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SELF-REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY ‘CONTACT ZONE’

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Draft only


Abstract
This article explores some aspects of the role of race and gender in shaping women postgraduate students’ experience of intercultural study. In it, we focus on various social and cultural aspects of their sojourn. These were suggested by data from two small pilot research projects investigating the experiences of two cohorts of international women postgraduate students studying in an Australian and a Canadian university.¹ We focus particularly on the manner in which the students’ representation of themselves as women intersects with their perception and/or experience of negative race and gender representations in their host cultures. In other words, we are interested in the students’ understandings of themselves as ‘other’, and how this impact on the way they represent the ‘self’. We suggest that these representations reflect a process of negotiation of identity that occurs in what we have called the global university ‘contact zone’. The concept of contact zones — the ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet’ (Pratt 1992) — derives from postcolonial theory. A further goal of this article, then, is to examine how such data appears when viewed from postcolonial perspective.

¹ The original research was conducted by Jane Kenway, Professor of Education, Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures, University of South Australia and Diana Langmead, Research Fellow, Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Deakin University. They were assisted by Michelle Ariga, Research Officer, who organised and undertook the on-site interviews in Canada. The original research was undertaken with the support and funding of the Canadian High Commission through a Faculty Research Program Grant (1998-9) and the Australian Research Council through a Small Grant (1998). The original researchers express their sincere appreciation to the funding bodies and to all the participants in this study for their time and sharing of their stories. Subsequent analysis and conceptual development of the research data has been conducted with the support of Elizabeth Bullen, Research Associate, Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures, University of South Australia.
Introduction
Postcolonial theory has long been of interest to feminist scholars but it has been relatively neglected within education until recently. There are, of course, some notable exceptions. Nevertheless, while some have offered postcolonial readings of educational issues in general (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Rajan, 1995; Roman & Eyre, 1997) and issues affecting higher education in particular (Gunew, 1998a; Rizvi, 1997 & 1998), those few who have offered a postcolonial perspective on gender issues in education (Crowley & McConaghy, 1998; Jayaweera, 1999) have not done so in the context of higher education. Those who have applied postcolonial concepts to issues of gender and education have tended to focus on issues of migration, multiculturalism and indigeneity. Those who have introduced postcolonial concepts into debates in higher education have done so in response to the internationalisation of the university and in the context of globalisation. Postcolonial studies have proved to be a resource for theorizing issues raised by the increased flow of international students, including those of power. Here, we use it is to explore some aspects of the role of race and gender in shaping the study experiences of international women postgraduate students.

As Ashcroft et al. (1998, p. 1) point out, postcolonial analysis exposes the ways in which ‘the structures of power established by the colonizing process remain pervasive, though often hidden in cultural relations throughout the world’. This is why, they contend, postcolonial analysis is better able to clarify questions of global culture and politics than analysis from the perspective race, class, economics or gender alone. Likewise, we suggest that a feminist postcolonial approach to the experiences of international women students has the potential to produce a richer and more nuanced understanding than a conventional Western feminist perspective would achieve alone. Thus, while this paper is feminist in orientation, it departs from the feminist preoccupation with access and equity which predominate in much of the existing literature on international women students.

Given this, we begin with a brief overview of the existing literature on international postgraduate women students and look at some issues it raises in regard to a feminist approach to the field. These issues provide the context

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2 We use the term Western feminist theory here as short hand for what Chilla Bulbeck (1998) describes as feminist theory and practice emanating primarily or predominantly from English-speaking White women, focusing on issues and analyses pertinent to white culture and hegemony. However, we recognise several problems in so doing, not the least being our own English-speaking whiteness and probable/possible accusations of ‘thirdworldism’. We acknowledge the complexity of difference within postcolonial feminism and that there are many issues involved with the feminist naming and framing and ‘stiffing polarities’ associated with notions of Asian/non-Asian; Eastern/Western; First World/Third world feminism. We understand that North American and UK hegemonic and mainstream feminisms—within which we include Australian—often ignore feminisms in Africa, Asia and certain parts of Europe.
within which we describe the research projects which form the empirical base for our analysis. The data from the research projects is designed to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. It functions as a springboard from which we explore the potential of a postcolonial feminist perspective. To do so, we use Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the ‘contact zone’ as our principal theoretical frame. We also refer to a range of other feminist postcolonial theorists at those points in the paper where they enrich our understanding of the data. Having outlined the theoretical framework, we turn to the women’s stories. We focus on their self/other representations to explore various ways in which identity is negotiated and represented in the global education contact zone.

The literature
Much of the existing gender literature that concerns itself with international students comes from educational psychology and the sociology of education. It tends to look at the international student in either a gender-neutral or a gender-biased manner. The most common approach is to homogenise the needs and concerns of international students with regard to ethnicity (Chalmers & Volet, 1997), gender and, indeed, level of study. Most research on international students focuses on undergraduates (see, for example, Barker, 1991; Dey, 1997; Wiseman, 1997). Statistics such as the 1996 Overseas Student Statistics, gathered by the Department of Employment, Education, Training & Youth Affairs, Australia, either offer no gender breakdown or, where gender differences in enrolment are recorded, conduct no analysis with regard to the causes or implications of these differences. Women international students' perspectives are mentioned by a very few authors compared with those whose work represents ‘general' students' perspectives. Another tendency has been to normalise male students and, thereby, to assign to the woman student the subordinate status of 'other'. In other words, it is assumed that the student is male. Rosemarie Ashamalla's (1994) paper on problems faced by spouses of international students points to a corollary of this. She identifies the student as 'usually the husband'. Similarly, de Verthelyi’s (1995) study of the cross-cultural adjustment process of international students' spouses is based on interviews with the 'wives' of international graduate students.

The research that does attend to international women students has tended to be of two sorts. Firstly, there is the research that discusses all international students but, in addition, mentions issues facing women international students particularly (for instance, Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Here, the ‘tendency ... is to see gender issues as supplementary questions to be tackled only when the general work has been done’ (Wright, 1997, p. 94). Secondly, there is the research

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3 Indeed, student-driven research recommends that greater attention be paid to the particular needs of postgraduate international students (National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia, 1995, p. 22).
that explores the issues facing women postgraduate students in general and, thereby, includes international women students in the analysis (for example, Conrad, 1994). Research of this sort has arisen out of liberal feminist access and equity concerns. While some of this body of literature is founded on empirical research (see, for instance, Moses, 1990), much of it results from speculative research involving a synthesis of existing secondary materials and ‘Western’ feminist theories. This also tends to be the case with studies that focus specifically on international women students (Habito, 1996; Leonard, 1998; Nicholls, 1989; Wright, 1997). This research generally focuses on the negative positioning of international postgraduate women vis-à-vis men to highlight their disadvantage.

While recognising the importance of attending to matters of women’s ‘disadvantage’, we believe the issues facing international students cannot be reduced to this. A more nuanced approach is needed and, in this regard, we take up the alternative line of inquiry implied, if not developed, by Wright (1997). She argues for future research that resists accounts of women's disadvantage premised on their ‘inherent qualities’ as women (1997, p. 106). We believe it is important to explore the conceptual and political opportunities made available by a more holistic portrayal of the experiences of international women students. The international students’ autobiographies in Garrod and Davis (1999), for instance, provide compelling examples of the merits of a holistic approach and point to the benefits of autobiography and autoethnography on this topic. We also believe that research must be grounded as much as possible in students’ experience and viewed from their standpoints and this was reflected in our methodology.

Although such a privileging of students’ stories does not diminish the insights made available in the existing research, it does have implications for a feminist approach to the field. Firstly, it raises questions about how we should theorise the experience of non-Western women. As we will show, non-Western, and even other-Western women, whether feminist or otherwise, do not necessarily focus on the same issues in the same ways. Indeed, in explaining their experiences, many such women do not necessarily recognise or acknowledge oppression or disadvantage and tell rather different, more complicated and, in some ways, less depressing stories. This raises the question of whether a ‘Western’ feminist political prioritisation is justified in cases in which the women in whose support it supposedly speaks do not agree with its priorities. If they do not see certain things as negative or if they are not conscious of certain problems, can such problems be identified in the name of feminism? Should we — can we — represent others? This points to some methodological and ethical issues in the research that warrant a far more thorough evaluation than is possible in this
Here, instead, we look at how this dilemma presented in the Australian and Canadian pilot research projects.

**The research projects**

One purpose of the pilot projects was to develop a sense of the ways in which international women postgraduates regard, represent and 'live' their international educational experiences. International postgraduate women studying at an Australian and a Canadian university were interviewed about their experiences in their respective host countries and universities. University staff-members who were significantly involved with the students were also interviewed. Participants attended individual interviews at the multi-campus universities in which they were enrolled. The interviews were semi-structured, but relatively informal in order to allow the free flow of discussion.

The Australian group consisted of three students from Laos; two each from China and Thailand; and one each from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam to make a total of ten. The average age of the cohort was approximately 35-years-old. More than half the women had studied outside their home country before, however, only one had studied in Australia previously (for two months) and only one other had studied in an English-speaking country (Canada). Four of the women were studying for their PhD, four for their Masters and two for their Graduate Diploma. They came from a range of professional backgrounds including academe — two assistant professors, one in Development and Communication and one of English, and two lecturers, one in Educational Administration, the other in Biology. The cohort also included a seismologist (now studying engineering) and an assistant director, researcher and trainer in a non-government organization. In this paper, we use the voices of five students who studied in Australia, anonimized here as Jingyu (China) and Agueda (the Phillipines), Rakawin (Thailand) and Raden (Indonesia). They studied at a regional university (University A).

Whereas the students studying at the Australian university tended to come from the Asia-Pacific region of which Australia is a part, there was no regional pattern in the origin of the students enrolled at the Canadian university (University B). Also numbering ten students, this group consisted of women from Japan, Kenya, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United States of America (USA) and the West Indies. The average age was approximately 28-years-old, younger than the cohort studying in Australia. Their professional experience was also less broad than that of the students studying in Australia. In

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4 See Jane Kenway and Diana Langmead (1999) *The 'Politics of Transitions': International Women Postgraduates in a Canadian and an Australian University*, a Report to the Canadian High Commission, available on request. A paper specifically examining methodological issues and the ethical questions they pose is in progress.
addition to schoolteachers and librarians, the group included students who had come straight through the university system with few or no interruptions. Six were studying for their PhD and four for Masters qualifications. Seven of the women had studied outside their home countries before. Of these, five had previously studied in Canada, for periods ranging from three months to six years. All those who had studied outside their home country had spent time in English-speaking countries (Canada, Britain and USA). The students whose voices are heard in this paper are Ulla (Sweden), Claara (West Indies), Jacki (USA), Carla (the Netherlands) and Miko (Japan).

This study originated in Australia and its Canadian component grew from our Australian assumptions about what constitutes an ‘international student’ cohort. It soon emerged that such assumptions were problematic on many counts, not the least being the notion that, as British postcolonies, Canada and Australia would have common institutional and political frameworks around, for example, questions of multiculturalism. Gunew (1998a) points out that multiculturalism in Canada, as a code for racialised differences, includes references to ‘visible differences’ and indigenous ‘first nations’ people. She explains that in Canada, therefore, much work on anti-racism is conducted under the name of multiculturalism. In contrast, multiculturalism in Australia is not so much associated with indigeneity or racialisation as it is with ethnicity. Take another example. We expected the Canadian cohort to resemble the Australian. The number of students from so-called ‘developed’ countries with English a commonly-used language surprised us. We had naively assumed that the students would be from ‘developing’ countries and, therefore, the data would be at least somewhat comparable.

All of this was a matter of consequence in the direction of the overall research and, now, in its theorisation. Given that cross-country comparison yielded such ambiguous results, the merits of attempting to reach definitive conclusions from small-scale research projects such as these are open to question. In many ways, our inquiries are most fruitful for generating questions. Certainly, they remind us, yet again, of the problems of essentialist accounts of identity and the dangers of feminist research practices of homogenisation which create ‘essentialist and monolithic categories’ of women from diverse cultures, classes, religions and ethnicities. Further, they alert us to such tendencies in our own research design and to such issues in much of the research noted above. Being alert to difference, puts ‘different’ questions on the research agenda and invites in those feminisms which address such concerns.

Multicultural, black and postcolonial theorising have brought to ‘Western’ feminism a serious acknowledgment of diversity and have given rise to debates
about the politics of difference (Ang, 1995, pp. 58-60). As Blunt and Rose (1994, p. 6) argue,

> The central task for many feminists today is to articulate the extraordinarily complex and simultaneous interaction of gender, class, race and sexuality (to name just four of the most frequently cited axes of identity oppression and resistance) that create differences between women.

Indeed, quite central to the postcolonial literature is a consideration of the processes and effects of ‘othering’. From a feminist viewpoint such as this, to collectivise international postgraduate women from a diversity of nations and cultures is to collude in the reproduction of discourses of ‘othering’ and, thus, in the establishment and perpetuation of power differentials (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996, p. 6).

It is thus mindful of the pitfalls of attempting to represent (an)other that we have adapted the conceptual vocabulary assembled and developed by Mary Louise Pratt, a scholar in linguistics and feminist and postcolonial studies, as our theoretical bases. It is to a discussion of the theoretical framework with which we will explore the impact of host culture race and gender representations on the production of international women students’ identities and experiences that we now turn.

**Theoretical framework**

In postcolonial studies, discussion of the contact zone is usually by way of reference to Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). There, the contact zone refers specifically to the historical and geographical space of the colonial encounter and the unequal and conflicted nature of contact between indigenous and colonial cultures. Contact zones are, Pratt explains, the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination — like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. (1992, p. 4)

In this context, it would be easy to mistake the contact zone as an artifact of history. After all, as Pratt has pointed out more recently (1999, online), ‘there will be no more first contacts or first encounters’ and key terms in postcolonialism like centre and periphery become problematic when ‘There is no longer as “outside” to world economic systems’. However, globalisation has not yet made the notion of the contact zone redundant, not if we remember that it ‘refers to the places where cultures from disparate historical trajectories come into contact
with each other’ (Pratt, 1999, online).

In fact, when the concept was introduced in a shorter and earlier paper, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’ (Pratt, 1996, first published 1991) in addition to establishing its credentials as a mode of postcolonial critique, it formed the basis upon which to theorise a new pedagogy of the arts. Since then, a number of US scholars writing in English Studies have used this concept to explore issues relating to the teaching of world literatures and the dynamics of the multicultural classroom (see, for example Bizzell, 1994; Canagarajah, 1997; Lu, 1994; Miller, 1994). As Bizzell (1994, p. 166) puts it, the contact zone is not only what practitioners are teaching about, but what they are teaching in. Dissemination of the concept in education beyond this context, however, appears to be limited.

According to Pratt (1996), the notion of the contact zone stands in contrast with that of community. The idea of community in academe, she asserts, is premised on an assumed homogeneity of language, communication and culture, of shared understandings and shared sets of rules. But this, she emphasizes, is an ‘imagined’ community. In reality, the constituency of the university is heterogeneous and so, too, are the ways in which individual students understand themselves and their relationship to others. Given this, the goal of those teaching in (and about) the contact zone is not to focus on essential natures, but on how students, texts or cultures might come together in productive dialogue — without glossing over difference (Bizzell 1994, p. 165). The virtue of this, according to Pratt (1996, p. 540), is that ‘Virtually every student [has] the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it’.

In postulating an educational contact zone created by the globalisation of the contemporary university, a contact zone that includes but extends beyond the classroom, we ask whether any of these goals are being realised? Or, do the asymmetrical relations that typified historical ‘contact zones’ persist? Do the international women students whose voices form the basis of this study experience the globalised university as a ‘world’ which acknowledges and accommodates their difference and their struggles? Or, does being an international woman student mean being marginalised, reduced to ‘other’ where being the “other” of a dominant culture involves living in a bifurcated universe of meaning. On the one hand, one must produce oneself as a self for oneself. That is survival. At the same time the system also requires that you produce yourself as an “other”. (Pratt, 1999, online)

However, it also needs to be emphasised that a ‘contact perspective’ is not the reductive polarisation of oppressor and oppressed. Rather, emphasis is placed on the way ‘subjects are constituted in and by their relation to each other’ and,
importantly, its treatment of these relations is ‘not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices’ (1992, p. 7).

Pratt theorises the processes of negotiation that occur in the contact zone in terms of transculturation, a concept borrowed from ethnography where it is used ‘to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture’ (1992, p. 6). According to Pratt’s coinage, transculturation is a reciprocal exchange of influences, of modes of representation and self-representation, and of cultural practices. Among the questions it serves to raise in her book is, ‘How have Europe’s constructions of subordinated others been shaped by those others, by the constructions of themselves … they presented to the Europeans?’ (1992, p. 6). In exploring these questions, Pratt uses the idiosyncratic terms ‘autoethnography’ and ‘autoethnographic expression’ to refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (1992, p. 7)

Autoethnography entails ‘a partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conquerer’ (1992, p. 7). Here, of course, we are more interested in content than form: Do international women students select and adapt dominant culture discourses which situate them as ‘other’ for their own purposes? Do they participate in their construction as ‘other’? And, how does their self-representation function as modes of acquiescence, resistance or pragmatism?

**Heterogeneity in the contact zone**
Homogenization is integral to the process of ‘othering’, to the creation of an ‘other’ who is typically stereotyped, silenced, marginalized. In the context of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, it is by these means that the subjectivity of the colonizer is established and empowered (Ashcroft, et al., 1998, p. 173). The idea of identity in the contact zone, by contrast, is heterogeneous. As indicated above, this does not mean to say that the relations between individuals or groups within it are equal. It does not mean that none there are stereotyped, silenced or marginalized. In approaching our data from a contact zone perspective, however, we hope to avoid these things in our own analysis. We do so by looking for evidence of transculturation, of ways in which the students’ perceptions of host culture attitudes toward them as racial or gendered ‘other’ are incorporated or resisted in their ‘self’-representations. We identify in the
Interview data a range of standpoints among the responses of the women to various social and cultural aspects of living in another country. These range from positions of resistance to affirmation and we will examine some of these individually. We begin, however, with a brief preliminary overview of the students’ sense of race issues in their host country.

Lawley’s and Blight's studies (1997) show that racial discrimination in the destination country is an important consideration for many students, although the degree of importance varies in different countries of origin. Women in the Canadian group did not mention prior concerns and several commented that the city where University B is located ‘is very multicultural’, that the university itself is ‘very international’, and that there were thus ‘no biases or prejudices’. Some of the Australian group, on the other hand, admitted to concerns about racism prior to going to Australia. They alleviated those concerns with the knowledge that only a small proportion of the population would be racist.

Despite most students’ early claims of experiencing no overt racism, in both studies they eventually spoke about feeling subjected to racist stereotyping and behaviour. One student was warned not to go out at night by friends who had experienced discrimination and racism in Australia. A Chinese woman in the Australian study had been subjected to racist taunts shouted at her from a car as it drove past. However, like her peers, she too said that she did not take racist attitudes to heart. Generally, though, the students experienced more subtle feelings of racial differences in their treatment. Some were unsure what people were thinking of them, making them think twice about what to say and do. Others observed different ways of communicating and felt their supervisors looked down on them when there was a misunderstanding. In this sense, racism was perceived as ‘low respect’ which left them with the feeling of a need to do things better than others, to work harder. They also said that although racism was not ‘malignant’, it was still present and was evident in such practices as ‘in-jokes’ which served to exclude them.

Negative representations of gender and race often occur as a function of corporeal marks of difference. Hage (1998, pp. 18-19) identifies the category of “Third-world looking people” (TWLP as opposed to the standard NESB migrants) explaining that, ‘when white people who embrace the white nation fantasy look at a migrant, what they differentiate between are not those who are NESB and those who are not, or those who are European and those who are not but those who are third world looking and those who are not’. Ulla’s residential college, for example, was generally regarded as full of academically-devoted Oriental women. Indeed, she found that people categorised her by her looks (Oriental) rather than her nationality (Swedish). Claara reported that, because of her Islamic dress, it was often assumed that she was from the Middle East. In
fact, she was from the Caribbean.

'Visible minorities' often find it hard to get housing and work, although only one student had been in this situation herself. Interestingly, Jacki from the USA was refused housing in Canada because she was considered 'too Californian'. Indeed, Jacki was totally unprepared for the resentment and stereotyping she was subjected to as an American. She spoke frequently of 'American-bashing', which she found offensive although understandable in terms of the cultural imperialism that the USA exerts over Canada. Both Americans in the Canadian group were also subjected to class-based prejudice. Being blonde and articulate led to assumptions about privilege and an upper middle-class background. Jacki’s experience is significant because it clearly problematises other easily made assumptions about international students, equity and race. However, it is to the students’ views of the construction of international students, in particular, ‘Third-world looking’ students, as serious, studious and uninterested in interacting socially that we will now turn.

**Pragmatism**

The students studying in Australia were very conscious of being represented as serious, studious and uninterested in social interaction. There was certainly a sense in which these constructions were seen as a way of closing off the cultural conversation, as an obliterating expression of (in)difference. However, while they did not like to be represented in this way, the students felt that to some extent such views were warranted. There was also some suggestion that such images were generational. International women of 40-plus were seen to be more likely to conform to this image than younger students who had often assimilated Western ways. This reputation, it was suggested, was influenced by a number of factors.

In the first instance, it was seen to arise from the necessities associated with studying in another language and, thus, the requirement to spend extra time on reading and writing (see further Lewthwaite, 1996, p. 180). When residential time was short, such pressures were exacerbated. This reputation also arose from the importance these students attached to academic achievement and success. This, in turn, attached to their own and others’ financial and other investments or their scholarship obligations. Further, some of the women expressed awareness of cultural restrictions and pressures particular to them as women studying outside their home country. Raden made the following comments, which were not unique:

Men are allowed fuller and wider experiences whilst overseas.
Women are not expected to have fun.
Women are under pressure to do extra well in their study, to prove themselves.
As this suggests, the production and perpetuation of such assumptions is complex and cannot simply be reduced to a construction imposed by one culture upon its ‘other’. Referring to ‘[t]he nature of global capitalist modernity’, Ien Ang states that “‘other’ peoples are left with two options: either enter the game or be excluded’ (1995, p. 67). From a contact zone perspective, however, the students are themselves involved in the production of such representations, if for no other reason than pragmatism. Certainly, this perspective offers an alternative to Orientalism, that is, Edward Said’s (1978) thesis that Asia is a construct of Europe. We do not necessarily go as far as Arif Dirlik (1996) who argues that contemporary ‘self-orientalization’ among intellectuals is a ‘manifestation not of powerlessness but newly-acquired power’ (p. 96). Nevertheless, it is clear that the students’ acceptance and incorporation of this image into their self-representation can be seen to be instrumental to their achieving academic and personal goals and fulfilling the expectations not merely of the host culture, but of their own.

Resistance

The postgraduates studying in Australia, all from Asian-Pacific countries, identified another set of gendered racial representations of which they were far less tolerant. Both Agueda from the Phillipines and Rakawin from Thailand had encountered sexist assumptions about Asian women. Here are some examples of what they said:

- Australians think Filipinas are here to marry and stay here.
- Filipinas seen as good domestic workers ... but we can do more than that.
- Thai women are seen as prostitutes.
- Australians think Asian women go to bed easily with Australian men.

The image of the Third World women as ‘the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the obedient wife, etc.’ (Mohanty 1988: 81) have a long history in the West. As van der Veer (1995, p. 15) observes, through ‘narratives of her subjection and lack of freedom ... the Asian woman has long been the sign of the backwardness of Asian cultures in the orientalist imagination’.

This raises the questions about ‘how representations become naturalised and ultimately coercive in structuring self-representation’ (Rajan, 1995, p. 129). In fact, these were images which the students vehemently rejected. Agueda was not alone in deciding to ‘work to break stereotyping of Asian women as “easy”’. She saw herself as a strong woman, able to find ways to cope in the contact zone without without behaving as a 'subservient Asian student'. Her response reminds us that the function of representations of this sort is not only to define ‘other’ cultures, but the hegemonic culture.
In other instances, however, the students indicated that they felt pressure to represent, that is, to be a spokesperson for their home country. This was felt to be most restricting. As Trinh T. Minh-ha explains, the ‘automatic and arbitrary endowment ... with legitimised knowledge about her cultural heritage and environment’ (1988, p. 75) reminds the ‘outsider’ of the boundaries within which she is to remain, validating the power of the dominant. This ascribes to the ‘outsider' the arrogance and all-knowing attitude usually attributed by the dominant person to him or herself. At the same time, it homogenises the 'outsider's' culture as representable by one member. It was evident in a number of interviews that many students felt that they carried what Atvah Brah (1996) calls ‘the burden of representation’ (see, also, Yuval-Davis, 1997). In some instances, they were committed to dispelling misrepresentations such as those above.

Ambivalence

The experience of the contact zone is more difficult, however, when there is a clear disjunction between the sense of identity as ‘self’ and as ‘other’. Pratt, we recall, explains that

‘being the “other” of a dominant culture involves living in a bifurcated universe of meaning. On the one hand, one must produce oneself as a self for oneself. That is survival. At the same time the system also requires that you produce yourself as an “other” (Pratt 1999, p. 2).

Charles Taylor argues that the stereotyping of others ‘can inflict harm, and can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being’ (1995, p. 249).

Take the case of Miko from Japan. She was very conscious of the difference between her perception of her ‘self’, her identity as a student living in Canada, and the identity as ‘other’ with which she was conferred, the identity of the marginalised outsider. Miko explained that she liked to get ‘psychologically involved’ when she entered a new environment. In this instance, she had invested considerable energy in understanding the way of life in Canada, including its politics. However, she felt that this 'investment' went unacknowledged by her adopted society. As a non-Canadian student, she remained locked into non-citizen status. She was acutely aware of public debate concerning international students, in particular the view that money spent on them was money down the drain and unfair on Canadian taxpayers. She felt disappointed that, despite her psychological investment in Canada as her home and despite longing to feel part of the society, she was still constructed as a foreigner, indeed, as an intruder.
Ironically, the extent to which Miko’s had constructed herself as an international woman student only became apparent when she returned to Japan for holidays. She found it necessary to make adjustments to the way she interacted with family and friends in ways that clearly involved suppressing interests and opinions she had developed in Canada. For instance, she avoided discussing political issues, with male family and friends especially, and talking too loudly or too much. In reflecting on this, Miko said that:

In all the courses and stuff, I had learned how hegemony and consent works, and I was, like, there was resistance and there was room and here I was, you know, I was completely complacent [sic] to the hegemonic processes in this culture and I was very sad, very disappointed with myself.

Thus, displacement both to another culture and on returning home, created a feeling of 'otherness', of alienation, of lack of belonging, comfort and satisfaction.

Ang (1998, pp. 153-4) makes the observation that, when constructed as a foreigner or stranger, and as not an accepted member of the community .... [people] develop all kinds of strategies to deal with it — some people will try to deny their foreignness, and self-hatred is part of this, or they will try to assimilate into the dominant culture as much as possible.

The implication is that this is not much of an alternative. However, as the following stories suggest, the project of renegotiating identity, indeed, of reinventing oneself, is not always experienced as negative.

Reinvention
If Miko’s trips home to Japan only served to intensify her sense of marginalisation and personal disappointment, Carla’s holidays in her home country acted to crystallize the sense of agency which she attributed to her experience in the contact zone. She described how, when returning to the Netherlands after a period away, she felt constantly, consciously 'confronted' by things she normally took for granted. Cultural differences, behaviour, style of speech had all been denaturalised for her. Whilst this 'lack of naturalness' challenged her sense of identity, she also felt it made her more aware of her choice of identity. She also noticed that the contact she had with Dutch friends while in Canada helped to keep her (and their) cultural identity intact. Students’ cross-cultural experiences forged many notions of self and many identities.
Jingyu, for instance, wanted to reinvent herself as a Westerner. With plans to immigrate to Australia (or Canada) on completion of her postgraduate studies, she identified closely with all things Western. Whilst she recognised differences between Chinese and Australian culture, lifestyle, and teaching and learning styles, she qualified her observations with comments suggesting that China was becoming more Westernised. She emphasised that young people in China were very internationally aware, through television, movies and use of the Internet. At the same time, one of her reasons for wanting to emigrate was to be able to live where ‘it's freer in so many ways’. China was the 'old country'. Her plans for the future created a reason for her to accept and adopt Western mores and customs and, not surprisingly, the new identity which she was in the process of constructing, drew little on her Chinese heritage.

The desire to reinvent oneself is not always and necessarily regarded as negative. Clearly, Jingyu did not perceive it as such. The fact that white American Jacki also felt the urge to reinvent herself as a result of her experience in the contact zone further problematises the assumption that it is. Jacki believed that knowledge she acquired in re-establishing a home in a hostile culture had given her a resource which would help her revise her identity according to changing life circumstances in the future. In other words, the capacity to reinvent oneself was viewed as an asset rather than a compromise.

Affirmation
Van der Veer (1995, p. 7) makes the point that

negative evaluation of the other helps to create social cohesion within; outsiders play a role in the formation of national identity; the discourse which marginalises and demonises the migrant also breeds nationalism among those who are marginalised.

It is interesting to see the way in which this process worked for Ulla, a young woman from Sweden. She described how it took her cross-cultural travel to awaken nationalist pride for her home country. Born of a Japanese father, as a child in Sweden she was inevitably the only non-blue eyed blonde in class. Because she looked 'Oriental', she was treated differently to others. She could not be put in any category. There was ‘just me,’ she said. As a consequence, she found herself identifying as Japanese rather than Swedish. When she came to Canada and found herself in 'one of the most multicultural cities in the world', however, she realised that she really was Swedish, despite being regarded as Oriental in Canada.

Ulla found it much easier to be an ‘ethnic’ woman in Canada than in Sweden, which is a much more homogenous country (although as a woman, she preferred
to be in Sweden). She expressed concerns about returning to Sweden on completion of her studies, fearing that she would be 'treated as a recent immigrant', rather than a Swede. She expected to miss the feeling of acceptance — of 'fitting-in' — she had experienced in Canada. She did not say, however, how her newfound identity as a Swede would be affected. One wonders whether she will adopt a hybrid identity of Swedish and Japanese, revert to being 'Japanese', or continue to assert her 'Swedishness'. Either way, her story tends to confirm Ang (1998, p. 160) observation that there is

no such thing as complete belonging or complete non-belonging, but they exist at the same time, and in that sense you move in and out of a culture, move in and out of a certain kind of bounded space.

This is perhaps why Stuart Hall’s distinction between roots and routes has become so popular. Reference

**Solidarity**

A further mode of response to inscriptions of outsider status in the contact zone is by way of practices of association and affiliation. At both Australian and Canadian sites of study, non-white international students tended to remain together. Those studying in Australian said they felt safe from racism in student residences because of the mix of nationalities. Those studying in Canada also tended to associate with other international students and, according to Claara, many formed friendships only with their international peers. She herself spent a lot of time at the International Student Centre and when she referred to Canadian friends and associates, she meant ‘visible minority’ Canadians. How did the women interpret these apparently restricted social relations and racially coded social spaces?

In their theorization of women’s postcolonial geographies, Blunt and Rose (1994, pp. 15-16) make the point that just ‘as the centre needs its margin, the inside requires an outside’, with the resulting

paradox that the ‘others’ of the master subject are marginalised and ignored … but are also given their own places: the slum, the ghetto, the harem, the colony, the closet, the inner city, the Third World, the private.

However, this is not necessarily how the students perceived their situation. One of the reasons Claara liked being in Canada was because she was confronted by less racism and sexism than in Trinidad. This suggests she was familiar with the experience of racism. Why, then, did she not perceive these apparently restricted social relations and social spaces as racist?
According to Julie Matthews (1996, p. 6), the tendency for international students to socialise among themselves can be seen as a pragmatic, practical survival strategy. It is an everyday practice of affirming and claiming identity. Kefala (1998, p. 49) calls these forms of association ‘communities formed by chance’ which, nevertheless, are ‘invented as a way of creating a feeling of home’. They provide a sense of ‘outside belongings’ (Probyn, 1998, p. 27). For these writers, drawing on their own experiences of travel, exile or migration, such affiliations are clearly affirming. Gunew, however, identifies a further paradox when she points to the risk that, in creating an institutional space for themselves, this space may be negatively construed as an international students’ annex where they wilfully perform their difference, their ethnicity (Gunew, 1998b, p. 113) in a culturally nostalgic or chauvinistic manner.

As indicated earlier, a contact zone perspective acknowledges the heterogeneity not only of those who occupy it, but of their points of view. The perspectives described by Matthews and Gunew above provide an instance of this, offering both the ‘outsider’ perspective of the ‘other’, the colonized, and the perspective of the dominant, the colonizer. Pratt (1996) provides a further perspective when she describes the social and/or intellectual spaces like international student residences and associations as ‘safe houses’ which offer respite from the contact zone. She argues that ‘Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world which they can bring into the contact zone’ (1996, p. 541). Although international student communities are not culturally, linguistically or ethnically homogeneous, residential colleges, international student-targeted curricula, associations and services do opportunities for shared trust and a temporary protection from the legacies of outsider status. Canagarajah (1997, p. 192) goes further in arguing that such spaces ‘ensure the heterogeneity and diversity of the contact zone’ and provide ‘the critical distance, the oppositional stance, and the personal space needed to help students find a voice for themselves in academic discourse’.

Conclusion
We have not so much reached conclusions in this paper as beginnings. Clearly, a postcolonial analysis of our data suggests that international students’ perceptions and experiences of the global university contact zone are as heterogeneous as the cohort of students we interviewed. This points to the limitations of a certain, primarily ‘Western’, feminist perspective, not only because of its propensity to homogenise, but because the asymmetries of relations which the self-representations of international women students reflect and subvert have their legacy not only in patriarchy, but in imperialism. Understanding the globalised university as a contact zone is one step towards recognising the complexity of these students’ experiences. However, this paper provides no easy answers for
feminist researchers in higher education and those working with international women students particularly. Rather, it points to the need to open up further lines of inquiry in such a way as to better reflect the storylines which emerge from such women themselves. This is something which the pilot research projects we undertook achieved only in the most modest of ways. We call for more research, self-reflexive research in particular, on the lived experiences of international women students — ‘their everyday life, everyday awareness, the small things they hold onto, questions of affect, structures of feeling’ (Ang, 1998, p. 157). Such research would, we believe, shed new light on the ‘art(s) of foreignness ... as a relay of different thoughts, relationships and encounters’ (Zournazi, 1998, p. 16) in the contact zone that is the contemporary global university.

References


Matthews, J. M. (1996) What does it mean to be 'Asian' and female in a South


