Impossible Identifications: The University and ‘Women of Difference’

KALPANA RAM

The paper examines the way Western knowledge traditions organise liberal invitations for members of minority groups to speak their difference. Heidegger’s critique of post-Cartesian Western philosophy for its intellectualism is here applied to the context of post-colonialism, while the political complexities of post-colonialism are in turn employed to look at some of the inadequacies of the phenomenological tradition. Multiculturalism in Australia and anthropology’s place in the Western university are used as examples of the political inadequacy of simply adopting phenomenology’s methodological valorisation of ways of being.

It has become increasingly common for women who are members of minority groups to be called upon to speak as an identity, to speak as a ‘woman of difference’, to represent their difference as women and as members of minorities, and in addition, to relate this difference to other topics. This paper was written in response to a critique given by the author on the panel on Women and Diversity at a conference on Women and the Culture of the Universities [1]. I wish to step back and explore the nature of this request and the implications of this injunction to speak, which makes its appearance at a certain historical conjuncture. At a time when there has occurred a partial and unstable shift in the terms in which modernity is understood, this injunction to speak one’s difference may be understood as the best that liberal pluralism has to offer figures such as the immigrant from the Third World, the woman, the black, the colonised. While this offer, request or injunction to speak one’s difference from the mainstream would never have been made if it had not been a history of struggle by these marginalised populations, their unsettling attempts to raise questions of exclusion and marginalisation are continually reinterpreted and subverted by the familiar and deadening habits of thought built up by certain traditions that have been crucially formative in Western intellectual history.

I wish to argue that to ask someone like me to speak as a woman of difference about academic knowledge is to misinterpret the problem. In this formulation we have the subject—that is, the ‘woman of difference’ assumed to be a self-evident entity, who is transparent to herself. In representing herself, she is simply being called upon to present what she already knows about herself into language. Let us now look at the other half of the formulation—where such a woman is asked to speak about academic knowledge. Here the object, academic knowledge, is not seen as
subject as something she knows about herself, not even if she happens to be an academic. Rather, academic knowledge is assumed to have its own location, completely outside of this woman, precisely because of who she is, namely, a 'woman of difference'. Let us notice also that in the process, it is not only the woman’s subject status that has been represented as a given and knowable entity. Academic knowledge has also been represented as an entity that is simply a given, a knowable and definable object.

I wish to argue in this paper that this subject/object dichotomy continually reorganises and re-frames the demands of marginalised and colonised populations. Nor is this a coincidence. The subject/object dichotomy represents one of the dominant organisational structures of Western philosophy itself. In its classical formulation, one particularly associated with Cartesian traditions, the subject—prototypically, the male philosopher—assumes his subjectivity to be a matter of the thoughts, beliefs and representations which are transparent to himself. The world, in this formulation, is external to the thinking subject who regards it in a mode of detached contemplation. As a result of this formulation, a problem emerges: how does this self-enclosed subject come to know the object, the world, whether in its natural form or in terms of the presence of others in it? The various permutations of response to this question chart the history of Western epistemology since Descartes. What Heidegger points to is the enduring feature of a radical separation of the enquiring subject and the world, which remains a characteristic of responses in thinkers otherwise as varied as Descartes, Kant and Husserl.

For this prestigious and influential Western intellectual tradition to even bother itself with the woman, let alone the non-European woman, and to ask her how she comes to know the world, is itself a major concession—forced on it by the collective struggles of the colonised. Before the concerted anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century the 'difference' of the colonised was simply regarded by this Western tradition as knowable and representable by the colonisers themselves. The difference of the colonised native was represented in terms of particular attributes seized upon by colonisers as 'gate-keeping' characteristics that were henceforth to make entire cultures available for easy comprehension, whether for purposes of denigration or valorisation: 'caste' and 'religion' in the case of the Indian subcontinent, 'Islam', 'the harem' and 'lineage' in the case of the Middle East and magic, shamanism, and 'primitivism' in the case of indigenous peoples.

The injunction that the colonised themselves 'speak their difference' marks, therefore, something of the post in 'post-colonialism'. What I wish to show here is the equally powerful tendency to reabsorb the 'post' back into the colonial. I wish to examine the way in which the hegemonic traditions that have shaped prevailing habits of thought that confront subjects with objects is at work in the demand that we see ourselves and our difference as transparent to our consciousness. I also wish to show this same tradition at work in the way the object—here the university—is set up as external to ourselves, as irrelevant to the constitution of our 'difference' as 'non-European women'.

The first part of this paper will be taken up in demonstrating the inadequacy of this conception of the subject. The second part is devoted to problematising the assumed externality of the object, that is, of the university, to the 'woman of difference' even where she is herself an academic. In the final section, I come to a reformulation of difference in the situation of the non-European woman academic and hence to the title of this paper: 'Impossible Identifications'.

The Subject of Difference

The injunction that we represent our difference—whether this be the difference of our culture, or of our gender, or of both—in terms of language, immediately raises for the non-European the first question: represent our difference in terms of which language? Even for those of us who have been schooled in English from a young age, there is an incommensurable gap between our primary language and English. The incommensurability can only be understood if, by the phrase 'placing into language', we mean not simply the placing of pre-existing representations into language, but the resort to language as an entire and primary modality of constructing a shared world for the speakers of that language. That is, before we can discuss the problem of asking someone whose 'culture' is shaped by one language to represent their culture in terms of another language, we need to explore the nature of language itself.

This 'working' capacity of language is relatively well explored, particularly since the age of structuralist linguistics. Less explored is a fallacy that is logically prior to the problem of translation from one language to another. This is the mistake of assuming that we 'know' our culture—or our gender—even in our primary language. To be asked to speak one's culture or one's gender, is to be asked to regard one's culture or one's gender as an object of representation in language. The requirement is treated as nothing more than that of expressing openly that which we already entertain in our minds. Culture, in this view, is a mental representation before it is a language representation.

Culture may be understood as a number of different kinds of representational systems: it may be understood as a matter of beliefs, of customs, of concepts, or even as so many rules we follow. Common understandings of 'gender' follow the same pathways. Gender is commonly understood as roles that are played, as beliefs that are held in the mind, and, if one is referring to gender in a non-European culture, it is understood as enduringly the province of rules that are imposed on women, or as traditions that are followed blindly.

This is a spurious model of the relation between subjectivity and gender or culture more generally. We do not live our gender or our culture consciously, we do not hold it in our minds as object of representation, nor do we live our culture or our gender as so many conscious beliefs and goals. Instead, gender and culture are lived as a matter of patterns or schemas which are implicit in our social practices and are diffuse enough not to have to impinge on our consciousness. The meaningfulness of our practices are rather in the nature of a background that is the cumulative result of our repeatedly and actively engaging in social practices over time. We are able to draw on this background, without any necessary reflection, in order to respond to the demands of the present. But precisely as a result of being implicit and available
according to the present context, we cannot place all of our experience of gender or of culture into words. We cannot expect to bring culture, in its entirety, into consciousness. There is simply no context which is capable of bringing all of our cultural background into the light, as it were.

If this is the case, we cannot expect to be able to 'speak' our gender or culture. All we can aspire to is to elicit or to illuminate some aspect of it. Even as we do so, we will be drawing on other aspects which we would have to treat as 'givens' in order to do so, aspects which remain in the shadow or in the background.

We are now also in a better position to appreciate the further difficulties of speaking our culture in a foreign language, or, in the case of non-Europeans, in a language which does not even share a 'family' of languages with our mother tongue. Even if we 'translate' some specific aspect of our culture into the other language, what gets lost, what is missing, is the unspoken background of every representation, which is absolutely vital to its meanings to the speakers. Nor is this background exclusively a matter of other linguistic representations, as is held by the structuralist traditions of language but also by the variants of theories which are dominant in academia and which focus exclusively on signs, representations and signifying practices. These theories fail to integrate the place of non-linguistic social practices. While language is undoubtedly primary as a social practice, it gains its meanings in turn through other social practices, through ways of doing, through embodied activities. These activities are also 'meaningful', but without requiring linguistic representations. They acquire their meaningfulness only over time, through repetitions and through the non-conceptualised acquisition of a sense of the way they interconnect with other cultural practices. For example, the way of wearing a sari in India is acquired over time, but it also interconnects with other social practices such as the way in which clothes in general are worn since childhood; it interconnects with a sensibility for particular colour combinations and textures which is imbued in the individual; it interconnects profoundly with the way in which gender is lived as a bodily practice in terms of how the body is revealed and concealed from others, particularly in relation to men. A linguistic reference to a sari in a poem or a song has all of this and much more, hovering as a horizon of meanings for the culturally shaped subject. It follows from this that it is not enough to learn a language in order to acquire the background to representations—one has to actually engage in a variety of social practices over time. It also follows from this that I cannot tell others all that is involved in being an Indian woman—it is quite simply not available even to me as a matter of consciousness.

It is in this sense that the injunction to 'speak as a woman' and to expect that a fullness will emerge from this speech, is fundamentally flawed. It can never be fully realised even when this demand is taken up by women or by other minorities as a basis for self-representation. It becomes even further removed from lived experience when applied to 'women of difference', with the demand that we represent our cultural version of gender in terms of its difference. Such demands, notably at work in the transformation of culture into ethnicity, take us very far from the way we live our culture. To view one's gender or culture as a set of 'representations' is itself a response to an unusual disturbance or a breakdown in our social environment. Culture becomes ethnicity when we have to live as a minority in a dominant culture that is alien to us. Thus in Australia, white Anglo-Australian ways of life are not understood as ethnicity, and only partly even as a culture. For the most part, Anglo-Australians enjoy what is in fact a feature of any culture, but which has become the privilege of the dominant—namely, to live one's culture simply as so many ways of being, uninterrogated and not requiring continual efforts of self-representation. Ethnicity and the label of difference attaches itself to all the non-Anglo-Celtic ways of life in this country. This itself can have unforeseen consequences, where many Anglo-Australians have told me they feel they have no 'culture', and envy me for 'having' one. The situation of breakdown can also refer to colonisation, when people and their culture are colonised, not only in the name of economic surplus extraction, but in the name of being ruled by a superior civilisation.

In a more positive vein, the breakdown of the socially taken-for-granted can also occur in the context of social and political movements of transformation such as the women's movement which transforms gender from an implicit background for social practices that reproduce gendered being, into a set of representations and concepts that actively challenge the necessity for such practices and meanings. However, it would be a mistake to assume that even a social movement for transformation such as feminism can bring all of our gender into consciousness and make it available for transformation at any one time. This is because gender is not only a matter of explicit meanings, nor can all the implicit meanings of social practices be made transparent.

The psychoanalytical strands of feminism avoid some of these pitfalls by paying attention to the unconscious and embodied nature of gender, but misunderstand gender by isolating it as a separate set of practices and meanings. Gender is not isolable in this fashion. Not only does it permeate all aspects of identity, but it derives its meanings from its interconnections with a whole range of social practices which is why the attempt to universalise an understanding of 'woman' in feminist theory has met with a necessary failure. It is also the reason why, even while one set of gendered practices is being questioned, others remain in the background. This is not necessarily a deficiency. We can only mobilise our critical practices on the basis of taking others for granted. Thus it is fairly typical for women to mobilise in order to combat class oppression or military repression on the basis of their gendered being as mothers, daughters and wives. Such unevenness in what is available for questioning is a necessary characteristic of feminism itself. The consciousness-raising sessions of the 1970s allowed Western women to bring certain areas of their gender oppression into consciousness, but it was largely on the basis of taking for granted their identity as class beings. The women who were questioning gender oppression were sustained by the social privileges of child care and economic security that allowed them the time to question. If these aspects were called into question by socialist-feminism as in the Sydney groups I was a member of in the 1970s, then the aspects of feminism that were based on race privileges were noticeably not called into question. Black and coloured women were and are confront by the striking inability of Western feminism to 'see' its own cultural
assumptions and the privileged basis on which these assumptions become universalised.

In constructing my argument I have already been drawing heavily on the phenomenological insights of Heidegger ([1962] 1992) and Merleau-Ponty ([1962] 1986). I wish at this point to turn more explicitly to the argument that Heidegger developed in his critique of particular Western philosophical tendencies, and to apply it specifically to the situation of colonised non-European peoples. Heidegger's critique is aimed at a failure to understand human 'being' as anything but mental representations about an objective, external world. He finds different versions of this tendency in Descartes (radically isolated cogito, in Kant's transcendental subject, and in the account of intentionality given by his own mentor in phenomenology, Husserl. In certain respects, he finds antecedents to such a tendency in Plato, who made theorising the central way in which human beings make sense of the world (Dreyfus 1991). The Western philosophical discourses examined by Heidegger elaborate a deep-seated prejudice in favour of knowledge, that is, in favour of ways of knowing the world [2]. To this Heidegger contrasts a more fundamental mode in which we engage with the world, which entails a non-reflective and active flow of practices. This more fundamental mode Heidegger terms ways of being.

Fundamental to the legacy that these philosophers have bequeathed to contemporary intellectual formulations is a tendency to understand culture as a matter of thoughts, beliefs and projects, culminating in intellectualism's predilection for imagining that we deal with the world primarily through concepts. Although the philosophical shifts of post-structuralist critique have de-centred the structure of this earlier legacy in that it is no longer the subject who is the originator or seat of concepts and beliefs, the older philosophical preoccupation with mental states and concepts now shows up as a preoccupation with representations and signs. In cultural studies, for example, it shows up as a gravitation towards the media and advertising, towards literary and other kinds of texts, towards examining culture as identity politics—in other words, towards practices that are involved in producing culture as representation. These are all important areas for investigation and interpretation, but they are not primary as these discussions seem to presume. What we have, all over again, is the tendency of intellectualism to conflate that which is readily available for interpretation and for decoding with lived experience. Representations of food or clothing are hardly the same thing as the lived experience of cooking, eating, dressing. Formulated in this way, the statement seems self-evident. Yet if we only ever discuss the former, then the weight of intellectualism's history quickly works to obscure the difference between the two.

Equally, we might say that the problems in philosophy and in other more recent areas of academic enquiry are themselves not unique to academia, but represent the explicit thematisation and intellectualisation of tendencies that have in fact been produced by a wide range of European social practices from the seventeenth century onwards. The very way in which Western Europe and England came to understand 'religion' as a matter of beliefs affords an illustration of the widespread social character of intellectualism. 'The religion of a people became a matter of asking what was believed and if it was true' (Harrison 1990: 2). Once abstracted, 'beliefs' could then be compared as the criteria of 'the religions'. Harrison explores the constellation of practices which came together in post-Reformation England, some of them related to the growing prestige of the natural sciences and scientific method, and others to do with the destabilisation of religion by the oscillation between Protestant and Catholic monarchies.

In turn, such ways of understanding culture had effects well beyond Europe. I wish to apply Heidegger's powerful critique to two such situations that are relevant to my own history: namely, the transformations that occurred in Indian culture as a result of British colonisation, transformations which have shaped our own understandings and misunderstandings, as Indians, of our culture; and secondly, to my situation as a member of an 'ethnic minority' in Australia.

Colonial Ways of Knowing: The Transformation of Culture into Representations

In the colonial context, what is simply a deep-seated and fundamental misunderstanding of ways of being on the part of influential European intellectual traditions takes on a powerful political role in the mischaracterisation of entire subjugated cultures. A good deal of post-colonial critique is devoted to the inferiorising character of colonial representations of the Other. Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) has pioneered a powerful tradition that examines colonial representations as a systematic discourse with the capacity to produce power relations of inequality. This tradition of critique, focused as it is on representations, overlooks an even more fundamental violence. It is not simply that negative representations were produced by colonial power. The very transformation of culture as so many ways of being into so many representations entails a fundamental impoverishment. Commentators have remarked on the reduction of Indian culture into certain key representations, such as caste and religion, that become metonymic of the entire complexity of a civilisation (Appadurai 1988; Pandey 1992). What needs further examination is the very understanding of cultural practices as so many rules, beliefs and mental representations, and the particular political force this understanding acquired in the colonial context. In the colonial context, culture, already misunderstood as 'rules' in the European context, now became understood as labyrinthine rules of caste and religion, inexplicable to the Westerner. Culture, already misunderstood as primarily a matter of 'beliefs', now became a matter of understanding Hinduism as a body of superstitions beliefs, in contrast with the tenets of Western reason or of Christianity. Cultural tradition became dogma, rigidly adhered to by the Indian. Attachment to culture becomes a passive acquiescence, a blind conformity—indeed, the fatalism of the 'Hindoo', 'governed' by 'beliefs' such as dharma and karma is a recurring trope in British representations [3]. It is not an accident that 'custom', a term conveying a mechanical reproduction of practices and beliefs that is the very antonym of Reason, comes to play a particularly favoured role in colonial representations of the culture of the colonised. It is equally salient that the term re-emerges, newly appropriated, in the self-representations of the colonised, as in the 'kastam' of the peoples of the Pacific (Keesing 1982). What has occurred here is that culture, which is a repertoire of skills actively developed and drawn upon in the process of
negotiating with the world, and which can be used flexibly according to context, has been transformed into a series of representations existing in the mind of the native, into 'beliefs' which govern behaviour in the way that rules can be said to govern behaviour.

Colonialism made further distinctions on the basis of its prejudice in favour of ways of knowing the world over ways of being in the world. Where colonialism came across traditions that were recognisable as other intellectual traditions, the term 'civilisation' was extended as a sign of recognition. The predisposition in favour of overtly conceptualised traditions of discourse oriented colonialism to recognising not only the Sanskrit traditions of religious and literary texts, but also the regional traditions such as the Tamil literary corpus. Such recognition is elaborated in an Orientalist scholarship based on the interpretation and codification of this corpus. In accordance with this orientation, the key to understanding the culture was located in the self-consciously intellectual castes of the Brahmins, who became, in this view, the interpreters not only of texts but of 'Hindu' culture itself (Mani 1988). Such selective recognition was always already shaped by colonial inequality. Where Western intellectual traditions were viewed (and continue to be viewed) as self-reflexive and evolving, Indian intellectual traditions fell under the colonial sign of religion rather than that of reason. The conceptual traditions of India were therefore understood as intricate, and bafflingly rich in their elaborations and distinctions; but they were also viewed as an inert corpus of 'traditions'. Conscious mastery over this corpus by the Brahmins did not necessarily bring them credit — their conscious custodianship was just as indicative of a wily mastery, a manipulative will to power.

With just one group being credited with custodianship over a vast and complex civilisation, the way was clear to understanding this very monopoly and consciousness as evidence for a plot of deception and intrigue. The term 'pundit', which has passed into the English language, conveys exactly this mixture of selective recognition for mastery over a corpus of learning, mixed with a certain denigratory irony about such claims made by the category of people thus described.

If we look around the Western universities as it is today, this colonial redefinition of non-European intellectual traditions is evident — they are placed, if they are placed at all, in a Religious Studies Department, studied as Hinduism and Buddhism perhaps, but not in the Humanities or in the Social Sciences. They are not placed in a context where they are understood as live intellectual tools in the flow of contemporary critical thinking.

Heidegger argued that central strands of Western philosophy intellectualise all culture. I have suggested that this intellectualist prejudice had profound implications in orienting colonialism towards intellectual traditions in interpreting the cultures it colonised. Such a prejudice is equally sharply apparent towards cultures which did not readily present themselves as possessing traditions that could be represented as 'intellectual', as based on an overtly conceptualised and textualised discourse. Where this occurred, the cultures were simply not granted the status of a 'civilisation'. We have seen this kind of colonial non-recognition at work in the white encounter with the indigenous population of Australia as well as with other cultures of the Pacific. In such cultures, custodians of knowledge ranked even lower than the Brahmins of India and their 'punditry'. In cultures that did not convey knowledge through a textualised body of religious doctrine, custodians earned the denigratory characterisations of the 'African witch doctor' and 'the shaman'. Although Western counter-cultural movements have given new cultural capital to such traditions, what remains constant is a tendency to define and characterise other cultures primarily in terms of religion, now understood as their 'spirituality'.

The post-colonial critique of colonialist representations, with its adoption of a powerful Foucauldian analysis of power, leaves us unclear at times as to whether there is any reality outside these representations. I am arguing that in the case of colonialism, there is such a reality. It is not necessarily to be found in 'native' representations as might be argued by nationalism, since, particularly among the upper classes, these, too, will have a tendency towards intellectualism, often shaped by the colonial traditions. Educated Indians themselves will characterise their traditions as a matter of customs and beliefs. Older Indians like my grandfather still respond to the missionary critiques of Hinduism as idol worship by characterising 'real' Hinduism as high philosophical doctrine, with idol worship as Hinduism's answer to the aspirations of the uneducated masses. Younger middle-class Indians, often growing up in the United States or Australia or Canada, require that older generations produce, much to their astonishment, explicit meanings for any rituals in which they take part, such as marriage rituals. At my wedding in Sydney, the priest, with a practised ease borne of responding to many such requests from young Indians, produced a typewritten exegesis of the ritual for the culturally mixed audience.

Post-colonial theory in Western universities has been preoccupied with colonialist representations in texts, in museums, in art, in discursively elaborated traditions such as Orientalism. As many have pointed out, such a concentration on Western representation itself reinforces the centrality of a discursive universe the practice seeks to disturb [4]. In India, post-colonial scholarship is less inclined to privilege Western representations and more inclined to interrogate nationalist discourses as centrally constitutive of Indian life. Yet the study of colonialist discourse, and in India of nationalism, both continue to privilege systematically elaborated discourses at the expense of social practices that may or may not produce a version of being that coincides with these discourses. A typewritten exegesis of wedding rituals can certainly be investigated as a hybrid artefact of nationalist-colonialist representations of Indian culture. Yet such representations are not the only means by which Indians understand their own culture. This will be easier to convey if we cease to think of understanding in terms of cognition. The same Indians who characterise their culture in terms of beliefs and customs are engaged in social practices which give them an implicit understanding of their culture in quite different terms. I will take only one example: the bifurcation between Hinduism as philosophy and Hinduism as 'idol worship'. The same Indians who posit this bifurcation are quite likely to be engaged in practices of worship. Such practices of worship implicitly deny the dichotomy between doctrine and temple worship, between the spirit of the deity and the form in which the deity is present in the temple. This non-dichotomous understanding is implicit in the way that most people socialised in Indian families
will respond (even if they intellectually disagree with religious precepts) to any practice that brings the divine into manifest presence—whether these be practices of narration regarding the deity or devotional practices of dance and music. Practices of image-making and image-worship take their place within this broader constellation of presence-making practices.

Multicultural Australia and the University

In this section I wish to shift the argument, and suggest that simply substituting ways of being for ways of knowing is inadequate unless we examine the wider ramifications of colonial distinctions which are operative in the present. Multiculturalism in Australia provides an excellent case study in the problems with a partial dismantling of colonial distinctions. In Australia, entire non-dominant cultures are understood primarily in terms of so many ways of being: ways of eating, of dressing, ways of marrying and raising their children, and so on. We have for some time been familiar in Australia with the particular understanding of non-dominant cultures in terms of food—with the cultivation of tastes, the way these foods are eaten, the celebration of a diversity of ways of eating. The recognition of these cultures in terms of intellectual 'ways of knowing' is not there. It is certainly not my argument that these ways of eating, or dressing, or of marrying are trivial or facile. However, there is a political power relation between ways of knowing and ways of being that a philosophical critique such as Heidegger's does not reckon with. We have to grapple also with the dominance of what Western culture regards as prestigious. This prestige is reserved for conceptualised discourses that are systematic and intellectually elaborated. The Australian university system in this country, as the highest tier of learning, embodies the prestige and importance reserved for such discourses. Such power relations are not forged in one isolated set of practices in philosophy departments, but in a broad constellation of practices. The persistence of inequalities between ways of knowing and being may therefore be better understood by placing the practices of the Australian university in relation with broader practices such as that of multiculturalism and the state in Australia. Taken in this larger political context, the representation of non-European cultures, not in terms of their intellectual and complex discourses, but rather in terms of types of food and clothing, is in fact a highly unequal and diminishing representation.

At least one consequence of my argument is the conclusion that it is vitally important to represent non-Western traditions precisely as elaborated ways of knowing, as complex ways of understanding and representing the world, and to do so precisely at the highest and most prestigious level of education, namely at the university level. Moreover this placement at the university level must be done in ways that do not at the same time partition them off by placing them in enclaves that are themselves relatively marginal in a university dominated by the world views of technocratic modernity, and Enlightenment-derived values of secular critical thought. In other words, representing non-European intellectual traditions purely in terms of 'religion' is already to marginalise even while representing them. There is an urgent need to free-up constructions of non-European intellectual traditions from colonial misrepresentations. These traditions are not 'religion', since 'religion' itself has been misrepresented as empty and formal dogma. Instead, non-European intellectual traditions need to be taught along with the mainstream of university disciplines. I cannot speak for the sciences, but there is no reason why they cannot be taught as part of critical theory in the Humanities and Social Sciences. There is no reason why fully conceptualised discourses such as Indian aesthetics could not take their place in the study of Fine Arts and aesthetics. There is no intellectual reason why Aboriginal or Indian narrative traditions, with their different construction of time and presence could not radically challenge the teaching of History and Philosophy. These are not to be taught as separate exotic constructions, but rather as an equal engagement, capable of restoring dimensions of being such as the magical, that Western intellectual traditions have become dead to.

As long as inhabitants in this country who fall outside the dominant Anglo-Celtic stratum of culture find themselves represented only in terms of 'ethnic' food and dress, we know that we still occupy an inferior place. It is also no coincidence that we from other cultures occur prominently in the one place in the university that attends precisely to non-intellectual representations of culture—namely, in the discipline of anthropology. When we are represented in anthropology, it is precisely in terms of 'culture', and not in terms of our intellectual traditions. In this discipline, we are understood in terms of the ways we are socialised into ways of reckoning kinship, marrying, food and gift exchanges, our dancing, our body decorations, the way we worship deities and demons, and the way we construct elaborate social 'rules' of rank and status. We do not, it seems, create scholarly traditions that require the same critical reading and apprenticeship as Western intellectual traditions do. Our philosophies and our literatures are not integral or well represented in anthropological discussions [5].

It will be clear from my argument thus far that there are several things wrong with this university-level representation of other cultures primarily in terms of an anthropological understanding of 'culture'. First, this understanding is marginal to the way the university promotes an understanding of Western traditions. When it comes to the West, the representation is in terms of formal discourses of knowledge, and the focus is on intellectual traditions of thought. Although anthropologists certainly try to turn their representations of other cultures against Western assumptions, they do so within their own discursive field, one which is not positioned to challenge the way in which every other department in the university trains its students. Secondly, although the methodological insights of anthropology are in fact universalisable—that is, every culture, including European culture, may be understood in terms of ways of meaningfully organising its practices around food, kinship, status and so on—the fact is that if we view the university as a whole, then anthropology's place within the university is primarily to enquire and document 'other cultures'. In other words, the anthropological view of 'culture' is developed primarily in relation to non-dominant cultures of the world and not in relation to the dominant culture. Attempts to anthropologise Western culture are relatively underdeveloped and not central to the anthropological discipline. On the other side of the divide, other
departments that devote themselves to intellectual discourses are there not just primarily but in fact exclusively in order to convey Western traditions.

These problems are exacerbated by the weaknesses within anthropology's own characterisation of culture, which inadequately or at best unevenly interrogates Western philosophy's predisposition towards mentalist representations of being. That is, the dominant tradition within anthropology continues to represent culture as rules, beliefs, and representations, in which the cultural subject necessarily appears as passive and socialised in a docile manner. Geertz's work on the Balinese cockfight, for example, treats the cockfight as a text which the skilled hermeneutic can decode (Crapanzano 1986). Dumont's work on India, far more sophisticated, takes up the Durkheimian tradition of viewing religion as a set of collective representations that gives cohesion and meaning even to as diverse a civilisation as that of the subcontinent (Dumont 1980).

This kind of intellectualist understanding has been challenged and partially shifted in recent years particularly by anthropologists influenced by Heidegger, such as Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1977 1992) carries over into anthropology a view of culture that centres instead on social practices that, over time, provide a patterning and patterned set of dispositions that Bourdieu calls a habitus. However, Bourdieu's work on non-European cultures focuses only on the implicit meanings of culture, marginalising the intellectual traditions—for example, the Kabyle of North Africa are examined entirely in terms of their habitus, while the formal systems of intellectual life such as Islam, are ignored (Bedford, n.d.) [6]. In other words, the dynamics of the binarism are reproduced: either we can look at culture as practice, or we can examine intellectual traditions, never both at once. The repercussions of this are more than intellectual—they draw automatically on the discursive legacies of colonialism, which provide a crucial part of the implicit 'background', in the phenomenological sense I have described previously, to formal intellectual representations. Bourdieu's representation of the Kabyle, an exclusive focus on the habitus goes with an exclusive focus on that which the Kabyle are necessarily not fully aware of. Interpreters often refer to his active concept of 'strategies' as one which rescues Bourdieu from a conception of culture as producing passively socialised subjects. While the concept of culture is undoubtedly more sophisticated as a result of his invocation of strategies, it does not atone for his failure to take into account the subjectivity of a non-European group such as the Kabyle. His elaboration of their 'strategies' is a non-cognitivist one, that is, it does not refer to the Kabyle's conscious awareness of the way their strategies draw on larger cultural patterns. On the other hand, he ignores the intellectual systems that the Kabyle are highly conscious of, and he does so in the name of a critique of intellectualism. Again, the critique is entirely legitimate, but allows a lopsidedness to creep in which immediately translates itself into a colonial situation: the natives are unaware of their true situation, but Bourdieu emerges as the carrier of science, a title Bourdieu continues to desire for his brand of anthropology.

The inequalities I describe are not confined to any particular discipline or to the university. They are pervasive in Australia even in the most benign forms of representation available, which are those offered in the name of multiculturalism. Anthropologists are approached to see if 'culture' is a mitigating circumstance that can be used in the defence of an Aboriginal person or an Indian in an Australian courtroom—yet the actions of Anglo-Celtic Australians are not examined in parallel terms. This is no coincidence. The model of the relationship between culture and action in the courtroom is that of cause and effect. Such a model may be considered adequate for understanding the non-Western person, but would seldom be entertained as a description of the Western individual, ensnared in common sense as the originator of action, thoughts and projects. The model of culture used for the non-Westerner is as mistaken as the model of the individual used for the Westerner—but equally pernicious is the unequal application of culturalist and individualist arguments.

I have concentrated in my argument so far on the two disciplines of anthropology and philosophy. These happen to be the two disciplines that I am most familiar with, but they are also the two disciplines that, when brought into a structural relationship with one another, are perhaps most revealing of the way the Western university has, since the late nineteenth century, implicitly shaped constructions of the Western self as against the 'non-Western Other'.

The Object of Difference
The University as Habitus

I began this paper by criticising the inadequacies in the characterisation of the subject and the object in the injunction to speak as a woman of difference about the university. In examining the inadequacies of the conceptualisation of the subject, I have already had to deal to some extent with the university system. This is no coincidence. The subject is not formed in isolation from the object. In the case at hand, the representations of sexual and cultural difference that feed into representations of the 'woman of difference' are shaped by social practices in a number of sites, but sites such as the university are particularly important because of their prestige and status. I have drawn attention to two distinct ways in which such representations are produced: in part through explicit discourses on difference, such as that found in anthropology, and in part through non-thematised university practices that produce implicit meanings through the very way in which the field of knowledge is divided up into disciplines. I have drawn particular attention to the way in which a distinction between the study of ways of knowing and the study of ways of being has coincided, since the late nineteenth century and the establishment of anthropology departments, with the study of European disciplines and the study of the non-European peoples. Such a distinction, all-important as it is in reproducing inequalities, is non-thematised in the sense of never being made explicit as the basis for such a division of labour and methodologies. It is also non-thematised in the sense that it draws on a politically crucial background to the evolution of Western knowledge through the period of colonialism. Such non-thematised practices are precisely the ways in which the university itself functions as a habitus, as a site of socialisation for all those engaged in its practices.
I wish now to turn to a different sense in which the 'woman of difference' and the university cannot be thought of as two given entities that must be brought into relationship with one another. Many, perhaps most, of the women speaking at an international conference about universities, held at a university, are themselves members of universities, as I am. Further, we share the common background provided by colonial histories which inform our present, although we occupy different and unequal positions within it. In this sense, I cannot comment on academic knowledge as if it was something utterly external to myself, as if it were an object that is simply a 'given'. The predilections of the classic male philosopher who can only imagine the world as an object towards which one strikes a contemplative attitude take on different meanings in relation to women like myself. They take on the expectations that a 'non-European native' will both remain entirely external to the contaminations of the Western world and have the skills to play the informant at a university conference. This is to bypass the formative processes of modernity in countries like India, in which post-war out-migration to Western countries is only another phase. More specifically, my subjectivity, but also the implicit non-therapeutised horizon on which I draw, have been shaped over many years of being a student and an academic at Western universities. Nor is this a passive shaping—the socialisation occurs precisely through an active engagement and the development of skills over a period of time which allows me to respond, not like an automaton, but according to the specific needs of the intellectual context with which the present confronts me. There are also pleasures in this process of transformation, in learning the intellectual tools necessary to survive in the dominant culture, in becoming-scholar [7], in learning to represent the world in new ways. Re-socialisation is not an entirely unpleasurable experience.

What then remains of difference? My response emerges from what has been said thus far. Even in the process of re-socialising myself into Western university knowledge systems, I find difference re-inscribed there. When an Indian woman studies Western philosophy as a student, she encounters the study of highly discursive traditions that foreground the processes of subjectivity—reflection, introspection, critical reflexivity—all of which take the individual as the starting point and the end point of intellectual processes. When the same woman studies anthropology, she encounters the study of non-Western societies including her own, not in terms of her culture's intellectual traditions, but in terms of representations she can only be partly aware of, which are implicit in her ways of doing things. The only alternative Western tradition is that of Orientalist scholarship which valorises textual traditions that are in the past or which require little reference to the interpretations of living Indians or Arabs in order to sustain the interpretation. In either case, she does not encounter Indians as subjects in the way that she encounters Westerners as subjects in the discipline of philosophy. Instead, what is foregrounded in anthropology is culture as the active agent, culture as the active subject. This focus on culture is one I am in intellectual agreement with, but such intellectual propositions take their place in a social field defined by diverse and intersecting social practices, in and through which inequalities are produced. Given this historically produced field, academic discourses are not only representations of the world; they draw on social meanings that students and teachers bring to academia as already social subjects. The discourses themselves actively bring into being a world into which the student is socialised.

Academic discourses therefore function as 'mirrors', not mirrors as governed by the physical laws of morning something that already exists, but in the active formative sense that Lacan uses the term in describing the infant's primary identification with the whole that she or he sees in the mirror. In the mirror of philosophy, I as student fashion myself as an active consciousness but at the price of rendering irrelevant my social locatedness, particularly insofar as my formative experiences of gender and class occurred outside the Western cultural matrix. In the mirror of anthropology on the other hand, I develop identifications with the interpretation of my culture as a whole, as a seamless tradition, but at the price of finding no place in it for the Indian as enquirer, as intellectual, as woman, as shaped by a specific modernity. Lacan’s description of the mirror image is apposite in more ways than one. The six-month-old infant, 'still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependency', does not actually experience wholeness—the image in the mirror is therefore seized by the infant with a sense of jubilation (Lacan 1977: 2). I recall reading, while an 'infant' as far as being socialised into anthropological traditions, anthropological texts containing interpretive accounts of rituals performed by my own caste-community of women in south India. After the complete absence of my culture in other disciplines such as philosophy and sociology, the text was a powerful experience of being 'hailed' or interpellated, and I greeted it with just such a sense of jubilation. Furthermore, my own experience of these female rituals had been fragmentary, shaped by modernisation, urbanisation, Western education and ultimately, by migration. I was confronted instead by a holistic interpretation. Meanings that would in any case have been implicit in these ritual practices had been rendered explicit in the interpretation. But the jubilation was undercut by a sense of alienation. An irreducible gap appeared between the fragmentary nature of the experience and the completeness which the interpretation offered. Living under the historical conditions of post-colonialism, it was only too easy to assume that some other Indians somewhere had access to this perfect fullness of meaning in their ritual lives.

In Lacan's account such alienation is made an irreducible part of the human condition. The wholeness with which the infant identifies is based on a fundamental misrecognition. Identity itself in its assumption of fullness is based on a méconnaissance. I prefer not to adopt this generalisation of alienation as the basis of all human identity and to reserve it instead for critiquing situations of radical cultural inequality. To be situated by language and social relations need not be understood as lack and alienation but can rather be understood, as Merleau-Ponty has movingly argued, as the basis on which we find ourselves out in the world as embodied intentionality, and not locked up each within our own isolated and solipsistic consciousness. However, Lacan's account of alienation is useful if used in a delimited way as critique. Thus Irigaray (1974) 1985) effectively deploys the paradigm of radical alienation in language in order to convey the specific plight of women, who lack an apparatus with which to symbolise and therefore mourn that which they are
asked to give up from infancy. The language available has already represented women as lack, deficiency, as imitation and as negative image of the subject, giving the little girl nothing with which to symbolize and mourn her loss. The resultant alienation of women from culture is dramatic—Irigaray describes it as the state of being abandoned, of not having a home in culture.

I find Lacan’s account of alienation very apt for the plight of the woman from the ex-colony who finds her culture described in the texts of anthropology. The post-colonial migrant woman finds, in anthropology, an account of her own community’s rituals, which, however, do not stand for her own experience. The account is complete, whereas her experience is fragmented; it is in English, not in Tamil; it appears in textual form, not as bodily practice; and while appearing so complete in its textual intellectualism it is absolutely impoverished, shorn of the emotional colouring, the smells, the sounds and sights that go with even a fragmentary lived experience of ritual. All these aspects must be re-imagined on the basis of a textual exegesis. To the extent that her culture itself is treated as text, as a set of representations to be read and decoded, the alienation in front of this anthropological mirror is acute. She may cling to these representations, which are the only enclave in the university where something of her culture exists or can be brought to life, but the identification with these texts is unstable in the extreme, impossible to maintain.

Such impossible identifications may have many contradictory effects. The gap between academic ways of knowing and one’s ways of being may be so acute as to make itself felt as a certain nomadism, a restlessness and inability to settle into any intellectual genealogy. The same gap may, under certain conditions, foster a critical engagement with the dominant traditions of knowledge. What is certain is that, despite the strenuous efforts of identity politics, one’s ‘non-Western’ way of being is never available as an alternative set of representations, already in language, ready to hand, to be wielded against prevailing academic scholarship. Cultural ways of being, as opposed to discursively elaborated intellectual traditions, only emerge in relation to social contexts, as ways of doing things, as modes of comportment, as unthematised, unreflective flows of practice that are purposeful, but also simply expressive of a marvellous outward directedness towards the world and towards other human beings. When a social context does not exist for them, therefore, cultural ways of being retreat into a zone which is neither disappear (since they can spring back into existence, as when I speak to another Indian or set foot in India) nor active presence. Universities are relatively better equipped to make a space for non-Western traditions of knowledge, although the non-thematized divisions of the theoretical labour of anthropologists against even such accommodations. What is even harder to envisage in an institution that takes knowledge as its raison d’ être, is how a space might be made for culturally alien ways of doing things. One recalls efforts in the late 1960s and 1970s at changing not only the content of pedagogy but also the mode of pedagogical practice, down to the very arrangement of tables and chairs in the academic space of teaching. But to the extent that the academy is itself a live social context, and not simply a repository of inert texts and knowledge traditions, it can consign ways of being that are culturally alien to the shadowy zone that is neither presence nor absence. From this zone there is no necessary reason for them ever to emerge. Alternatively, the academy can strive to make these ways of being relevant to the context it affords. If we insist, however, on only ever calling them forth as a set of alternative representations, or as identities presumed to be fully known to the non-Westerner and fully knowable by the Western academy, we will continue to fundamentally mistake the nature of our social being.

Macquarie University, Sydney

Dedication

To my grandfather, who died after this paper was written.

Notes

[1] The conference Winds of Change: Women and The Culture of Universities was held at the University of Technology, Sydney, 12-17 July, 1998, Sydney, Australia. An unedited version of this paper has been published as part of conference proceedings (Ram 1999). I wish to thank the organisers for providing this occasion for reflection, and the Australian Research Council for the time to do so. I also thank Jan Bedford for his editorial eye. Finally, I wish to thank the two readers for Communal/Plural, whose generosity of response provided the energy for undertaking revisions.

[2] It is certainly true that Heidegger’s critique sets up a sweeping characterisation of Western philosophy. Nor is such a tendency so unique to Heidegger that it can be safely consigned to the past—his characterisations have shaped some of the most influential and critical of contemporary deconstructive philosophy, evident in the way that Derrida and Irigaray convict Western philosophy as the history of the metaphysics of presence and of phallicism, respectively. Some of the same legacy is also apparent in the rhetoric of crisis, such as the ‘end of philosophy’ envisaged by philosophers like Rorty. Christine Battersby (1998) and before her, Seyla Benhabib (1992) are therefore right to point to alternative traditions within Western philosophy. However, I am indebted to Bambach (1995) for showing how Heidegger’s characterisation also enables a different reading of the history of philosophy, as of philosophical genealogies—not as something unique and unrepeatable that proceeds according to an inner principle of development and progress, but as involving both enough repetitions to enable the discernment of patterns of coherence that constitute a tradition, and therefore, because of this capacity to pattern experience, to become a living existential aspect of the present and of future possibilities.

[3] I have elsewhere discussed the resurfacing of these tropes in Western anthropology (Ram 1994).

[4] To quote just the latest version of this criticism that I have come across, in Leela Gandhi (1998), ‘while it may be revoltingly to teach Gandhi as political theory in the Anglo-American academy, he is, and has always been, canonical in India ... Rarely does postcolonial engage with the theoretical self-sufficiency of African, Indian, Korean, Chinese knowledge systems, or foreground those cultural and historical conversations which circumvent the Western world’ (1998: ix-x).

[5] Even in literary departments that title themselves departments of ‘Comparative Literature’, the circle of comparisons is a narrow one—as my brother found when he won a scholarship to Yale and found that he could not count any of the Indian languages he knew towards a study of literature.

[6] The inspiration for this section on Bourdieu comes from Jan Bedford’s critique (n.d.).

[7] I draw here on the work of Deleuze who emphasizes the pleasures in the transformative aspects of being as becoming-other (Deleuze & Guattari 1980).
The Globalisation of Buddhism and the Emergence of Religious Civil Society: The Case of the Taiwanese Fo Kuang Shan Movement in Asia and the West

JUDITH NAGATA

The experience of the Fo Kuang Shan (Buddha’s Light Mountain) movement represents a particular example of some general trends in world religions today. It displays such features of a globalising religion as increasing this-worldly social engagement and ecumenical co-operation, greater lay and female involvement in most activities, and expansion in non-traditional zones beyond Asia. The enlarged scope of religious pluralism and of transnational religious connections provide conditions for the emergence of a global religious civil society, transcending territorial state boundaries, and capable of engaging in informal, quasi-political and diplomatic roles in their interstices, and even of exerting a measure of moral authority from the margins, as visible in the peripatetic activities of the Pope and the Dalai Lama. Fo Kuang Shan, as a transnational, humanistic, neo-Buddhist movement, with members on every continent, appears to be playing a role in global Chinese identity politics, including rapprochement between China and Taiwan, while providing the latter with an alternative voice in a world of ‘nations’ where its position is tenuous.

Introduction: The Emergence of Global Religion

The place of religions in today’s global order is subject to a number of contradictory evaluations. In opposition to more conventional predictions as to the decline of religion and religiosity under pressures of globalisation are observations recognising the adaptability and resilience of religion, often in non-traditional and less recognisable forms (Comaroff 1994; Weller 1994). The attention of other observers is drawn to the fate of religions under conditions of extreme space-time compression (Harvey 1989), of an invasive global market, and of extensive migrations where unfamiliar religious communities must live side by side in alien cultural settings, offering unprecedented opportunities for experimentation, proselytisation and conversion. This is the stage on which the territorial reach and test their universalism, even as, of necessity, they must appeal to local and indigenous cultural needs. One measure of a universal religion is its success in going local, yet without losing its essential character and identity. This makes any prescriptive line between local and global particularly hard to define in practice.

References

Benhabib S 1992 Situating the Self, Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics Oxford Polity Press.
Devereux G & Gauntt-R 1980 A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press.