Fleeing the Self in Pursuit of the Other

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New times, new vistas?

The crisis of representation debated by philosophers, feminists and post-colonial theorists calls into question the possibility of mimesis. Many now doubt the possibility of ‘seeing it and telling it like it is’. Working within and against all the uncertainties and insecurities of ‘New Times’ (Hall 1996) this paper examines the Self–Other distinction in academic discourse and the implications of this debate for the reformation of education and pedagogy.

Even though the ‘New Times’ stage may be set with scenes of unease and doubt, it seems to me that many of our acts still rely on conventional assumptions, desires and practices. Within this framing, the Self–Other distinction operates to appease our insecurity about what we can and cannot know. It legitimises certain questions about the Other, while avoiding others about the Self. In short, it enables the rigorous pursuit of authentic knowledge about the Other that is at the same time, a flight from ourselves.

This paper aims to attenuate the discomfort in order to make the case for alternative pedagogical movements and possibilities. Such arguments have important ramifications for rethinking pedagogical practice and transforming academic discourse. My arguments do not revise the popular idea that marginal groups have been traditionally silenced and should be ‘given voice’. It seems to me that such notions do little more than incorporate the marginal into the centre and thus fail to deal with material circumstances of exclusion. Rather, this paper stresses and problematises the political importance of the self-representational tactics of those who confound the Self–Other binary—those who can be marked, or who mark themselves as Other.

I plan to proceed by exploring two sets of terrains. The first relates to what you can and cannot be in academic discourse and thus to the politics of the Self–Other distinction. I intend to examine the Self–Other distinction as it relates to the notion of epistemic privilege. Epistemic privilege refers to insider knowledge embodied in the locations, standpoints and positions of, for example, sex, race, culture, ethnicity, sexual preference, class, language, nation, political affinity and/or geography. It calls forth trust, belief and desire for knowledge and understanding grounded in experience and perception.

The second terrain relates to the politics of academic discourse itself. Here I refer to the practices of epistemic violence outlined by Spivak (1988, 1990). These are the violently appropriative colonising practices that are deeply ingrained in Western textual production. I regard academic discourse as like popular culture in as much as they are both political terrains that are not invariably or inevitably hegemonic or counter hegemonic. Rather, both

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1 Following Fuss (1996) it is important to realise that the ‘other’ is not an essential, ontological category but a theory of self-development with a range of (psychoanalytic/phenomenological) understandings. Its binary (self/other) status means that definitive explanations cannot be offered for either term because the limits of one are defined by reference to its counterpart (Young 1990). Problematically, the establishment of the ‘self’ as the standard or norm underestimates the actions and creativity of those marked as ‘others’ (Fuss, 1996).

2 According to Narayan (1988) this term was first used by Alison Jagger (1985) to refer to an insider’s knowledge of oppression, knowledge that outsiders can never understand or share.
are sites of negotiation and struggle (Hall 1991, Gilroy 1990) and both are intersected by power dynamics and the limits of what we can think.

This paper will examine epistemic privilege and violence in relation to two particular incidents. The first concerns a group of white students who wanted to act the part of Aboriginal characters in a play. The second refers to the ethnic emulation of Helen Darville, an Anglo–Australian author of novel about Ukrainians, who masqueraded as a Ukrainian.

The magic imaginary line

Ang-Lygate (1996) focuses attention on the rationale of the Self–Other binary. If we accept the logic that is implicit in binary dualism, it would be reasonable to assume that if one could cross the magic imaginary line that separates the Self from the Other, then one would be on familiar territory and could represent the Other from the inside out (Ang-Lygate 1996, p.57).

When the territories of the Self are clearly distinguished from those of the Other, we are able to entrust ethnography, observations and interviews with the task of penetrating and bridging the gap. Familiarity and intimacy exposes the inside of the Other in order to produce an authentic and insightful representation. This process assumes a transparency, translatability and representability with respect to Others that, Spivak (1993) notes, we would not assume of ourselves. Furthermore, it enables us to assume that Others examining Others (similar to themselves) will have the capacity to produce even more faithful and authentic representations of Others.

The point that I would like to mention here, and which is developed later in this paper, is that even if we can be certain that we can be simply inside or outside our own affairs, we work within a violently appropriative academic tradition. The epistemic violence of academic discourse serves to ensure that whatever we say stays within the order of Others talking about Others rather than about ourselves.

Absences

Let me move on to discuss an incident which throws into relief some implications of the points raised above.

*Once a group of young white Australian students decided to perform a play featuring Aboriginal characters. The students rehearsed and they rehearsed until they got their lines just right. Then they asked the writer if she would like to see them perform the play. She asked if there were any Aboriginal students in the play. They said no. So did the writer.*

The writer’s rejection focuses our attention on the absence of Aboriginal students in the academy and their lack of opportunity to undertake their own practices of self-representation. It emphasises the status of Aboriginality as Otherness. ‘Others’, according to bell hooks (1990) is a term that can mask the oppressive hiding places where ‘we’ would be if ‘we’ were there now, speaking. Thus when those marked as ‘other’ are ‘here’ and ‘I’, they can no longer be ‘there’ and ‘not-I’ (hooks 1990).

Clearly the white students couldn’t know what it was to be Black under the circumstances detailed in the play, but they did believe that as actors they could develop the ability to draw on and thereby match up similar psychological and emotional experiences
from their own lives, with the lives of the Aboriginal characters in the play. They felt that
they had learnt empathy techniques that would enable them to effectively represent the
Other.

When the writer rejected the possibility of representation, she forced the students to
consider the question of who can speak for whom. To clarify the situation we now need to
consider two related issues. We need to look more closely at our assumptions of epistemic
privilege and our practices of epistemic violence.

Epistemic privilege

The idea of epistemic privilege relates to what Gilroy (1992) refers to as ‘being able to
walk that walk, and talk that talk,’ and what Kaplan (1994) calls the politics of location.
The white students desire to perform the Other, relied on an imposed demarcation—a
distinction of racial and cultural difference and an assumption that such a manufacture
could be unproblematically attained. The students were thwarted in their goal by the author
who (deploying the same binary Self–Other premise) politicised the exercise and asserted
incommensurability premised on notions of epistemic privilege. Claims to epistemic
privilege can thus be a political manoeuvre that respects difference by demarcating
distinctions of race, ethnicity, sex and class.

However, epistemic privilege necessarily and inevitably works to buttress the Self–Other
binaries demarcated by academic discourse because it relies on the production of natural,
authentic, unified, cultures and identities. Gilroy reminds us that because Otherness evokes
essentialism it can be a ‘lazy, casual invocation of cultural insiderism’ (Gilroy 1990, p.5).
He astutely observes that this is a scary place to be because it approaches ‘the complex
dynamics of race, nationality and ethnicity through a similar set of precise culturalist
equations’ (Gilroy 1990, p.7). The racism of new-Right ideologies concur with liberal-
humanism in the statement: ‘yes we are all different and ‘they’ belong over there, while
‘we’ belong here.’ In other words, sectarian ethnicities (Gilroy 1992, 1990; Hall 1991),
doctrines of multiculturalism (Young 1995) and even the rationality of social Darwinism
(Foucault 1984) can be used to reify individual and group identities and to reduce the
complex dynamics of race and ethnicity to the same set of precise cultural equations.

Spivak (1990) quite rightly observes that the crucial debate is not about essentialism—
about what is natural or unnatural, cultural or biological—about what we are or what we
are not, about what Others are or are not, but about representations, about who can speak
and who will listen. It is useful to recall Spivak’s injunction that our ‘authentic experience’
is ‘cultural explanations that silences others’ (Spivak 1993, p.33). It is not merely that we
should be dissatisfied with the idea that only Others can speak of and write for the
experience of Others, but that those of us who can and do speak, must appreciate the limits
of our work rather than seeking to establish it as the future solution (Spivak 1990). The
provocative conclusion to Spivak’s (1988) argument is that in academic discourse the
Subaltern can never speak for if they could they would not be Subalterns. Like Ang (1995),
Spivak stresses the barriers to communication and the places where there are no shared
dialogic grounds for understanding and translation. Thus we need to be dissatisfied with
notions epistemic privilege and standpoint because ‘knowledge is never adequate to its
subject...the person identical with her predicament...’ (Spivak 1993, p.8). The textual
practices of academic discourse work beyond the reach of our intent to maintain a colonial
discourse of authority and mastery. Importantly, by ignoring the points at which knowing
escapes and confounds us we miss the opportunity to explore our own hybrid, ambivalent
in(essential) self-representations.
Epistemic violence

For Spivak (1990, 1988) all academic practices of representation are colonising. In our preoccupation with, and desire for, authentic Others, we fail to consider who can talk and listen. Colonisation does not simply comprise appropriative intentions, but (unintentional) appropriative actions such as those attempted by the students above, or by the representation of Others' voices in this text. Colonisation can thus be a consequence of our failure or refusal to notice the epistemic violence of our own representational practices.

Epistemic violence works with two sorts of gestures, first the Other is demarcated as a 'not-I'. The 'I' or Self is a production of a 'not-I' or Other, the 'us' a production of 'them.' The only thing intrinsic to this otherness is that it is set in relation to privileged authoritative centrality. The establishment of authority through the demarcation of identity and difference is an essential characteristic of Western metaphysical thought. Second, the world is demarcated as object of possession that can be fixed and arranged. 'Out there' is conceived of as uncharted territory. Texting inscribes, objectifies, territorialises, names and leaves unnamed. Like Spivak, Spurr (1994) ties colonising practice to writing where 'in the face of what may appear as a vast cultural and geographical blankness, colonisation is a form of self-inscription onto the lives of people who are conceived of simply as an extension of the landscape' (Spurr 1994, p.7).

Ethnic emulation

The Demidenko duping offers another occasion to examine the intricate workings of epistemic privilege and epistemic violence. The incident enables us to examine our faith, trust and lack of scepticism in the words of those with the ability to look and act the part. It says as much about our desires and expectations of authentic Others as it does about the overt colonising movements of the author. The story goes as follows:

\begin{quote}
Once an Other young woman decided to write a novel about 'others.' She wrote, she wrote, and many of those who read the book applauded. Then one day someone noticed she was not an Other and the applause promptly stopped.

We were disappointed and we felt tricked, we thought we were reading an authentic Other, and discovered we were reading a pretend one. Our expectations of the writer's insider knowledge, turned to disapproval when we realised that she was not really an Other.
\end{quote}

The narrator of the novel, The hand that signed the paper\footnote{This book won the Vogel Award in 1993 and the Miles Franklin Award in 1995.}, was Ukrainian, the claimed ethnicity of the author Helen Demidenko. Later it was discovered that Helen Demidenko was actually an Anglo–Australian called Helen Darville. In the book there are scenes of infants being thrown into the death pits by the narrator's uncle, of plunging a bayonet through a knapsack containing a hidden Jewish child and of the narrator's father raping and killing a Jew.

Why were we troubled by the Demidenko incident? Was it the justification of Darville's anti-Semitism in the claim that her family had been killed by Jews? Was it the realisation of our own voyeurism and the pleasure and excitement we gained from being able to observe the Other-side? Was it Darville's ventriloquism and her appropriation of the voice of the
Other? No, I think we were more interested in the way we were tricked into believing that an Anglo-Australian was an ethnic-Ukrainian. We were self-righteously angry at being taken for dupes. We were earnestly disappointed at the Others disappearance because of course when Demidenko was the Other we desired and expected, we were able to get to the Other side, and observe Others’ writing about themselves.

Margaret Simons, in the Australian Weekend Review (December 9–10, 1995, pp.1 & 6), commented that we learnt that being ethnic in a multicultural community is as much about how you see yourself, as how others see you. She cites Kurt Vonnegut who, in *Mother Night*, advises us that ‘we are what we pretend so we must be careful what we pretend’. Simons suggested that the whole affair was not really very surprising because:

We all look for the exotic and romantic idea of the writer, and of the ethnic. We all seem to want to escape from our ordinariness. We all want, in our modest ways, to be kidnapped by aliens. For that reason, perhaps we were all heading for a fall (Simons 1995, p.1).

It is not to condone the actions of Darville to say that in our desire to hear the authentic Native voice/informant, we contribute to the duping of ourselves.4

Hybridity

The writing of those who are marginal or Othered often challenge conventional notions of representation. Their writing throws into relief the ways that distinctions and distance created by the Self–Other binary can be variously maintained and collapsed. Such work suggests that rather than more resolutions or improved procedures that try even harder to capture the essential detail of the Other, there are spaces to be explored at the very points where representation fails and knowledge escapes us:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalising strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure (Trinh 1995, pp.211–218).

Trinh (1995) notes that the representational practices of these with ‘hyphenated identities’ and ‘hybrid realities’ resist reproducing Self–Other distinctions, like Spivak she is aware that Others writing about themselves are able to articulate contestatory political positions that assert difference while at the same time challenging it. In emphasising that Others are more likely to use ambivalent textual practices that blur the boundaries, Trinh (1995) urges us to consider the implications of our Outsider expectations, our desires for authenticity, and for finite, truthful Selves and Others.

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4 In 1997, two similar incidents came to our attention. Elizabeth Durack confessed that she has been painting under the name of Eddie Burrup, an Aboriginal man and Leon Carmen won the Dobbie Award in 1995 for a novel written under the name of Wanda Koolmatric an Aboriginal woman.
In-essential Others

With searing anger, hooks (1990) uses irony and parody to do a double-take on the appropriative moves of academic discourse. She observes that colonisers only need to talk to Others when they wish to speculate on, or appropriate their stories:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way.

Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still coloniser, the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk (hooks 1990, p.343).

Hooks talks about the mobile arena of fear where she is afraid of those who don’t speak to her but speak about her to themselves. In this circumstance, authentic representations of Others run the risk of essentialising Others so that they are actually rendered in-essential to academic discourse.

As a black American academic, bell hooks is positioned and positions herself as an marginal insider. Kaplan (1994) regards the self-representational practices of bell hooks and Michelle Wallace as multi-located and mobile, moving among complex nodes of identity and structuring, travelling and thinking from one place to another. Having experienced multiple confusion they adopt speaking positions of incisive perception or double consciousness that that flow from being both inside and outside a place of marginality.

Johnson’s (1987) discussion of Zora Neale Hurston’s essay, How it feels to be colored me, demonstrates the way that Hurston’s writing deploys irony and satirical humour to articulate contestatory positions. The essay works at several levels of ironic interrogation:

The essay begins, ‘I am coloured but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was not an Indian chief’. Collapsed into these sentence are two myths of black identity, the absurdity of whose juxtaposition sets the tone for the entire essay (Johnson 1987, p.174).

According to Johnson, Hurston implies that the story of Indian blood is a common extenuation of the ‘crime’ of colouredness. By making lack of Indian blood into an extenuating circumstance, Hurston makes explicit the absurdity of seeking extenuating circumstances for something over which one has no control. Hurston continues by saying:

‘But I am not tragically colored. I do not always feel colored. I feel most colored. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. At certain times I have no race, I am me. I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored’ (Johnson 1987, p.175).

Johnson suggests that Hurston creates interlocutory situations in her text which turn her answers into strategies rather than truth claims about questions of identity and difference.
Hurston’s discussion of ‘being coloured me’ asks questions such as compared to what? As of when? Who’s asking? For what purpose? And as such, she contrives to mock the (im)possibility of being inside or outside black. As Rosaldo (1993) astutely observes, it only because more Others or ‘Natives’ are coming to the academy that these different sorts of insider/outsider questions are able to be raised.

**Homework**

Because both epistemic privilege and violence rely on the same epistemological Self–Other, I–‘not-I’ platforms, neither is able to challenge or solve questions of representability. On the one hand, by reducing the Self to an-Other, epistemic privilege can reinforce or buttress separations, divisions and distinctions. On the other hand, by separating the Self from the Other, epistemic violence can overwrite the Other so that ‘they’ become translated, mirrored and landscaped in academic discourse.

I have maintained that the pursuit of the Other does not merely produce the Other, but also entails a flight from ourselves which consequently overshadows or even eclipses the absence of work on ourselves. The anticipated, desired, finite, authentic, representable, in(essential) Other is the legitimate object of academic discourse. Its illegitimate objects are the ambivalent boundaries that may be both in and out of subject positions, the hybrid, mobile, confused assertions that maintain and yet challenge difference.

I have argued that rather than fleeing the Self, there is important work to be done on ourselves. In my own situation, I realise that I rely on the magic imaginary Self–Other line to demarcate crossover points. Having collected a lifetime of knowing based on apartness and difference, I draw on this knowledge to make sense of the discourses of racism and sexism. Yet I feel pinned by an expectant gaze that obliges me to qualify myself as too Western to be Asian and too Asian to be Western. And it is here that ‘writing and reading ‘under Western eyes’ becomes a fraught and almost disabling self-conscious exercise’ (Sunder Rajan 1991, p.1) and this is why I am compelled to refuse to be reduced to a Same or an-Other, to either an outsider’s objective reasoning or an insider’s subjective feeling:

She is this Inappropriate Other–Same who moves about with always at least two–four gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while persisting in her difference; that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at (Trinh 1995, p.218).

There is important homework for us all to do, work that entails fundamental changes in education thinking and transformations in educational practice. We can investigate and interrogate the ways we represent ourselves and others. This necessarily involves struggling with issues of representation, trying out, experimenting with and developing critical pedagogies and literacies quite beyond conventional notions of grammar and linguistic competency. It will involve language immersion, experiments and trials that strain, stretch, extend and press out new and self-critical reflections, expressions and understandings of ourselves in relation to others.

So rather then fleeing the Self, I suggest that there is important work to be done on our Selves. However, this should not be a solitary or selfish exercise. If we are to avoid recentering our selves we must also pay attention to the spatial luxury of our own access to coloniser places and practices and support the struggles of those who are marginal, absent and silent to access places of academic and intellectual privilege (hooks 1990). The absent
places and silences cannot be filled by those who are already here, centred, speaking or ‘giving voice’.

Our deconstructive efforts to give-up authority that impresses or intimidates, and our efforts to ‘demythologise’ the ‘magic of essences’ (Trinh 1995), must be accompanied by Others because, when those marked as ‘other’ are ‘here’ and ‘I’, they can no longer be ‘there’ and ‘not-I’. We may find that our wrestlings with the epistemic violences of our texts—and our doubts and imaginings about what we can know about ourself and the universe—is accompanied by Others who are similarly compelled to ‘tread lightly along the limits of where I am speaking from’ (Chambers 1995, p.6).

REFERENCES


Gilroy, Paul (1990) ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at... The dialectics of diasporic identification’. Third Text, 13 (Winter) pp.3-16.


