and Mississippi before Andrew Jackson drove them on death marches to the west. Her poetry, like that of several other Native American writers, deliberately blurs lines between the Euro-modern notion of poetry "as art" and a less bifurcated view of poetry as metaphysical creativity, as invocational, as a power that participates sacramentally in the worlds that it helps to bring into being. This blurred understanding of poetry ignores early Protestant distinctions between art and the sacred and later scientific distinctions between art and reality, a distinction summed up by the 18th century poet and literary historian Samuel Johnson who said that art, if it is any good, necessarily embellishes what the artist sees. Understood this way, all art is fiction, and that is Johnson's point. "Poetry pleases" he claims, "by exhibiting an idea more grateful to the mind than

the things themselves afford" whereas religion must concern itself exclusively with the truth. This is the reason, Johnson argues, that religion makes for bad art, and vice versa.¹

Aside from the more or less obvious apology for Protestant iconoclasm resident in Johnson's early modern bifurcation of art from truth (which is not a small aside, but the Protestant dimension is not the direct subject of this essay) the dominant logic resident in that division makes the challenge of thinking theopoetically today to be all the greater. If poetry is art, and art is fiction, then poetry is fiction. The irony, or more accurately, the problem in this equation is that it only works if fiction is the opposite of truth—a lie—and if it is misrepresentation (both of which occur as synonyms in mainline thesauri). The equation falls apart however if "fiction" means a particular mode of invoking, creating, or constructing the real. This is a mode of duality that seems very much in keeping with Voss Roberts' analysis, and congenial to the permeability that she finds so richly abundant in both Mechthild and Lalleswari.

So let us take this permeability one step further. In "A Postcolonial Tale" Harjo writes "Everything was as we imagined it. The earth and stars, every creature and leaf imagined with us."² She writes poetry in a more or less conventional sense of the word. But her "embellishments" on what she sees in the world are not exactly fictional in the modernist, dualistic sense that requires art *qua* art to be other than real or even representational, something other than presence – a deferral of presence at most. Within a logical framework that grants to nature an independence from human imagining (whether in the Newtonian sense of objective substances governed by universal laws or in the post-Kantian, postmodern sense of a nature/world so wholly independent from human imagining that it can only *be* imagined, which is to say fictionalized, or misrepresented) the possibility that imagination has substantive effect is nonsense. It is a lovely embellishment, a fiction, to say that *everything was as we imagined it* and actually mean *the earth and stars, every creature and leaf imagined with us*. Because of course we cannot

actually mean that, grant it some kind of objective truth. But fluid metaphysics edges into the territory of such possibility. Native philosophy, as Vizenor suggests, has always already been in that territory.

The rationality that Harjo inherits perceives a world that is more malleable than the mental-physical poles of traditional Christian or Advaita thought allow; it is less law-abiding than that, and this difference may be the stone on which Voss Roberts' project stumbles if it pushes Mechtild and Lalleswari as far as I am suggesting that her construction of *duality*, at least, might go. The philosophies of Native America describe some of the unruliness in reality that both Advaita and Christian philosophies eschew, but more than that its poetry and stories also implicate us in ontological unruliness. Native American philosophy ascribes poesis to poetry in actuality and as such casts possibility backward and forward precisely because it pokes holes in anything solid and ushers productive ambiguity in, not just in language, as if language is merely a mode, but in actuality, at least in those realms that understand that stories must be told in season, and carefully, because the story itself, the poem, makes and breaks the world.

The challenge of framing a concept of fluidity that does not simply slide back in to the logic of the One is a challenge not only of recognizing the duality at play in the flow between the cognitive and the material, but I suggest that it also means the *touchy* matter of the sacramental – which Lalleswari's and Mechthild's treatment of the body also suggests. Regina Schwartz gives a very tidy summary of the problem that faces Christian theologians, which is also a problem of the metaphysics that produced impassible otherness of the divine in both Hindu and Christian thought. She examines the "disastrous separation" of divinity and world—indeed a dualism if there ever was one—in terms of its effect on sacramentality, which can be a helpful way for us to think in practical terms about an ontology of fluid multiplicity. Looking at the history of Christian doctrine in terms of sacraments, she identifies this dualism as a problem of secularist logic. More precisely (I would argue) it is a problem of

the logic of the One in practical terms. Schwartz writes:

"God's body cannot be here and at the right hand of the Father," said a logic of physical space that trumped the sacred space of sacramentality. "Man [*sic*] cannot eat God" said a logic of human physiology that [turned] a deaf ear to the liturgy of sacramentality.... "A priest cannot sacrifice God" claimed a logic of authority that denied the mystery of sacramental agency.... "A sign can only stand for, that is, stand in for what it signifies, which is necessarily absent" said a logic of representation that defied the participation of the sign in its referent.³

The participation of the sign in its referent demands a logic of permeability that defies an absolute separation of world and divinity. And "sacramental agency" also demands a certain malleability, fluidity, or porosity in the world (and its spirits) that Voss Roberts' nondualist notion of duality supports. She is mining hints of this logic in Lalleswari and Mechtild, a logic that I am simply suggesting is full-blown in the philosophies of Native America. It is a presupposition of creative relationship between the theologian-storyteller and a world that never listened to the secularists to begin with – a world that never divested itself of divinity and so never had to justify or mourn the loss of the gods in the world, the way that Schwartz argues the European and American moderns did. Lalleswari and Mechtild both predate the disastrous separation between sacred and secular in modernity that Schwartz decries, but they write—unconsciously, perhaps—against its impending, gathering force.

Voss Roberts sees them resisting this dualism through their attention to the body. She notes, "Lalleswari and Mechtild can speak to each other, and to us, because they speak to somatic experience" and in this experience is divinity.⁴ These are poets working at the margins of a world whose dominant wisdom severs the body from divinity. Lalleswari, Mechtild, and Harjo all reveal a mode of reasoning that is not beholden to Thomistic or

Kantian limits. The trouble is, these limits make it as difficult for us to approach Lalleswari and Mechthild as it is to approach Native America. More than its emphasis on somatic experience, the nonduality at work in all of these writers is a mode of reasoning that, in terms of native America, anishinaabe philosopher Gerald Vizenor has dubbed “native modernity.”⁵

Concerned primarily with survivance (by which he means “an active sense of presence”) of native peoples beyond the tragic non-actuality of a non-history called by the misname “indian,” Vizenor argues for a much trickier nomenclature for the “storiers of native modernity.” He builds his argument on Louis Dupré’s observation that “[c]ultural changes, such as the one that gave birth to the modern age, have a definitive and irreversible impact that transforms the very essence of reality. Not merely our thinking about the real changes: reality itself changes as we think about it differently. History carries an ontic significance that excludes any reversal of the present.”⁶ Native survivance is therefore not merely a tattered picking-up of the traditional pieces in the brutal aftermath of colonial devastation, a nostalgic “reversal of the effects by returning to premodern premises.”⁷ What is relevant in Vizenor’s development of native survivance to Voss Roberts’ treatment of Lalleswari and Mechthild is its attention to “an active sense of presence.” The comparative link between these two ancient women and native philosophy is ontic signification that takes seriously the reality-changing aspect of devotion – the co-constitutive character of theology that sees fluidity as a metaphor for reality “all the way up and down”.

Implied in the permeability of reality on which the concept of dualities rely is, I suggest, a sacramental agency that understands the ontic significance of speech, poetry, and stories. Art – speech – imagination – does much more than describe, embellish, or lie about what is already there. Art – speech – imagination – storytelling also creates what is there. *This* is anathema to Euro-modern dualist thought and its logic of the One. It takes somatic experience seriously, and involves multiplicity that is far beyond the realm of numerical reckoning, and into the realms of shape-shifting, responsive, and excessive

process – the capacity for reality to respond to our words, for us to respond, rhizomatically, to the world.

For example, Harjo’s thinking of love as the “very gravity that holds each leaf and star together” is not that far from Mechthild’s notion of divine eros. In both cases, a form of natural theology is suggested – gravity as love/love as gravity, creation pulled together in desire. But in neither case is natural theology in a *reductive* sense adequate to describe what is going on in the different cosmologies/metaphysics being engaged. A part of what is distinctively shared, at least as I am suggesting it here, between native modernity and these medieval poet theologians, is an openness to actual presences that make a kataphatic difference without reversion or reduction to a problematically substantive stasis.

Harjo begins “A Postcolonial Tale” with the stanza “Every day is a reenactment of the creation story. We emerge from dense unspeakable material, through the shimmering power of dreaming stuff.”⁸ The mode of reasoning at work here is utterly serious about the claim, also in this poem, that “earth and stars, every creature and leaf imagined with us.” And yet this is not a reductive rationality. She concludes with “No story or song will translate the full impact of falling or the inverse/power of rising up.” If a new theological sensibility is to apply here at all, it means something else altogether than a mechanistic conflation of “nature” with design. The chancy, excessive, poetic dimensions of reality disrupt the dualism carried in ontologies that fundamentally separate the reality of the divine from the creativity of the world out of which divinity, perhaps, comes. Every day, brimming over with divinity, our stories re-enact creation, become-in the context (out of) the dense dreaming stuff. They make us and the world. This is a narrative, imaginative, ontically significant claim, and it is unintelligible to a metaphysics of solidity.

As I am suggesting here, other modes of reasoning exist (than the logic of the One, that is) that have never required “presence” to instantiate static, unverifiable substance prior to linguistic or narrative implication. They do not assume language, narrative, and story to be inert

building blocks and tools for reporting, memory, or instruction. In other words, these other modes of reasoning do not assume language, narrative, and story to be disembodied, without agency on their own. Perhaps there is a fundamental tendency in book-cultures toward the negligent idea that language and narrative can be reduced to utility and thereby bound (as in shelved.) The error lies in forgetting the innate agency of stories, their capacity to be bound *for* something, for mischief and creation beyond any storyteller's ability to predict or manage. Ontic significance co-implicates story and presence(s), assuming a world-creating aspect to narrative that cannot be restricted or entirely managed. But this idea is intelligible only within a mode of reasoning that begins with fluidity or more specifically does not presume a prior logic of the One wherein an ontological separation between truth (as one) and fiction (as multiple) must be rigidly maintained.⁹

Dualities gives us a powerful argument for staying with the tensions that have so often been sundered by dualism. In that spirit, I am fascinated by the ways that two women from such divergent cultures, religions, and times can, in essence, speak across the limits of their own cultures and times to our own, bearing gifts of an alternate logic that resists the "disastrous separations" of spirit and body, divinity and world, truth and art. As this exploratory essay reveals, my own comparative work lies in native North American traditions, in which the ontological assumptions are quite different than in European Christianity or in Indian Saivism or Advaitism, although native North American philosophies, like the voices of ancient women writers in Europe and India, are muted by prejudice, genocide, and missionary overlay. Nevertheless, there are interesting resonances between the theopos of native North America and these two theopos of medieval Europe and medieval India, especially in light of the richness of the fluidity metaphor that Voss Roberts has developed. The plural that Voss Roberts has placed on "duality" is brilliantly apt. There is more to divinity than One, there always has been. But—and this is the crux of "dualities"—there is more to duality than two (I have offered, experimentally, a third.) This is

the challenge of Lalleswari and Mechtild read together in service of a contemporary, constructive theology. Voss Roberts is onto something here, she is pulling a thread that strings a tapestry. It is worth seeing where it leads.

Notes

¹ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 180. Quoted in Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) p. 5.

² Harjo, Joy, "A Postcolonial Tale" in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, (NY: W.W. Norton, 1994) p. 18.

³ Schwartz, p. 5.

⁴ Voss Roberts, *Dualities*, p. 105.

⁵ Vizenor, Gerald, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) p. vii. Among other things, with this concept Vizenor suggests that the philosophical moves of European and American postmodernity is beginning to approach native wisdom, which has already long understood the malleable, fluid and interdynamic aspects of reality. Vizenor does not capitalize "native," "indian" or the name of his own tribe, anishinaabe. I am following his usage where appropriate.

⁶ Dupre, Louis, quoted in Vizenor, p. viii.

⁷ Vizenor, *ibid*.

⁸ Harjo, p. 18.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of the bifurcation of fact and fiction in the logic of the One, see Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplcity*, (London: Routledge Press, 2008) Chapter 6.