

Introduction

This discovery of a boundless country seems worthy of consideration. I don't know if I can guarantee that some other such discovery will not be made in the future, so many personages greater than ourselves having been mistaken about this one. I am afraid we have eyes bigger than our stomachs, and more curiosity than capacity. We embrace everything, but clasp only wind.

—Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals” (1578)

This right, to present oneself for society, belongs to all human beings by virtue of the right of possession in common of the earth's surface, on which, as a sphere, they cannot disperse infinitely but must finally put up with being near one another.

—Immanuel Kant, “Toward Perpetual Peace” (1795)

The civility of no race can be perfect whilst another race is degraded. It is a doctrine alike of the oldest, and of the newest philosophy, that man is one, and that you cannot injure any member, without a sympathetic injury to all the members.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Address on Emancipation in the West Indies” (1844)

The modern world must . . . remember that in this age, when the ends of the world are being brought so near together, the millions of black men in Africa, America and the islands of the sea, not to speak of the brown and yellow myriads elsewhere, are bound to have great influence upon the world in the future . . . If . . . the black world is to be exploited and ravished and degraded, the results must be deplorable, if not fatal, not simply to them but to the high ideals of justice, freedom, and culture.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, “To the Nations of the World” (1900)

Human dignity enters with knowledge, the whole world changes for the enlightened man and he becomes more effective. When one is enlightened, he does not stand out from the rest of the world, but embraces it . . . The very moment of enlightenment experience takes in the whole world and is totality.

—D. T. Suzuki, Lecture at Columbia University (1952)

The Negro-African . . . does not observe that he thinks; he feels that he feels, he feels his *existence*, he feels himself. Because he feels himself, he feels the Other; and because he feels the Other, he goes towards the Other, through the rhythm of the Other to know-him-in-being-born-with-him [*con-naitre*] and the world.

—Léopold Senghor, “The Negro-African Aesthetic” (1956)

Our existential condition is a global one.¹ To reflect on the self is to reflect on the world. To be alive today is to be connected to processes across the globe that remain always beyond one’s control. As the sampling of quotes above shows, this relation of self and world has a long history in modern thought from around the world. Whether from France or Brazil, Germany or Japan, Senegal or the United States, those who have asked what it means to be human have placed at the center of their reflections how humans relate to each other across time and space. The resulting questions are not easy to answer: What does it mean to have a self if that self is so diffused to all the corners of the globe? How do the histories of power and domination unevenly shape the histories of global self-making? What kinds of concepts would we need in order to be aware of these differences while simultaneously appreciative of our extensive connections? The following pages demonstrate again and again that these types of questions are inseparable from modern self-making.

And yet the claim that the modern self is a global one might sound strange to some readers. We are accustomed to thinking of who we are in modernity as either intensely personal—as in the Cartesian self, founded precisely by turning away from the world—or deeply cultural—as in the anthropological understanding epitomized in Marx’s expression “social being determines consciousness.” The questions this volume poses in response are: What if the Cartesian moment of turning in is not the founding moment

of modernity, but the evasion of its global demands? And what if our “social being” is mediated not just by our nation or culture, but also by our global connections? The questions are raised not so much against these other formulations, but rather as part of an attempt to tell other parts of the story of who we (fragmented, uneven, but global nevertheless) are. There of course would be many histories of such global selves, many positions within this global frame that are denied access to it, many denials of the very idea of having a “self” in the first place. But my claim here is that such questions are part of the general problem that confronts us in the modern world: How are we to relate who we are to individuals across a finite planet, whose existence and meaning are connected to ours, whether viscerally or not?

I have learned how to tell this history in part through my reading of two canonical histories of the self that take as their geographic orientation the history of Europe and the invented tradition that links Europe to the Greek and Roman past: Michel Foucault’s lectures, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981–82); and Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (1989). In the pages to follow, I engage more closely with Foucault than with Taylor and disagree with both of them. But from each I have taken the central idea that to tell a history of the self is to tell a cultural, philosophical, and political history; that is to say, that to speak of who we are is to speak, as much as possible, of the totality of our condition. Moreover, I have learned to think of our ideas of who we are as having histories constituted in part by our cultural and philosophical inheritance. What I have denied are simply the ideas that our most important modern inheritance has to do with Greek and Roman sources and that the most significant context of modern Europe had to do with changes in the scientific worldview.² Rather, following globalist and postcolonial³ scholarship, I have tried to show how the making of the modern self was profoundly framed by global encounters both violent and peaceful, and that taking this into view can change how we understand who we are, what constitutes our condition, and what liberatory practices may entail. This story, then, is not about our relation to the philosophical past or how the mathematization of nature changed our role in the world. Rather, I speak of how the modern self was made by uneven, violent, overlapping, hopeless, hopeful, loving, confusing, dominating, liberating, skeptical, mystical, universalizing, pluralizing, and revolutionary crossings of people and places across space and time.

Readers more aligned with these varieties of global and postcolonial theory might find this claim rather banal. Have we not known since at least the opening pages of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) that Europe

made itself “by setting itself off against the Orient [and other Others] as a sort of surrogate and even underground self”?⁴ Indeed, at the heart of postcolonial theory has been the claim—again in Said’s vocabulary, borrowed from Raymond Williams—that the modern world and those in it were “constituted” by colonial encounters.⁵ To be sure, there is a vast amount of literature on how modern ideas of selfhood were constituted globally, and I am indebted to it here.⁶ But, for reasons that become increasingly apparent in the pages to follow, I think there remain significant gaps in our understanding of this global constitution. There simply does not exist, for example, a narrative that highlights the historical linkages that would bind together the six seemingly disparate thinkers quoted in my epigraphs, as I do here. The extent and specificity of how ideas about global life constituted the history of Euro-American thought still require further exploration, and so do the complex ways in which thinkers from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere were part of this same global conversation. In calling the object of this study the “modern self,” I follow recent critics like Gary Wilder and Shu-mei Shih, who register this fact of a shared—if violently different—history of the modern world.⁷

This book thus speaks to both the traditional and the postcolonial versions of intellectual history. It also works to show both of these traditions why they should engage seriously with Buddhist thinkers. To do so, I have demonstrated how some of the canonical Euro-American thinkers of the modern self—such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G. W. F. Hegel, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—formed their major ideas in the crucible of international relations. In *reconstituting* this global history, I thus continue to pry open the canon and show how the question of global self-making is at the heart of even the most Eurocentric thinking. Europe, then, is not the founder of modernity, but is itself a reactive formation created in the face of global pressures.⁸ This in turn allows me to show how figures like W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and D. T. Suzuki are not outsiders to the Western tradition clamoring to make their voices heard, but rather part of a single, shared, wildly uneven, and violent history of global self-making.

This basic reframing leads me to critically engage with a number of the leading thinkers in both critical and postcolonial theory across the breadth of this book. Too often, I find, even those who think about global concerns still place a deglobalized European philosophical history at the center of their theorizing. This happens either by locating the problems of the world solely in “Western metaphysics” or by “using” critical theorists to analyze global conditions without considering the global histories that

inform their theories in the first place. By suggesting that the philosophical history of modernity is a global one, I hope to push contemporary theorists to remap their critical analyses of the present. If the problem is not just Western metaphysics but more specifically particular ways of configuring global relations, then the proposed solutions will need to respond to these ideas about global life.

Essaying the Globe

Thinkers coming from such radically different times and places will of course produce different ideas about the global self, and that's the whole point: the history of the modern self is a pluralist history of attempts to make who we are adequate to the task of being global. I sometimes refer to taking up this task as "essaying the globe," in part because the writers I consider all worked in the essay form. They likely did so because the essay, as an attempt or trial that works through the many parts of an object, is a form ideally suited to trying to understand one's place in the extensions of the global. The challenge of these essayists was to understand the whole world from their limited position on it, and to do so not merely at the level of intellectual understanding, but also by transforming themselves into subjects at once humble and critical, at once local and far-flung, at once firmly directed and open to the wild contingencies of life. I follow an interconnected series of essayists who took up that challenge with greater and lesser success from Renaissance Europe to modern Japan and Senegal. I consider skeptics, rationalists, universalists, pluralists, revolutionaries, and mystics as they responded to each other (either with praise or critique) across five continents and four centuries. These thinkers were appalled by specialization and had no interest in limiting themselves to one country or century or genre or discipline. I follow their provocations to think so broadly in this book.⁹

To understand their relationship to the world, the whole world, and nothing less was their task. This was not hubris on their part (although some of their propositions are hubristic). Rather, they believed, as Cornelius Castoriadis put it, that theory should be "the always uncertain attempt to realize the project of elucidating the world."¹⁰ For Castoriadis, elucidation does not mean explanation; it means that we are constituted by forces outside ourselves (heteronomy), which we must work through in order to make them clear (lucid) and our own (autonomy). Essaying the globe is the difficult

practice of gathering up the fragments of the world that make us who we are and developing concepts and ways of life that can come to terms with this connectedness. The task of these writers was to make the unbearable mass of the world's impression on their souls something that they could come to shoulder. This essaying required them to turn fragments of others into some real understanding. They restlessly pursued as much knowledge about as many peoples and ideas and things as they could.

Still, the essay—in spite of the excessive praise it sometimes receives—is no perfect form, and it may be put to as many different ends as any other form.¹¹ In the chapters to follow, I look at five modes of global essay writing: skeptical (in which the essay leaves us in a state of doubt with regard to all given cultures), teleological (in which the essay tries to move us toward a singular, global vision), alternating (in which the essay enjoins us to move back and forth between different visions of the world without attempting to synthesize them into a single whole), revolutionary (in which the essay attempts to intervene in and transform a given reality—ideally through pluralistic alliances) and emptying (in which the essay seeks, through silences, nonsensical asides, anecdotes, repetitions, and other means, to undo the ego of the reader and provoke an enlightenment experience). A single essay can, of course, embody components of each, but most essays studied here tend toward one specific mode. Sometimes the essaying attempts led these writers to achieve understanding; sometimes they did not. That uneven progress is the history of essaying the globe.

While the book thus aims to present a rival account to the “Ancient Greece to modern Europe” framings of Taylor and Foucault, it does not share their ambition to tell a complete history of the present. To the contrary, my claim here is that such denials of one's own partiality are part of why we continue to have such skewed visions of the modern self. I do not think it is possible to exhaustively tell a history of the “sources of the self” precisely because those sources are so vast and global and mean different things for different subjects—and often, of course, for the same subject at different times in her life. Rather than attempting to synthesize some general movements like Taylor's disengaged reason versus Romanticism or Foucault's rise of biopower and loss of the practices of the self, I aim to show how different solutions were broached in response to the problem of what I call “unbearable identities.” These are the various ways in which global being overwhelmed the subject and made life for her intolerable. I do not pretend that the problem of “unbearability” is the *ur*-problem of the modern self or that my list of solutions (skepticism, universalism, pluralism,

revolution, aesthetics, mysticism) is exhaustive. I merely suggest it as one plausible narrative vocabulary for understanding how global connections have constituted and continue to constitute who we are. More specifically still, I suggest it as a way of understanding the strange and surprising history that will connect essay writers from Montaigne to Kant to Emerson to Du Bois to Senghor to Suzuki.

Unbearable Identities

Identities are understood here as how personhood is conceived and crafted in relation to the world. I am not particularly concerned—as Taylor is, for example—with whether the very idea of a deep, internal self is a unique invention of modernity. However one conceives of personhood—and we come across a great many differing conceptions here—what concerns me is how this diverse set of thinkers has conceived of what it means to be any kind of individual since the sixteenth century, when, as Sanjay Subrahmanyan tells us, the long-standing human fascination with cultural difference “crystallized around the idea of a world that had been ‘encompassed.’”¹² By this he means the realization that there were not just different people “out there,” but that we were all bound to eventually run into each other on this finite, “encompassed” sphere. My question is: How did our thinking about identity respond to this condition?

The answer I am suggesting here is that, quite simply, it became unbearable, and in several different ways. Of course the primary sense of this unacceptability was the exacerbation of the all too human will to dominate others. The focus of this study is in how this will interacted with other transformations of self-understanding. The first, such as we find in Montaigne, is when we realize that our inherited knowledges cannot bear the weight of these new connections. The kinds of identities one might once have sculpted—a Greco-Roman man of letters, for instance—do not have the resources to make sense of being alive in this new configuration. The Cartesian response to refind certainty in the self, which is supposed to be the founding of modern subjectivity, is thus in fact only its evasion. This did not mean, however, that engaging the global necessarily overcame the problem. Another path, such as we find in Kant, is a universalism that seeks to make sense of the situation by attempting to bear on its shoulders—or in its mind—a basic set of truths to govern the whole world. This, too, proves unbearable, and in two senses: first, because it is simply too much for any

one thinker or cultural system to bear the world's diversity, and, second, because in attempting to do so, one tends to impose unbearable demands on others to live up to one's ideals. This thus produces another kind of unbearable identity, such as we find negotiated in Du Bois: the unbearable burdens of having a degraded and often violently oppressed position within someone else's universal scheme. (This will in turn produce potential forms of self-essentializing, which I consider with Senghor, although I believe he ultimately avoids this self-imposed version of unbearability.)

Overcoming these primary forms of unbearable identities will produce other possible modes of subjectivity, including, on the conceptual side, a traditional pluralist way of both respecting and maintaining difference, and, on the more active side, the revolutionary subjectivity of attempting to overthrow the conditions of unbearable imposition. Indeed, without social transformations, practices of the global self fall back into mere changes in subjectivity that are equally incapable of bearing the needs of the modern world. Thus, while social change is not the immediate focus of this book, it is a crucial context that I discuss throughout. Traditional pluralism and revolution also each have their own constraints in turn: pluralism runs the risk of encasing others in static—if no longer denigrated—identities. And revolution, when it does not proceed through pluralistic alliances forged in deep organizing, may impose its rightful transformations in an unbearable manner.¹³

The final form of unbearability that is my focus here is that of mysticism. In this model, such as we find in Suzuki, unbearability is overcome through the negation of the very idea of a subject that is separate from the world. Only such separation, Suzuki suggests, lets one feel the world as other than oneself and thus as a possible burden to oneself. While this model may have great efficacy, it runs into a limit—one that Suzuki admits—when it has to deal with the difficult questions of everyday political choices in the face of human suffering. The mystical release simply cannot bear the burden of these demands.

In cataloguing these modes of unbearable identities throughout the book, I do not suggest that they are entirely flawed. There is within Montaigne's skepticism, Kant's universalism, Suzuki's mysticism, and so forth values that can be named and upheld as methods within themselves for overcoming the unbearability of global relations. And indeed, this kind of radically pluralist response, one that insists on the plurality of all ideas, peoples, individuals, and natures and thus can engage with different ways of being at different moments without dissolving into infinite particulars, is

what I suggest as the most fortuitous method of overcoming the unbearable identities found in this history.

Radical Pluralism

I later trace the roots of radical pluralism to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and W. E. B. Du Bois. The idea of radical pluralism is that plurality is not just between things, but within them as well. We all know that cultures have drastic differences within themselves and that individuals are hardly ever consistent. Nevertheless, cultural theory tends to minimize these internal differences in the name of “ideal type” analyses that can summarize a cultural moment. Our era as one globally saturated with neoliberal rationality is a good example. And indeed, critical theory requires our ability to demarcate cultural trends so as to be able to support or fight against them. Otherwise we are lost in the empty and muddled multiplicity of the present moment. We need to reconcile the demands of critique with the reality of internal and external difference.

There are of course a great many writers who have theorized individuals and cultures in these terms, and I have learned from each of them.¹⁴ However, I have often found that we lack the language to articulate both the reality of constituted entities (be they individuals or cultures or ideas) and the fact of their internal multiplicity. This leads to an ensuing failure of our critical vocabulary to be able to denounce those aspects of any entity that create unbearable conditions for others without denouncing the totality of that entity. To properly articulate this dual relation is the hope of a radical pluralism. It is “radical” in the etymological sense of the term—it goes all the way down to the roots (radicals) of things. There is no essential substrate to be found, only the ceaseless multiplicity of life. But it also insists that real entities, themselves plural, emerge from these infinitely plural roots, and these entities must in turn be ethically and politically negotiated. Thus it is also radical in the sense that it does not accept any given strata of a plurality simply because it exists. It demands that all strata of a society be accountable to the tasks of liberation in a globally connected world.¹⁵ In the ethical language of this book, that means that radical pluralism contributes to the overcoming of unbearable identities, and that it effectively does so is my argument in the chapters to follow.

The existence of concrete realities does not reduce those entities to singular traits. Radical pluralism posits that each resulting, worldly entity—

individual, society, nature—is made of infinite constituent parts. These constituent parts form concrete, conventional designations such as table, self, world. No such entities have an essence. (Readers of philosophical Buddhism will recognize the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality here, and I return in the chapter on Suzuki to the role of this philosophy in the generation of radical pluralism.) A table may be used as much for writing as for eating; a person may vacillate between fits of generosity and miserliness; the world may teeter between hope and apocalypse. Radical pluralists do not simply throw up their hands at this relativity, however. They analyze the ways in which entities congeal around specific nodes. Within each constitution there is a variety of strands, threads, voices. Each takes priority at different times—Emerson calls these “master-tones.”¹⁶ But there are also minor keys and unheard sounds. The trick, as we will see more deeply in Emerson, is to learn to move between these different sides both internally and externally and, furthermore, to see the world as this alternating complex with which our plural selves engage. It is this capacity of alternation that at once ensures and endangers progress, and the task of radical pluralists is to lend their weight to the elements of the world that overcome unbearability without, in the process, neglecting to encourage the freedom to be plural.

Traditional pluralism assumes that there are multiple ways of being in the world, and it sometimes suggests that “modernity” is the site of the mixing of these ways of being. Traditional pluralism tells us to be aware of the other ways of living, but the internal plurality of those other ways is not emphasized. It can thus become unbearable because, especially when coupled with dominating powers, it can force people into a prescribed role as much as universalism can. This was the case, for example, with South Africa’s terrifying Bantu Education Act (1953), which furthered apartheid by enforcing prescribed “tribal” rules for educating nonwhite South Africans.¹⁷ There are already many good theories of pluralism that have moved past traditional pluralism. In addition to classic works by William James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Hannah Arendt (and I would add Léopold Senghor to this list for reasons that may not yet be apparent to all readers), we might also include recent theorists like Richard Bernstein, William Connolly, Janet Jakobsen, María Lugones, Mariana Ortega, and James Tully.¹⁸ My point is not so much to disagree with these authors as to build on and extend their insights into the histories of global-self-making.¹⁹

The consistently pluralist approach I present here can be schematized in nine claims. First, that all cultures are within themselves plural, dynamic,

and not definable by a single essence.²⁰ Second, that every individual is plural within themselves because we are all made up a series of competing or complementary dispositions and desires. By combining these first two claims, we arrive at the third: that within a given culture, any individual has the capacity to move, or, as Emerson put it, “alternate,” between the different ways of being within a culture. (That freedom requires an openness to alternation is a theme that is especially evident in the sections on Du Bois, Fanon, and hooks.) Fourth, that the plural forms of life that come into being within one culture do not exhaust the totality of the ways of being. This is what requires us to engage with a plurality beyond the plurality into which we are born. Given that cultures have always mixed, it is rarely the case that there is an idea to be found in one archive that is completely absent in another, but there are certainly modes of life that have been deepened in one site or another. (We will see a version of this argument in Senghor’s aesthetics in chapter 3.) Therefore, fifth, that any individual who is open to it can alternate to another way of being outside of their own cultural space (where avoiding the risk of projection and appropriation requires great vigilance). Just as cultures and individuals grow, interact, and mutate, so do concepts, and thus, sixth, that concepts are themselves plural. Seventh, and related to this, that pluralism itself is plural. As we will see with Emerson and Du Bois, for example, different subjects in different times and places will develop different emphases in their articulations of pluralism. (They also sometimes need to ignore their plurality for political or personal reasons; I call these “strategic partialisms.”) Eighth, that all of these cultural mutations do not take place on a single substratum, Nature, but rather within the context of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “multi-naturalism,” or the idea that the world itself is plural.²¹ Finally, ninth, the concept of radical pluralism has appeared in different forms in different times and places. This does not make it eternal or a transcendental form of human life. It is a way of understanding the world and our place in it, and as those things both change, radical pluralism may itself disappear. I offer it here as a universal in the sense that radical pluralism intends all universal claims: as strategic partializations of ontology. This way of thinking about diversity calls on us to constantly negotiate the multiplicities that we are with the multiplicities that the world is. It is a difficult and never fully resolvable task, but it is the intellectual challenge posed by the plurality inherent in our lives.

If we apply this model to the idea of “the West,” for example, what we see is that “the West” is a real entity with historical power that has emerged through global constitutions. At the same time, we can appreciate

that its reality effects are plural and that they are received differently in different times and places and even differently by different subjects within the same time and place.²² Furthermore, we can appreciate the multiplicity of what has come to be within the West and the fact that different ideas were generated there, ideas that are worth finding and rearticulating.²³ The result, as I discuss in the context of Foucault below, is that our aim becomes less about “overcoming Western metaphysics” and more about overcoming certain versions of global life that were produced in the West (although certainly not only there—terrible ideas come from all corners of the globe).²⁴

To sum up: the claim here is that all entities are plural and global, constituted by the multiplicity of the world. Radical pluralism enables global subjects to overcome unbearable identities, for its practitioners are no longer trying to bear the burden of the world in a single vision, nor are they forcing others to have singular places within our schemes. Rather, they learn that they are always already sharing the burden of global being, and the task becomes learning how to share this better. The tragedy of life is that this sharing is not particularly easy either. But it is, at least, bearable.

Reconstitution

These epistemological and ethical claims about the plurality of existence are coincident with a historical methodology that I, following Said, call “reconstitution.” The aim of reconstitution is to show how constituted entities—like “the modern self”—were formed through a multiplicity of processes and interactions. Unlike a standard comparative method in which the givenness of two constituted entities is taken for granted and then each is analyzed (as in Erich Auerbach’s wonderful exposition of the differences in time consciousness between Greek and Hebraic forms of representation), the reconstitutive method begins by first showing how interactions across boundaries *produced* these entities in the first place.²⁵ It thus affirms that differences are real, but also that their reality is dependent on multiple factors. Unlike a dialectical method, which might seek the shared ground of these differences via a third category that unites them, or a deconstructive method, which might rest content with exposing the fact of mutual constitution, reconstitution thus aligns with a radically pluralist view of the world that holds reality and transformation together in a single vision.

Reconstitution shares a fair amount with what theorists like Jane Gordon, Michael Monahan, and Neil Roberts call “creolization” and what Shu-mei

Shih calls “relational comparison.”²⁶ I have used the term “reconstitution” for two primary reasons. First, because it leads more logically to a sense of maintaining difference than these other categories because of its link to what is “constituted.” Second, because I view this work as part of a tradition that uses Said’s thinking about mutual constitution to understand how concepts seemingly formed in only one place in fact have their origins in global interactions. A long tradition of scholarship has attempted to show precisely this constitutive role, including Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (1987), Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Susan Buck-Morss’s “Hegel and Haiti” (2000/2009), Peter van der Veer’s *Imperial Encounters* (2001), Sankar Muthu’s *Enlightenment against Empire* (2003), Antony Anghie’s *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (2004), Kevin Anderson’s *Marx at the Margins* (2010), Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacy of Four Continents* (2015), and Gary Wilder’s *Freedom Time* (2015).²⁷ But in spite of this extensive work, David Scott noted in 2010 that such claims still remain outside the mainstream accounts of European intellectual history: “It is not typically imagined that knowledges and institutions in these worlds [outside Europe] . . . might have had a role in the shaping of Europe and the discourses that *constitute* its cultural and philosophic identity.”²⁸ Part of my work here, then, is simply continuing to do the constitutive work that these other scholars have called for. But I also want to keep advancing the conversation through critical engagements with these critics. I thus hope to expand this field in several ways: by giving a broader narrative of this history of European thought in works stretching from Montaigne to Foucault; by taking up, revising, and disagreeing with some of the specific claims about these authors by previous global postcolonial critics; and by showing the connections between this constitutive history of European thought and its ramifications for how we understand American Transcendentalism, Africana thought, and modern Zen.

One example of these claims can be seen in the alternative history of dialectics that I trace across this book. Dialectical thought, of course, has been a critical resource for thinkers of the global since Hegel and Marx. The dialectical insight that history progresses through struggles generated by complex relations between self and other certainly speaks to how we might understand the modern history of global interactions. Recent critics including Buck-Morss, Timothy Brennan, and George Ciccariello-Maher have offered renewed visions of the power of dialectics for advancing radical critiques of philosophical traditions and our present conditions.²⁹ But while all of these works push dialectics beyond their Hegelian origins, and while Buck-Morss

and Brennan argue that Hegel frequently had colonialism on his mind, none of them argues that dialectics *itself*, as a way of understanding the world, was constituted in global interactions. For them the dialectic might have been *applied* to these interactions, but it was not itself formed in them.³⁰

But of course dialectics as a way of thinking does have origins. Most scholars would argue that those origins are in the science of the times (polarity and magnetism), or the history of Greek or Medieval philosophy. What I argue (in chapters 2–4) is that the very idea of the modern dialectic itself was (in part) constituted by geographic thinking. I trace a history of dialectics from Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre’s colonial ethnography into Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and then on to Schiller and Hegel. I show the specific ways in which dialectics developed through ideas about primitive life and how, simply by looking for it, we can see clearly the global origins of modern dialectical thought. Having established this history, I argue that key moments in the history of dialectics do not include just their Marxist revisions, but also the various refutations and reformulations of dialectical thought that we find in thinkers as diverse as Senghor, Fanon, and Suzuki.³¹

Rather than “deconstruct” dialectics, then, I reconstitute its history. And I am thus less interested in the ongoing debate in postcolonial studies between deconstruction and dialectics and more concerned to show how both of these philosophies were *themselves* formed in the modern history of global interactions.³² Nevertheless, throughout this book, I engage this debate as it occurs around some of the authors considered here and argue for why a radical pluralism that is aware of this constitutive history offers a powerful alternative route out of some of the impasses of contemporary criticism.

The other broad argument being advanced through the example of dialectics is that the history of thought is in part a history of geographic claims about how cultures can and should relate to each other, and that by ignoring this history we ignore the work of the theories themselves. As Linda Martín Alcoff puts it in a discussion of modern philosophy’s relation to colonialism: “If . . . the meaning of philosophy is simply the history of philosophy . . . then European philosophy does not understand what philosophy is because it does not understand its own history of philosophy.”³³ The aim of constitutive criticism is, following Alcoff, to make a stronger case for why the appearance of other cultures *matters* for the history of thought.³⁴ In the past few decades, several other methods have been used to understand the place of global cultures within the history of Western thought. Said, for example, focused on the *representation* of others

and how those representations went hand in hand with the political regime of colonialism.³⁵ Spivak, meanwhile, investigated the *rhetoric* of others, showing how admittedly marginal moments in texts create the conditions of possibility for their arguments.³⁶ Others asked what *resources* a thinker provides in spite of their hostile representations, as in, for example, recent works by Judith Butler on Levinas, or Brennan on Hegel, or Amy Allen on Adorno and Foucault.³⁷ All of these methods have a certain power and logic that I do not intend to dispute. My concern with them is that they allow us to continue to write and read as if these moments are discardable: “If our focus is not politics, why engage with representations?” “If this is just marginal rhetoric, then it does not touch the philosophy itself.” “If the resources are there, why does it matter what people actually said?” I believe that focusing more and more on questions of constitution can help rebut the logic of such questions. That is to say, we need to “rummage” back through intellectual history to reconstitute texts whose claims about others have been discarded.³⁸ In so doing, we can begin to reconstitute the canon itself, showing how these are not just matters of external representation, marginal rhetoric, or latent resources, but concerns at the heart of the texts themselves. Combined with a radically pluralist approach to criticism, this can also allow us to be up-front about what is problematic in theorists whose work in other domains we might appreciate.

Such a reconstitution does not work to determine once and for all the meaning of a concept or movement, but rather creates a narrative whose reconstruction shows the ongoing effects of these prior moments in our present. We constitute ourselves by reconstituting the forms that already inhabit our thinking. And in this reconstituting we also open ourselves up to new forms simply by following other possible implications that we might not, or even could not, have otherwise considered. Thus, for example, reconstituting the globality of Zen led me to need to reconstitute the globality of the European thought that preceded it. In turn, I have reconstituted a history that does not stretch from Rousseau to German and French critical theory, but rather from Rousseau to postcolonial critique and modern Zen.

Practices of the Global Self

This act of reconstitution thus forms a challenge to the history of critical theory. Critical theorists have often taken as their target some problem in “Western thought” whose overturning they view as central to new forms of

political liberation. This takes many forms, such as the framing of the world by technology and the “forgetting of being” in Heidegger (which I discuss in more detail in chapter 1), phallogocentrism and “the metaphysics of presence” in Derrida, biopower in Foucault, disembodied viewpoints in Haraway, the state of exception in Agamben, or neoliberalism for Wendy Brown. Across all the different diagnoses of how to name the failures of modern life, these thinkers all take as their central object of critique something whose origin begins in European thought. It is of course the case that all theories only diagnose an aspect of the problem, and most critical theorists would admit this. Still, there are moments, especially in the excessive concluding words of some of Agamben’s books, when it seems that theorists might just believe that overcoming a problem in the philosophies of Europe could bring about the revolution tomorrow.³⁹

But if the claims I make here, building on these traditions of reconstitution, have any value, then there must be something askew in this mode of critique. For, as van der Veer puts it, “[a] Eurocentric philosophical history . . . however brilliantly presented, ignores the importance of the global dimension of the issues it discusses.”⁴⁰ It is of course the case that in discussing global dimensions, one will equally miss some more specific and local issues, and I return to this problem below. My point here is not that the “truth” of our concerns lies in the global. Rather, it is that this work of reconstitution allows us to see problems otherwise obscured when the focus remains on supposedly internal European dynamics.

Throughout this book, my main example of what this change of focus could look like is with reference to the late work of Michel Foucault, whose research into what he called the “technologies” or “practices” of the self has been influential for my thinking about the global self. For Foucault, such practices mean that the truth is not available to us as we are, but that we must change who we are to be adequate to the tasks of truthful living. To be sure, becoming global requires transformations of the self; it requires us to become new kinds of subjects who can relate to global processes. Thus it requires us to develop practices (such as new forms of writing, new ways of thinking, and new practices of meditation) to enact those changes. Foucault, however, never once mentions such global transformations. Instead, he follows a standard Eurocentric trajectory, arguing that the rich practices of the self developed by Hellenic and Roman authors have been lost in modernity. I break with Foucault by arguing that what we witness in modernity is not so much a disappearance as a transformation: ancient techniques give way to modern practices of the global self. In other words, self-transformation

in the modern era is about making oneself the kind of subject who can overcome the unbearability of identity produced by global connections.

Foucault developed these ideas in his late work, especially in the lecture course “The Hermeneutics of the Subject.” In these lectures, he worked to understand what he called a transformation in the “history of truth.”⁴¹ He argued that philosophy seeks to know not what is true and false, but rather “the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to truth.” What Foucault found in his excavation was that there was a long tradition of “spirituality,” understood as “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth.”⁴² He argued that the modern era of this history—which he heuristically dubbed the “Cartesian moment”—began when spirituality split off from philosophy, and it was assumed that the subject, as she is, is capable of the truth without any work of transformation. We have enshrined “know thyself” above all and have forgotten how to care for ourselves.⁴³

Foucault wanted to excavate and reassert the importance of these lost “practices of the self,” but he found in the modern era a series of binds that limited such a reinvention: “I do not think we have anything to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self . . . I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental and politically indispensable task.”⁴⁴ This was, and remains, an urgent need for a number of reasons according to Foucault’s analysis of the functioning of power since the eighteenth century. In brief, Foucault was concerned that our analyses of political power had limited themselves to the question of the “juridico-discursive,” or the top-down legal institutions of a society.⁴⁵ He believed that these mattered, but also wanted us to turn our attention to the ways in which “power mechanisms . . . took charge of men’s existence, men as living bodies.” There we would see “new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique.”⁴⁶ Because power operates at the level of our existence, we must also confront it there by developing different techniques or practices of the self. This meant combating ossified notions of truth as they manifested in madness, criminality, or sexuality in Foucault’s early and middle works. In these late lectures, he began to focus on a more general theorization of the lost “relationship of self to self” through spiritual techniques.⁴⁷

We can see here the correspondence between Foucault’s analysis and his proposed solutions. Because he, like Agamben and Brown after him, focuses on transformations in Western social, legal, and economic formations, he

develops his solutions on these grounds. Indeed, Foucault is explicit about this: his concern is with a problem produced by “the set of phenomena and historical processes we call our ‘culture.’”⁴⁸ In spite of the scare quotes and the genuine sense that a “culture” is a complex and heterogenous assemblage of forces,⁴⁹ Foucault, whose analyses on so many other topics were dedicated to taking apart the presumptions he inherited, nevertheless believed strongly in this idea of “our culture.” Indeed, Foucault’s most famous analyses in many ways spring from an insight, recorded in the very first sentence of *The Order of Things* (1966), about the constrictions imposed on thought by Western methods of classification: “This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought bears the stamp of our age and our geography.”⁵⁰ It is only by isolating “*our* thought” as only one possible mode of thought that Foucault can name and describe it and thus find the leverage through which to pry it open.

Foucault’s enormous success in illuminating the systems of thought that undergird ideas of madness, of language, of sexuality, and of punishment, among others, shows that this is far from a futile task. Indeed, because “the West” *is* a constituted entity whose formation *is* in part through local and immediate concerns, such local analyses can of course produce tremendous results. But, as critics since at least Ann Stoler have pointed out in response to Foucault’s histories of the self, taking into consideration “a wider imperial context resituates the work of racial thinking in the making of European bourgeois identity.”⁵¹ Indeed, as historians of philosophy like Robert Bernasconi and Peter Park have shown, racist thinking was the primary reason why thinkers from outside Europe have been excluded from the canon of “philosophy,” and why someone like Foucault, constituted by global connections he did not fully grasp, would come to presume “the West” as “his culture.”⁵² Building on these scholars’ research, my argument here is that focusing the question of the practices of the self on their Greco-Roman roots ignores the very precise ways in which these practices were constituted globally. And if *part* of the modern self is a global self, then at least *part* of the solution to its problems must be sought in new forms of global relations.

What is ironic here is that Foucault himself seems to have known this. In his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978–79), for example, he was explicit that the eighteenth century saw the rise of “a new type of global calculation in European governmental practice . . . a new form of global rationality . . . a new calculation on the scale of the world.”⁵³ If part of the techniques of power were globally constituted for the past several centuries,

then it makes sense to say that Foucault should have devised practices of the self that were formed in this same, ongoing global constitution. And, in a sense, he in fact did. The Borges passage mentioned above, after all, references a “Chinese encyclopedia.” Throughout *The History of Sexuality* (1984), Foucault contrasts the “Western” approach to sexuality with those of other cultures. And, especially in the mid- to late 1970s, he began explicit and ongoing engagements with Zen Buddhism and what he called the “political spirituality” of the Iranian revolution.⁵⁴

However, when Foucault looked beyond the West, he did so not as a point of contact, but rather as a space of rupture. When he speaks of “political spirituality” in the context of Iran, he speaks of “this thing whose possibility *we* have forgotten since the Renaissance.”⁵⁵ And when he considers the possibility of comparative philosophy in dialogue with a Zen monk, it is only in its possible future birth: “if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or equally in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe.”⁵⁶ Foucault’s theorizing the loss of practice in the West while at the same time practicing global engagement is the fundamental irony of his study. Whereas he theorized that the West lost its spiritual practice and therefore had to locate spirituality elsewhere, I argue that *what happened to spirituality in the modern era was that it became precisely this global task. Modern subjectivity is not devoid of spirituality; it practices spirituality (for better and for worse) through attempts to make itself adequate to the globe.* The problem is not, or is not just, “our culture”; it is also how we relate to the world. Contemporary theory in general needs to understand this broader history in order to make more cogent interventions.

Several of Foucault’s excellent readers have similarly followed his partition between the question of globalism and the act of self-transformation.⁵⁷ Thus Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life* (2004), argues that we are in a moment “in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global community.”⁵⁸ She continues, “I confess to not knowing how to theorize that interdependency,” but then gives a very interesting theorization:

I would suggest, however, that both our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted in the recognition that radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part, that no final control can be secured, and that final control is not, cannot be, an ultimate value.⁵⁹

There would be reasons to question some of the terms of this statement, but that is not my present concern. Rather, what interests me is that this text appeared shortly before Butler's extended engagement with Foucault's late work in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005).⁶⁰ But although Butler had just the previous year called for a development of global subjectivity, this concern disappears from her account of self-transformation, and she accepts (or at least does not pause to question) Foucault's basic notion of "the West" as a tradition of thought that shapes certain people's subjectivity.⁶¹ The question of how one's subjective life is constituted globally thus does not, at this point in her work, get raised. This partition marks the history of critical theory in the present, even in thinkers as committed to global questions as Butler.

Some of the purpose of this book is to connect these two lines of thought through a long history of the methods used to theorize global interdependency and what that means for subjectivity. Foucault thinks that we can read a history of thinkers from Montaigne to Heidegger along the lines of attempted "practices of the self" that continually founder.⁶² We need to be able to have a new spirituality, but we are unable to define one. For Foucault, this is because of the regimes of disciplinarity and control and the discourse of science, and because we simply have not yet done what Foucault is attempting: to set out the explicit terms of the discourse.⁶³ Another problem, I am suggesting, is that we have not yet fully set these concerns within the actually existing geographic frame of modernity, that is, our fraught global condition. It is not that we do not have practices of the self in the modern era; it is that those practices are aimed at developing diverse modes of global subjectivity. To analyze the successes and failures of those practices, we must, at the very least, acknowledge their existence. Hence I have rewritten Foucault's historical stretch from Montaigne to Heidegger to that from Montaigne to Suzuki, globalizing each figure along the way.

A Partial History: The Narrative of this Book

A word on the choice of figures represented in this book. It might seem that the task I embark on—to trace the attempts at global subjectivity in a series of essay writers from Montaigne to Suzuki and his followers—is an impossibly ambitious project. To my mind, however, it remains unbearably parochial. Although this book is informed by the complex pasts of the