STRANDED BETWEEN THE 'POSTS': THE ATTENUATED FEMALE
SUBJECT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORY

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This paper is the by-product of my attempts to write ethnographies that deal with the relationships that obtain between female subjectivity and social location. My ethnographic work has been located in two kinds of socio-historical contexts: the first is the Tamil speaking region of south India, where my enquiries have, over the last ten years, focussed particularly on subaltern labouring castes (Ram 1991); and the second is the Indian diaspora in Australia. While this paper will focus on the diasporic subject (Ram 1995), one of the central themes explored here recurs in my ethnography of women in the labouring classes of southern India (Ram 1994 and forthcoming). This theme concerns the pervasive tension between the subjectivity of the women and the complexities of their social location.

The first problem in pursuing these intellectual goals arises in the construction of "difference" in academic social theory. This problem comes up in its most acute form in the realm of subjectivity. In the flurry of theoretical excitement over the efforts of post-structuralist social theory to decenter the subject, it is easy to overlook the fact that the view of the non-western subject permitted by social theory has never been anything but de-centered. Certainly it is hard to think of any lay figure which has served sociology as well as the Indian Homo Hierarchicus, apparently the perfect creature of hierarchy, holism, and collectivity. Anthropological constructions of Indian identity have contributed to a process whereby "Indianness" becomes locked into immutable categories of social collectivity, a problem I have examined in some detail elsewhere (Ram 1994). Such problems run wider than Indology, of course. In "East Asian studies" Rey Chow writes about Sinology as exemplifying an Orientalist melancholia, which, in
mourning for the grandeur of a cultural past, is unable to admit the centrality of modernity and colonialism to contemporary Chineseess (1991, 1993). In the "Middle Eastern" field of area studies, Abu-Lughod (1990a) has described the suppression of subjectivity in the name of a different array of sociological designations: "segmentary lineage theory", "harem theory", and Islam. In response to this suppression, Abu-Lughod feels impelled to reassert the value of "extraordinary individuals" through her ethnographic skills of description (1990:116).

The contrast between the western "individual" and the non-western "collectivity" is just one of many forms of the opposition between the modern and non-modern which underlie the basis of social theory's constructions of difference. Other distinctions include market and kinship, exchange and use value, commodity and gift, rationality and religion.

Of these interlocking antinomies, the polarity that opposes the subject (the Western enquirer) to persons regarded as mere sociological subject-effects is particularly pernicious. This particular polarity has generated pervasive effects well beyond academia. It is writ large as the common sense of modernity, and shapes the version of difference which occurs spontaneously in the logic of multiculturalism in Australia. The identities ascribed to the non-westerner travel with and continue to cling to immigrants who come to Australia from those parts of the world which are deemed to be fitting objects for anthropology, but not for sociology, and certainly not for philosophy. My attempts to undertake scholarship on India in Australian academia resulted in a steady series of disciplinary referrals that propelled me from my original discipline of philosophy, to sociology, until I was finally placed in the slot explicitly set aside for the study of the non-westerner: anthropology. The currents of critique transforming philosophy had not been allowed to disturb the construction of "the westerner" that implicitly underpinned the "comparative method" used in anthropological constructions of "Indian identity" (Ram 1994).

The possibility of a reflexive and critical theory of one's own society, culture and history is rendered redundant for "Asian" immigrants. Quests for individual autonomy,
outside approved categories such as the religious renouncer, become "Western", "modern" and at odds with nationalist claims to Indian superiority over the West. Such a consequence is particularly disastrous for those who might have more than a purely intellectual stake in pursuing such quests: subordinate groups in the collectivity, such as women, and in India, lower caste groups can easily have their struggle for greater autonomy redefined as so many instances of a "western consciousness" and rendered illegitimate. We encounter the same logic in the way in which a celebration of ethnic difference and identity in Australia leaves immigrant women with little way of claiming feminism for themselves without seeming to have acceded to assimilation. Further ramifications of the opposition between hierarchy as Eastern and egalitarianism as western are constantly felt in the crippling association between democracy and western political traditions.

Yet, there is no valid reason to assume that the values of humanness can only be expressed in terms of western humanism, that the value of rationality is entirely subsumed by western philosophical concepts of Reason, that expressions of aspirations to equality occur only in the form of western Egalitarianism, or that a critical tension between individual subjectivity and social locations occurs only in western Individualism. Themes of equality and a common humanity are recurrent themes in dissident movements within major world religions, such as Sufism in Islam, and Bhakti movements in Hinduism.

The effacing of such internal dissidence and complexity from constructions of "ethnic tradition" is one of the most overt features of displaced minority cultures in "multicultural" Australia. But are displacement and its corollary, minority status, capable of producing nothing better than a frozen and static version of culture? Or are there also specific forms of knowing that emerge from experiences of immigrancy, exile and physical displacement?

**Sensory experience and immigrancy.**
In my own case, learning classical dance, and thus renewing an integral part of the experience of socialisation within a Tamil Brahman habitus, has functioned as the trigger for a whole rush of access to forms of reflexivity previously inaccessible, despite more than a decade of scholarly research on India. I present this experience as ethnographic self-reflection, supplemented by interviews with other Indian women students of dance:

A moment of stillness, in which the past rushes in.. it occurs the first time I resume the basic stance of all Indian dance: the ardhamandali or the turned out knees, the feet turned out, arms clasping the waist. Even basic bodily schemas and the kinetic hypotheses based on them are already culturally informed. This would help to explain the feeling of "recognition" that I experience as soon as I take up the basic stance and begin the preliminary steps. The basic posture of the ardhamandali probably exists in a continuum with an Indian orientation to the ground and earth found in many basic everyday activities of eating, sitting, sleeping, and even, of particular relevance to women, in performing domestic work.

But of course, I am not simply taking up a bodily stance even at the inaugural moment. Already, before taking up the stance we have rendered the space sacral by giving the ritual apology to the earth. Simultaneously, I have renewed a forgotten and rejected relationship: of reverence and submission to the authority and knowledge of the guru, who sits calling out of the syllables, hitting the rhythm out with her wooden stick: thadi .. tha naka dinda, thadi tha na dinda, tharikitta thom, tharikitta thom. As we respond by stamping out the rhythms with our feet, the sensory experience brings with it knowledge of submission to power, first to the power of the guru, but then to the power of the deity, and to the absent figure of the lover. We go on to explore the intricacies of submission to the Other in minute figurations and nuances of gesture and emotion.

The dance elaborates, in accordance with the Indian aesthetic of viraha bhakti, the sentiments of an identity which is constructed centrally in the absence of the loved deity, lover, husband. It seems perfectly fashioned to resonate with immigrant experience.
Can this vast reservoir of an aesthetics of absence teach the immigrant Indian how to turn the loss of the beloved (India) into a creative source of energy?

A fellow learner, another Indian immigrant, reflects on learning to perform an erotic dance piece in the Kuchupudi genre:

*Kuchipudi has made me aware of eroticism in Indian culture. The Australian girls in my dance class found the kind of flirting seduction in Krishnasabadam very hard - they had problems with that behaviour. The seduction is less open, covered with so many layers of games. Maybe Indians are still hung up about women openly seducing, so they have to cover it up? But it is much more complicated than western seduction. There is a lot of teasing in it which I found fascinating. But I was myself much more comfortable with that mixture of shyness and really quite open sexuality.*

This sense of being inducted into another embodiment, another construction of sexuality with which one feels a certain cultural affinity, requires fuller exploration. In particular, it requires us to reconsider the nature of embodiment when embodiment is fashioned by several languages and cultures. It has become easy, even a matter of course in discussions of immigrant and post-colonial identity to use the language of 'fragmentation' and 'discontinuity'. This language is, in a sense, pre-given; it is provided by western auto-critiques of the unitary subject. What needs equally to be remarked on however, - for it is too often overlooked - is the endurance of sensory continuities across processes of cultural fragmentation.

In considering the sources of such continuities, we must consider not only the nature of embodiment in cultural transmission but also the holism of aesthetic experience. Dance exercises a particularly potent force in the transmission of sensory continuity, bearing within it an internal coherence, so that the subject cannot choose to adopt one component without adopting the whole that informs the aesthetic. Temple dances rely heavily for their transmission on certain specific interlinkages between the body and
memory. They rely in particular on the body's capacity to develop habituated forms of knowing, which can enable it to perform highly skilled actions without conscious reflection being involved. The kinesthetic link between an inner being and the felt movements which are reinstated allows memory to take the form of re-enacting rather re-presenting the past.

This capacity of the body is aided and synthesised in the case of Indian classical dance by virtue of the integral place given to the voice, which brings with it melodic, rhythmic and narrative structures and patterns. The musician who accompanies the dancer gives the dancer her mnemonic devices. The voice sings, and narrates a story, as well as breaking periodically into the jatis, according to a process of mimetic interchange between the voice, the rhythm of the feet and that of the drums. The confluence of voice, language, melody and rhythm lays an extremely rich base for the aesthetic experience of coherence, forming a semiotic network. Such an aesthetic must be learned, through an arduous apprenticeship, but it is precisely its internal coherence which makes such an apprenticeship necessary and indeed, desirable to the apprentice.

Participation in aesthetics comes to offer the fragmented post-colonial subject a powerful discourse within which to come to "recognise" styles of embodied expressivity that lack affirmation by the dominant culture (Ram 1995).

**Sensory experience and contemporary theory: Althusser and Bourdieu.**

The gestures are so familiar - that scene between the mother and daughter [referring to a dance performance of Tagore's Chandalika] ...Its like travelling somewhere and seeing points of reference, and saying Ah! that's me! (Interview with immigrant Indian spectator.)

I have argued that "classical" social theory revolves around a polarised construction of western vs. non-western identity, in which the complex subjectivity of the western "individual" is counterposed to a study of social collectivities such as caste, village,
kinship etc. An independent enquiry into the subjectivity of "non-westerners" is virtually precluded at the outset, before we even begin to enquire into the further complexities of immigrant subjectivity. In this segment I wish to argue that the dominant legacy bequeathed to social theory by structuralist and post-structuralist thought also does not necessarily validate and sympathetically enlarge upon the kinds of complex reformulations of subjectivity that immigrant women articulate. Instead, we find this legacy encourages a tendency to suspicion, if not downright denial, of the possibility of certain kinds of manifest experience.

Let me consider in some detail the case of the immigrant woman who experiences a sense of recognition in the dance: Ah, that's me! Within the terms bequeathed to us by structuralist social theory, this would be a classic instance of an immigrant subject being formed in ideology. Althusser's account of ideology and subject formation (1971:162ff) demands of us that we classify this experience of recognition as one of being "hailed" by ideology. Dance would be an instance of the rituals and practices in which ideology is realized, in and through which individuals who respond to it are simultaneously reaffirmed as subjects. This "hailing" function is what Althusser terms "interpellation".

What of the fact that in the instance I have described, it is the spectator who in a sense plays the active part in "hailing" the dance, as it were, by recognizing herself in it? What are we to make of this apparent inversion of the just direction of interpellation?

In Althusserian terms, this would be no more than an instance of misrecognition (meconnaisance). Ideology misrepresents the process by which we are rendered subjects, so that we come to experience ourselves as the source of origination, of our subjecthood.

We may wonder what becomes, in this theoretical scenario, of the particular immigrant context in which this hailing process occurs, whether we term it recognition or misrecognition. The recognition of an aspect of one's identity in the cultural form (dance) receives its specific value here precisely from the fact that it finds no representation
among the dominant cultural ideologies of subject formation in Australia. How is one to represent the space of this experience, which exists outside the dominant ideology?

We may perhaps not expect to find answers to such questions in the Marxism of the seventies any longer, but is contemporary social theory providing better tools for analysis?

The work of Pierre Bourdieu is often cited as an example of someone who has successfully negotiated and transcended the limitations of structuralism, and in this sense, has constituted through his corpus of work, a striking example of post-structuralism. Bourdieu, through his introduction and refinement of the concept of practice, is widely understood to have allowed greater initiatives for the cultural subject than was possible within a rule-oriented description of cultural formation.

I have found his work illuminating up to a point. His concept of the habitus is particularly useful for demonstrating the way in which experience is fashioned by a set of culturally defined predispositions. The Australian state immigration policy for Asians, unlike the British, has in general permitted only professional middle class Indians to enter as potential citizens. This circumstance in itself predisposes a certain kind of immigrant subjectivity, since the Indian middle class comes to Australia with a version of cultural modernity already shaped by the nationalist encounter with colonialism. Of particular relevance here is the way in which specifically immigrant relationships to history and towards the past in general are already prefigured by the contradictory attitudes of Indian nationalism. The impulses writ large in Indian nationalism characteristically involve two tendencies, simultaneously held: first, the advocacy of a break with the past, and secondly, the elaboration of an emotional yearning for re-discovery and revival of the past. The two often coalesce around a notion of reviving a reformed past. Among Indian immigrants to Australia, such a relationship to the past becomes simplified at some levels. Although the past may well be yearned for, in the process of migrating and adapting to life in Australia the aspiration to reform culture and cleanse the past is not often apparent. Yet what
characterises middle class immigrants above all is the active struggle to reproduce the past, to preserve tradition, to struggle against forgetting.

Such a typical practice as enrolling oneself or one's children in a dance school for classical dance takes its meaning largely from this immigrant imperative to transmit and reproduce cultural forms.

The temple dances of south India ("classical dance") have earned themselves a special place in the aesthetics of nationalism both in India and in the diaspora. As the value and uniqueness of India as a nation came to be located in the sphere of its religious spirit, the dances of the temple-court nexus in south India became one of the key sites in which to elaborate this claim through national and international performances.

Bourdieu's notion of a habitus therefore helps us to specify the class and historical components in the shaping of immigrant experience. Can it also illuminate aspects of experience that are in conflict or in tension with the dominant habitus?

Bourdieu certainly refers to such subordinated experiences in class society:

The universe of discourse ... is practically defined in relation to the necessarily unnoticed complementary class that is constituted by the universe of that which is undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny. (1992 [1977]:170)

Moreover, he has harnessed a good deal of pre-existing phenomenological theoretical labour on the nature of embodiment, to the cause of rendering a more sophisticated account of the determinants of social practice. This too could have considerable consequence in developing the work on sensory experience in immigrant conditions. Australian theorists of immigrant experience such as Bottomley (1992) have drawn upon Bourdieu's work on the relationship between symbolic capital and objective relations of power in order to reinterpret Australian multiculturalism. Instead of 'differences in life style', we come to perceive multiculturalism as a matter of different 'positions in the field of power' (Bottomley 1992:13).
In particular, an attempt to theorise the strong elements of a submerged stratum of sensory continuity which survives into migrancy would be enhanced by the strong, if not central place Bourdieu gives to embodiment in the development of his concept of "habitus". As he states in that locus classicus of his initial description of "the dialectic between objectification and embodiment":

Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, em-bodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking. (1992[1977]:93-4)

Therefore, an immigrant whose primary habitus has been formed under conditions other than those prevailing in her new country, is, according to this definition, carrying her culture in her own bodily memory. Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital will explain why this embodied habitus brings with it little cultural prestige or power in the immigrant situation. Bottomley has recently drawn attention to the fact that Bourdieu first developed his notion of the habitus in the study of peasant men in the Pyrenees who were increasingly marginalised by the gradual incursion of urban cultural practices such as new forms of dance (chacha, the twist), leaving the peasant men to carry their habitus like a burden ('heavy, bowlegged, knock-kneed, with bent arms') (Bottomley n.d). Or to take another example, in my work on maternity and childbirth in rural India (1994 and forthcoming), Bourdieu's language significantly deepens my capacity to bring to the fore the full extent of the inequality experienced by rural women. Their very way of giving birth in a rural environment becomes, in the context of modernity, an additional confirmation of their class and caste disadvantage. In hospital settings, their way of embodying birth and maternity confirms an elite view of them as 'backward', as lacking in cultural capital.

However, Bourdieu's framework orients us to only one aspect of immigrant or lower class embodiment - that which operates to the disadvantage of the immigrant or the labouring woman. But what is striking about the involvement of the Indian Australian
women involved in dance is the sense of discovery and excitement they derive from their explorations:

_Dancing itself is liberating. I've always been ladylike, not wanting to leap around too much. I always thought of Indian dancers as conservative. I suppose because of the way they dress, and the Hindu framework. So this particular teacher and group of women dancers have been a revelation to me. The dancers are incredible women. If an outsider looked at them, they would think: "Indian traditional women", but there is so much there of themselves, and an expression of their own freedom there. It is a self-expression of their freedom._

Equally, Bourdieu's framework cannot address itself to the kinds of critiques of hospital birth that even the poorest of women are able to offer, on the basis of their prior forms of embodiment, their knowledge about other ways of experiencing maternity and birth.

As long as one seeks only to show how embodiment and the habitus is a force for cultural reproduction, Bourdieu's theory, like structuralist social theory in general, has much to teach. However, one seeks in vain for tools with which to develop a more emancipatory, or at the very least, open-ended view of embodiment or of the subject in relation to the habitus. It is characteristic of the overall tendency of Bourdieu's sociology that insights into embodiment which he derives from phenomenology find their greatest elaboration in his vision of a "doxa" society, that is, where the habitus is beyond access to the conscious reflective interrogation of its subjects:

_The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, than the values given body .. (1992[1977]:94)._
hegemony from a reliance on "bodily hexis" to a more intellectually elaborated 'conscious systematisation and express rationalisation' (1992 [1977]:169). Embodiment thus comes to play the role of being the most sophisticated support of the habitus, opposed by its very nature to conscious reflexivity or to any kind of intellectually formulated hegemony.

Ultimately, such limitations are characteristic, not only of Bourdieu's treatment of embodiment, but of his vision of society as a whole. Several commentators particularly interested in developing alternatives to present systems of power and cultural hierarchy remark on the sense of "enclosure" in Bourdieu's work. Shiach (1993), working within cultural studies, looks in vain for the appreciation of the ambiguities in modernist aesthetics which give it its potential both for subversion and simple reproduction. Bedford (n.d) finds Bourdieu ultimately a "confining theorist", and argues that Bourdieu's contribution can well be viewed as that of fine-tuning the project of developing a total account of society:

One could, in the spirit of Ricoeur's critique of structuralist procedures, relax or loosen up the system to the point of replacing a closed system by an open one. But Bourdieu follows another: which is to relax the logic in order to retain the systematicity of a structure which, however flexible it may be made and despite his disavowals.. aspires to be total. (Bedford n.d:14)

Migration should offer a classic example of the kind of "objective crisis" which, according to Bourdieu, permits 'the practical questioning of the theses implied in a particular way of living'. The uneven production of modernity in countries like India, which implies in turn several styles of embodiment shaping individual subjectivities, ought to be able to satisfy Bourdieu's requirements for producing a 'critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation' (1992 [1977]:168). Indeed, "culture contact" is one of the examples he gives of such an enabling shift in objective conditions (1992 [1977]:168). The relationship between the immigrant's embodied habitus and the aesthetic discourse of dance is, moreover, one
which could well be understood in terms provided by Bourdieu himself of the transformation which occurs when unnamed experiences acquire access to language:

"Private" experiences undergo nothing less than a change of state when they recognize themselves in the public objectivity of an already constituted discourse, the objective sign of recognition of their right to be spoken and to be spoken publicly. (1992 [1977]:170)

It is however, characteristic of the theorist, and perhaps of structuralist and post-structuralist reactions to earlier emancipatory discourses such as Marxism, that even when Bourdieu concedes that such transformations can trigger off a crisis in the everyday order, he can permit nothing of utopian significance to occur. We may expect only the production of another order of legitimacy and authority, another form of "logotherapy" (1992 [1977]:171). An aesthetic discourse such as Indian dance would, moreover, emerge from Bourdieu's later treatment of art (1993), stripped precisely of that rich experience of holism and meaning which makes it exciting for immigrant students. All that would remain is its structuralist capacity to differentiate, to enforce distinctions of cultural power and identity.

The structuralist-Marxist suspicion of experience as "meconnaisance" persists, with the difference that the earlier possibility of a liberatory "rupture" with ideology is now withheld. The promise held out of a greater agency for the subject in the concept of "practice" turns out to be an instance of simply allowing the subject a longer leash with which to demonstrate, all the more efficiently, the ultimate mastery of the habitus.

**The marginalised habitus as 'unreconciled historical experience'.**

An attempt, unusual in contemporary theory, to creatively re-think the value of sensory experiences from the perspective of those on the periphery of western modernity, occurs in the work of Serematakis (1994). Introducing a distinction, if not a downright opposition between what she calls "depth" and "dust", she argues:
Sediments of sensory memory stratify the artifact as depth, forming a diachronic volume, from which all historical matter, valued and devalued, may seep as expressive material culture. The memory of the senses runs against the socio-economic currents that treat artifacts and personal material experiences as dust. Dust is created by any perceptual stance that hastily traverses the object world, skims over its surface, treating it as a nullity that has no meaning into our bodies, or recovers no stories from our past. (1994:12)

Seremetakis' contrast between depth and dust begins to restore a distinction which has fallen into disrepute along with scholarly adjudications of authenticity as "invented" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), "constructed" (Schechner 1985), and "colonialist" (Keeffe 1988, Thiele 1991). Yet this is precisely the distinction Seremetakis needs in order to enable her version of hybridity and post-modernity recover a critical edge. It is no accident that she re-deploys the older language of centre versus periphery, bringing back the element of critique that was formerly to be found in paradigms of uneven economic exchange and development (eg. Wallerstein 1974, Amin 1974).

In Seremetakis' exploration of sensory memories, the sentiment of nostalgia, so central to immigrant experience, is rendered in new terms.

Nostalgia is a difficult concept to explore, let alone to defend. Its English meaning denotes little more than trivializing sentimentality. Within traditions of modernity, nostalgia may be conflated with a desire to conceal, perhaps to covertly reproduce, the oppressive relations of power which sustained pre-modern social relations.

Postcolonial intellectuals and elites have internalised these presuppositions. A brief example may be given. British colonial adjudications of caste and forms of labour encountered in India designated them as so many forms of "bondage", 'representing history as a progression from unfreedom to freedom, as a process of restoring the loss of natural rights to liberty' (Prakash 1990:2). Today, such colonial representations of
modernity and of Indian tradition continue to play a formative role in the way Indians represent their past to themselves. In a milieu shaped by this history, every attempt to represent the non-modern lays itself open to the charge of neglecting to understand power relations, and possibly even to the charge of reproducing oppressive relations. The following evaluation by Nair (1993) is a case in point, aimed specifically against appreciative reconstructions of Indian female culture in the colonial period:

The attention paid in these works to the appropriation of popular/lower caste cultural practices by an increasingly hegemonic nationalist culture is noteworthy. Yet such an approach also displays a marked nostalgia similar to the conservative longings for an idealized pre-capitalist/ pre-colonial social order. The "autonomous" cultural domain itself was an expression of a sexual division of labour appropriate to the socially, economically and politically dominant groups in these societies. The refusal to engage with the ways in which material inequalities were masked by cultural compensations is problematic. (1993:88, emphasis added)

Yet in the hands of Seremetakis, who employs etymology as a methodology with which to 'capture the uneven shifts of semantic history that may be present at any given moment in a society' (1994:17), the Greek meanings of "nostalgia" open up a new way of understanding. The term now invokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement, the mix of bodily and emotional pain - but it also has the capacity to 'evoke the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience' (1994:4, emphasis added).

Seremetakis' notion of the past as unreconciled experience contains profound possibilities not only for exploring immigrant life, but also for the evaluation of post-colonial subjectivity in countries like India, where the synchronic co-existence of modern as well as non-modern discourses creates, not hybridity per se - a concept which in itself equalises all dimensions of experience and discourse - but rather subjects who have zones of experience for which no official place is provided in the dominant language.
The charge of "nativism"

The power of unreconciled experiences can easily be squandered by theoretical mischaracterisations. The kinds of experiences I have discussed in this paper can be mischaracterised as so many appeals to a simplistic version of nativism. A notable example occurs in an interview with Spivak by Indian feminists in Delhi (1990). The latter articulate an unease with transposing western models onto their own context, and enquire about the possibilities of discovering and promoting indigenous theory. Spivak responds by stating:

I cannot understand what indigenous theory there might be that can ignore the reality of nineteenth-century history (1990:69).

For one of the Delhi-based interlocutors at any rate, Gandhism provides an example of indigenous theory - 'even though it is a highly synthesized model.' (1990:69) In other words, the model of indigenousness being advanced here does not involve a simple claim for an a-historical native essence. Yet Spivak's response fails to recognise any distinction between the two:

As for syntheses: syntheses have more problems than answers to offer. To construct indigenous theories one must ignore the last few centuries of historical involvement. I would rather use what history has written for me. (1990:69)

However, what is at issue here is precisely the question of what, exactly, history has "written for" post-colonial subjects. Colonial western domination is historically a contingent factor and has been highly variable where it has occured, both in the intensity and in the scope of its impact. Nowhere does it represent the horizon of all understanding. Instead dominance is often exercised at a distance, as in the requirement that all alternative understandings have ultimately to be translated into western discourse in order to recieve global acceptance. The existence of different languages,
different embodiments, different ways of becoming cultural subjects will necessarily make available a variety of different strategies of resistance besides the deconstructive strategy.

The indiscriminate use of the same critique against very differently situated theorists shows up sharply when we compare Spivak’s criticisms of Kristeva (1988) with her criticisms of the Delhi feminists (1990). Both, it would seem, are guilty of the same error: of attempting to retreat to an originary space before the sign, the former in her notion of the semiotic, the latter in their notion of indigenous theory and identity. But are the Delhi feminists appealing to a space before the sign and outside of language? Or are they rather appealing to a space available to most post-colonial subjects, namely a space outside the dominant language? The potentialities of this space should not be romanticised, but to those interested enough to investigate this space, there are discursive histories and rich resources for alternative understandings to be found. The concept of "an indigenous synthesis" may therefore be more sympathetically interpreted not only as an attempt to acknowledge the transactional quality of post-coloniality, but also as an attempt to render more accessible to intellectual reflection the obdurately "unreconciled" aspects of historical experience.

The attenuated female subject of contemporary theory.

So far in this paper I have discussed complexities of the post-colonial experiences of Indian women situated as middle class immigrants in Australia. I have concentrated particularly on embodied forms of knowledge, and on the resources for reflexivity which they potentially hold. I have argued too that to the extent that theoretical regimes are unsympathetic and hostile to the very category of the experiencing subject, they encourage us to squander such resources. I mean now to extend this argument to the enterprise of feminism. Once again, my reference is primarily to Indian women. The destabilisation of the categories of experience, voice and subjecthood, when undertaken by feminists, has had a profound impact on an enterprise centrally predicated on the quest for fuller subjecthood.
Confronted with the dominant tendencies of contemporary theory that I have outlined in this paper, attempts to rescue some sphere of human agency remain weak, under-formulated, and hard to reconcile with the prevailing tenor of argument. Feminists, who have a particular stake in preserving the possibility of emancipatory action, have repeatedly seized upon Foucault's notion that power itself generates resistance (McNay 1992, Diamond and Quinby 1988). This notion, underdeveloped in Foucault's own work, has resulted in an effort among social theorists to identify elements of the now fragmented human subject in an "agency" which seems to be exercised exclusively in moments of resistance. Resistance, choice and subversion in turn are located in more and more exiguous nuances of cultural life.

Judith Butler (1990), for example, locates resistance in the parody and mimicry of gender in drag and cross-dressing. Having resolutely undermined the viability of the subject, of identity, and of representation, Butler seeks to locate the agency requisite for feminist politics in the contradictions and incoherencies of the multiple injunctions that face a contemporary woman: to be a good mother, a heterosexually desirable object, a fit worker, etc. The conflict of the objectives produces dissonance and enables subversion.

But this argument is inadequate. Dissonance can only be experienced as dissonance if the subject knows or at least aspires to what it is to experience a more harmonious mode of existence. At the very least it presupposes a subjectivity which overarches and attempts to provide continuity and coherence between the difference contradictory constellations of identity. Nor, as Butler claims, have we really left the domain of experience, which is where such tensions presumably manifest themselves. Rather, we have begun to add some of the ingredients necessary to develop a fuller, more satisfactory account of female experience.

In India, surrounded by far grimmer circumstances - increasing communal tensions, increasing poverty and inequality - the attempt to re-locate elements of the attenuated
female subject in fragments of "agency" has had even bleaker consequences. At least two Indian feminists have, in influential articles, been able to locate female agency only at the very limits of human endurance. Reacting, quite justifiably, to an earlier feminist emphasis on women as victims of larger social collectivities (caste, religion, nation), Bhutalia writes on women's agency during the massacres, rapes and forcible religious conversions of the Partition of India and Pakistan. She locates the agency of some women at least, in female suicides that occurred on a mass scale:

But what of the women who took their own lives, or who "offered" themselves up for death? Can we see them only as victims? Or did they play some part in the decision to take their own lives? The women could well have consented to their own deaths in order to preserve the honour of the community.' (1993:WS15)

Sundar Rajan (1993) pushes matters to an even greater extreme when she seeks to locate female subjectivity in pain. She is referring to the pain of the fire that engulfs the burning widow. In a lucid effort to avoid the methodological impasse - is sati freely chosen or is it imposed on the passive woman as victim? - she decides instead to locate female agency at the point of no return, in the aversive flinching away from the fire by the dying woman.

First, subjecthood is located exclusively in agency, then agency can be found only in such extremes.

What have we come to that we must find female subject-constitution, to use Rajan's terms, in the extraordinarily diminished or attenuated vision of the last moments of a dying woman?

**Conclusion.**

The formulations of female agency in the work of Rajan and Bhutalia are born of their sensitivity to modernity's overhasty dictum that "tradition" must necessarily be a site of
unrelieved oppression for women and subaltern groups. The problem is that we are not yet able to translate these analytical perceptions of complexity into a suitably enriched ethical vision. Veena Das, for example, sets out to capture the complexity of all postcolonial institutions in India through the concept of a "double articulation" (1995). She argues that features of Indian social life as "traditional" as caste, or religion, are now simultaneously articulated through institutions as "modern" as the bureaucracy and the law. However, the ethical conclusions she draws from this observation are largely negative. The ethical standards of both "tradition" and "modernity" are for her, now equally unavailable:

Hence, we cannot take recourse to notions of progress in order to critique tradition. Conversely, a nostalgic construction which uses ideas on the traditional community as a resource for building an alternative vision to that of modernity is equally unavailable. Unlike social scientists who came into the world of knowledge as part of the anti-colonial, nationalist enterprise, the new generation of social scientists in India have to live with a destruction of certainty as the only condition for the production of knowledge about Indian society. They cannot 'represent' India as if India were absent and silent. They can only insert their voice within a plurality of voices within which agreement between prescriptive, normative, and even descriptive statements is not likely to be forthcoming. This, however, may be a more hopeful position than one in which a single authoritative truth, with claims to sovereignty, comes to reign over all intellectual discourses. (1995:53-4)

Das' political conclusions may not be unhopeful, but they are as illustrative as are the previous examples of "agency", of the political tendency which Benhabib has described as the "retreat from utopia" (1992:229). Yet, in the absence of a 'regulative principle of hope', points out Benhabib, 'not only morality but also radical transformation is unthinkable' (1992:229). The toleration and promotion of pluralism advocated by Das and many others, itself represents a value that cannot be sustained or protected without referring once again to more overarching values and institutions.
These overarching values may be derived in part, as some fresh re-evaluations of postmodernism have argued, from a reaffirmation of some of the values and institutions bequeathed by modernity, such as democracy, civil liberties and a certain commitment to universalism (Mc Gowan 1991, Mohanty 1989, Sangari 1995). Equally, theorists who affirm modernity as the source of overarching political values need to do justice to the further complexities found in the subjectivity of individuals and institutions in postcolonial social formations. It is true that the practices of female embodiment invoked in this paper are not available as "tradition" in the way tradition is commonly represented. They neither exist in the present as coherent wholes, nor can they be reintegrated even in principle, into a unified whole which is free of the conflicts of caste, or of class. Neverthless, even these marginalised fragments of a bypassed habitus do lead the investigator into worlds that outstrip, in richness and sheer breadth, the current celebration of the fragments of human agency.

The "romance of resistance" that flourish in contemporary oppositional writing (Abu-Lughod 1990b) is itself a symptom of the impoverished half-life within which the regulative principle of hope survives. If feminism and other oppositional social movements are to replenish their utopian imaginings and to show themselves to be adequate to the realities of experiences in the postcolonial world, they need not only to expand their vision of modernity, but also to be bold enough and curious enough to investigate forms of experience too hastily relegated and set aside in the name of modernity.
I wish to thank Ian Bedford for his unfailing editorial reading. The structure of this paper diverges from my usual writing: it is envisaged as a sequel to my paper "Too Traditional Once Again": Some post-structuralists on the aspirations of the immigrant/Third World female subject" (Ram 1993). Unlike that publication, which was written in a more polemical vein, this one bases its contribution to ongoing political debates about modernity, postcolonialism, and feminism, on ethnographic work.

Parts of this paper have benefited from their presentation in conferences. The segment on the female subject was presented at the conference on Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities in Asia and the Pacific, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1994. Ongoing work on dance and diaspora was presented at Linking Our Histories: Women and Migration in Asia and the Pacific, Melbourne University, 1995. The present version was presented at the conference Knowledge and Discourse 96, at the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 1996. I wish to thank participants for their comments and discussion.

No migration is ever simply the result of structural pressure, of course. Mine was equally the result of the nature of the questions I was asking, which would now be described as "cross-disciplinary".

I refer here Dumont's singling out of the religious renouncer as the closest Indian equivalent to the western individual (1985). I have critiqued elsewhere the way in which this sole exception is positioned by Dumont outside the social world, unable to effect any change in the Indian social order of caste and hierarchy (Ram 1994).

In her more recent book, Bodies that Matter, Butler tries to tackle criticisms, evidently shared by many other readers, of her use of terms such as "construction" and "performance". Such reaffirmation has to be more whole hearted than the instrumentalist re-admission of these values in the name of a "strategic" use of "essentialism". Such a gambit allows the theorist to appeal to the very values she spends all her theoretical energies undermining, so long as she adopts a superior and judiciously instrumental attitude towards these values. The powerful mobilising capacities of humanism, universalism, identity etc. are thus allowed back in, but in an instrumentalist fashion. Such instrumentalism begs the question of what those values are to be that underlie the broader project towards which all this strategising and destabilising potential is deployed. As McGowan asks, just how different are the values of rescuing marginality and promoting difference, from the supposedly discredited values of modernity?

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