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GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK
b. 1942

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an unsettling voice in literary theory and, especially, postcolonial studies. She has described herself as a "practical deconstructionist feminist Marxist" and as a "gadfly." She uses deconstruction to examine "how truth is constructed" and to deploy the assertions of one intellectual and political position (such as Marxism) to "interrupt" or "bring into crisis" another (feminism, for example). In her work, she combines passionate denunciations of the harm done to women, non-Europeans, and the poor by the privileged West with a persistent questioning of the grounds on which radical critique takes its stand.

Her continual interrogation of assumptions can make Spivak difficult to read. But her restless critiques connect directly to her ethical aspiration for a "politics of the open end," in which deconstruction acts as a "safeguard" against the repression or exclusion of "alterities"—that is, people, events, or ideas that are radically "other" to the dominant worldview. She writes against the "epistemic violence" done by discourses of knowledge that carve up the world and condemn to oblivion the pieces that do not easily fit. Characteristically, she does not claim to avoid such violence herself; rather, she self-consciously explores structures of violence without assuming a final, settled position.

Spivak was born in Calcutta, India, and received her B.A. from the University of Calcutta. She came to the United States and completed her M.A. and Ph.D. in English literature at Cornell University, where PAUL DE MAN was one of her mentors. She has taught at various American universities, including the University of Iowa, the University of Texas, the University of Pittsburgh, and Columbia University. Her earliest important work was her introduction to and translation of JACQUES DERRIDA's *Of Grammatology* (1977), the first of his major books to be rendered in full into English. Spivak played a key role in introducing French "theory" into North American and British literature departments between 1975 and 1982. Almost from the start, she emphasized how deconstruction's interest in the "violence" of traditional hierarchical binary oppositions (between male and female, the West and the rest, etc.) afforded a passage from literary theory to radical politics. Spivak joined feminism's interest in silenced women to a Marxist global concern with the political, economic, and cultural oppression of nonwhite people. The result was a series of highly influential essays that helped set the agenda for feminism and for postcolonial theory in the 1980s and 1990s.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" may be Spivak's best-known essay; it is certainly her most controversial. First given as a lecture in 1983 and published in different versions in 1985 and 1988, Spivak offers a greatly expanded revision (more than one hundred pages) in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). Our selection offers three sections from this revised version, beginning with the sentence in which Spivak poses a central concern: "the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow." Her essay insists "on marking [critics'] positionality as investigating subjects." Postcolonial critics, like many feminists, want to give silenced others a voice. But Spivak worries that even the most benevolent effort merely repeats the very silencing it aims to combat. After all, colonialists often thought of themselves as well-intentioned. Spivak points to the British outlawing of *sati*, the Hindu practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. While this intervention saved some lives and may have given women a modicum of free choice, it also served to secure British power in India and to underscore the asserted difference between British "civilization" and Indian "barbarism." Hindu culture was driven underground, written out of law, denied any legitimacy. Can today's intellectuals avoid a similar condescension when they represent the oppressed?

Spivak articulates her reasons for her worries in the first part of our selection, applying MICHEL FOUCAULT's understanding of "epistemic violence" to the "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other." Foucault views intellectual power as functioning discursively to produce the very subject over which it then exercises mastery. Of course, no discourse succeeds in obliterating all alternative discourses. Intellectuals have frequently tried to create counterdiscourses that contest the dominant discourses, with the hope of connecting with the oppressed's own acts of resistance. Spivak sees postcolonial studies as a new instance of this attempt to liberate the other and to enable that other to experience and articulate those parts of itself that fall outside what the dominant discourse has constituted as its subjecthood. She asks whether such work can succeed. Can—with or without the intervention of well-intentioned intellectuals—the "subaltern" speak? Her blunt answer is no.

A subaltern, according to the dictionary, is a person holding a subordinate position, originally a junior officer in the British army. But Spivak draws on the term's nuances. It has particularly rich connotations for the Indian subcontinent because the Anglo-Indian writer Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) so often viewed imperialism from the ambivalent position of the subaltern functionary in the complex colonial hierarchy, caught between detested superiors and feared "natives." The Italian Marxist theorist ANTONIO GRAMSCI later applied the term to the unorganized masses that must be politicized for the workers' revolution to succeed. In the 1980s the Subaltern Studies Group (a collective of radical historians in India with whom Spivak maintains ties) appropriated the term, focusing their attention on the disenfranchised peoples of India. The "subaltern" always stands in an ambiguous relation to power—subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity. "One must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous," declares Spivak. Can this difference be articulated? And if so, by whom?

Because subalterns exist, to some extent, outside power, theorists and advocates of political transformation have consistently looked to them as a potential source of change. Marxists speak of and for the proletariat, feminists of and for oppressed women, and anticolonialists of and for third world peoples. In part, Spivak is reacting against the persistent tendency of radical political movements to romanticize the other, especially against the notion that third world peoples must lead the fight against multinational global capitalism. To assign them that role is to repeat colonialism's basic violence, which views non-Europeans as important only insofar as they follow Western scripts. Furthermore, when most of the power resides in the West, why should the least powerful of those caught up in globalization be responsible for halting its advance? Finally, Spivak points out that the suggestion that all third world peoples stand in the same relation to global capitalism and should respond to it in the same way is "essentialist."

Essentialism names the belief that certain people or entities share some essential, unchanging "nature" that secures their membership in a category. In the 1980s, essentialism was the target of much feminist criticism because activists recognized that generalizations about "woman" inevitably exclude some women. One response was "difference feminism," which stressed alliances among women across their differences and hoped to replace a solidarity based on shared essential qualities and experiences. Spivak's landmark contribution to this debate was the concept of "strategic essentialism." In some instances, she argued, it was important *strategically* to make essentialist claims, even while one retained an awareness that those claims were, at best, crude political generalizations. For example, feminists must publicize "the feminization of poverty"—the ways in which employment practices and wages, divorce law and settlements, and social policies ensure that in many societies women make up the majority of poor adults. Of course, many women are not poor, and poverty has causes other than an individual's sex, but to battle effectively against the

poverty of some women requires the strategic essentialism of highlighting the gendered nature of economic inequality.

Leftist intellectuals who romanticize the oppressed, Spivak argues, essentialize the subaltern and thus replicate the colonialist discourses they purport to critique. To replace this leftist fantasy of an untouched or essential purity lodged in a particular group, Spivak reminds us (citing Ranajit Guha, a founding member of the Subaltern Studies Group) that a person's or group's identity is relational, a function of its place in a system of differences. There is no true or pure other; instead, the other always already exists in relation to the discourse that would name it as other.

But does the differential position of otherness afford it some resources it can use to articulate its singularity, its nonidentity with power? Spivak seems doubtful; her historical and political analysis describes Western capitalism and colonialism as triumphant. The whole world is now organized economically, politically, and culturally along the lines of Western discourses. Although those discourses are not perfectly aligned, their multiplicity generally reinforces rather than undercuts the marginalization of nonwhite peoples and the dual marginalization of nonwhite women. Given this bleak picture, Spivak turns (in the second part of our selection) to SIGMUND FREUD in an effort to develop an appropriate model of intellectual work.

Freud furthers the analysis of colonialism by helping us see how the very identity of whiteness itself is created in part through the self-proclaimed benevolence of colonial action. More important, he implicitly cautions us against scapegoating or, conversely, creating saviors. Spivak's "sentence"—"White men are saving brown women from brown men"—serves to justify colonial interventions if white men are taken as saviors and brown men are scapegoated as oppressors (of brown women). A postcolonialist discourse could just as easily scapegoat white men, with the inevitable consequence of presenting either brown men or brown women as the saviors. Spivak thinks that Freud (as both a positive and a negative example, since he himself didn't always avoid scapegoating) can aid us to keep the "sentence" open, to explore the dynamics of the unfolding human relationships without foreclosing narratives by assigning determinate roles. She remains leery of any attempt to fix and celebrate the subaltern's distinctive voice by claims that the subaltern occupies the position of victim, abjected other, scapegoat, savior, and so on. The critic must remain attentive to the fluidity of possible relations and actions. Spivak's discussion of Freud is offered not "as a solution" but "in acknowledgment of these dangers" of interpreting and representing the other.

Neither Freud nor Spivak is silent. They each make various determinate claims and, Spivak says, reveal their "political interests" in those claims. As intellectuals, both are at home (although their belonging is qualified by Freud's being Jewish and Spivak's being a nonwhite women) within the dominant discourse. The subaltern is not similarly privileged, and does not speak in a vocabulary that will get a hearing in institutional locations of power. The subaltern enters official and intellectual discourse only rarely and usually through the mediating commentary of someone more at home in those discourses. If the problematic is understood this way, it is hard to see how the subaltern can be capable of speaking.

In the third part of our selection, Spivak offers yet a further twist. She tells the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide not as an example of the Indian woman's inability to speak within Western discourse, but to show that Indian discourse has been so battered by the storms of (colonial) history that it, too, offers no resources for successful communication. Bhubaneswari's suicide is misunderstood by everyone, including her own family—and no one in India seems interested in Spivak's return to and reinterpretation of the event. "Unnerved by this failure of communication," Spivak wrote her "passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak!" Fifteen years later, Spivak comments: "It was an inadvisable remark."

What scraps of comfort has Spivak unearthed in the meantime to challenge her

first, despairing conclusion? She has reminded herself that "speaking" always occurs within the nexus of actions that include listening, responding, interpreting, and qualifying. One's words can be taken up in any number of possible ways. The ongoing effects of an utterance, not its singular expression or any one response, produces its character as a speech act. Much of the point of revisionist history, of returning to scenes of domination and oppression, is to reactivate attempts at speaking that other forces tried to obliterate and keep from having effects. In revisiting Bhubaneswari's suicide, Spivak makes it speak in new ways. To deny that this retelling is a form of speaking would be to hold on to a criterion of "authenticity" that runs counter to Spivak's whole argument about identity. The historian who tries to recover the past should sketch "the itinerary of the trace" that the silenced subaltern has left, should mark the sites where the subaltern was effaced, and should delineate the discourses that did the effacing.

Spivak remains wary of all representations, even while accepting that the opening of "a line of communication" is "to be desired" and "allows us to take pride in our work without making missionary claims." On theoretic and ethical grounds, she insists that any system, any discourse, inevitably excludes something, and she will "reserve" the word *subaltern* to point toward "the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space." She very much wants the "traces" of those exclusions to haunt us. In every utterance, she urges us to hear the faint whisper of what could not be said. And she asks us to be ready to change our current discourse for a new one that would get closer to what the old one leaves unspoken—although the new discourse will have its own silences. This attunement to the unheard is what Spivak, following the philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal, calls "moral love."

A persistent complaint against Spivak, aside from her difficult style, is that she leaves us no place to stand. Her political pronouncements are unambiguous, but she steadfastly refuses to advocate solutions beyond an openness to the other that can appear vague, undiscriminating, and indeed theatrical. To continually dismantle one's own assumptions seems itself an act of privilege, a deconstructionist's luxury that few can afford, especially those who have to make decisions here and now (a point somewhat conceded by Spivak in her concept of "strategic essentialism"). As an antidote to complacency, however, Spivak's work is exemplary. She never lets anyone, including herself, smugly assume that he or she is on the side of the angels. Her restless probing is unsettling, but invigorating. Like the stranger whose name is "trouble," she shakes things up and gets them moving. No topic is ever quite the same or quite so easy after Spivak has come through town.

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From A Critique of Postcolonial Reason

From *Chapter 3. History*

[CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?]

* * *

In the face of the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow, a possibility of political practice for the intellectual would be to put the economic "under erasure," to see the economic factor as irreducible as it reinscribes the social text, even as it is erased, however imperfectly, when it claims to be the final determinant or the transcendental signified.[1]

Until very recently, the clearest available example of such epistemic violence[2] was the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity. It is well known that Foucault locates one case of epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, in the redefinition of madness at the end of the European eighteenth century.[3] But what if that particular redefinition was only a part of the narrative of history in Europe as well as in the colonies? What if the two projects of epistemic overhaul worked as dislocated and unacknowledged parts of a vast two-handed engine? Perhaps it is no more than to ask that the subtext of the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism be recognized as "subjugated knowledge," "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity."[4]

This is not to describe "the way things really were" or to privilege the

1. This argument is developed further in Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 154–75. Once again, the *Anti-Oedipus* did not ignore the economic text, although the treatment was perhaps too allegorical. In this respect, the move from schizo- to rhyzo-analysis in *A Thousand Plateaus* was not, perhaps, salutary [Spivak's note]. Some of the author's notes have been edited, and some omitted. Spivak here argues against regarding the economic as all-powerful *or* as negligible; instead, the economic factor has a discernible impact on society and its discourses (the "social text"). In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the French philosopher GILLES DELEUZE (1925–1995) and the French psychoanalyst FÉLIX GUATTARI (1930–1992) argue for a model of knowledge patterned not on plants with roots (as is traditional) but on fungal rhizomes, which lack centralized control or structure; their earlier *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) critiques both orthodox Marxism and institutional Freudianism. Earlier in her book, Spivak faults them for ignoring sociohistorical specificities, an omission that leads them to posit an essentialized psychological "subject of desire" in place of a historically constituted subject.

2. That is, the forcible replacement of one structure of beliefs with another: the term is borrowed from the writings of the French philosopher and historian of ideas MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926–1984), who meant by *episteme* (literally, "knowledge"; Greek) the underlying structure of knowledge and beliefs during a historical period.

3. See Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965), pp. 251, 262, 269 [Spivak's note].

4. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 82 [Spivak's note].

narrative of history as imperialism as the best version of history. It is, rather, to continue the account of how *one* explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one. A comparable account in the case(s) of Central and Eastern Europe is soon to be launched. To elaborate on this, let us consider for the moment and briefly the underpinnings of the British codification of Hindu Law.

Once again, I am not a South Asianist. I turn to Indian material because I have some accident-of-birth facility there.

Here, then, is a schematic summary of the epistemic violence of the codification of Hindu Law. If it clarifies the notion of epistemic violence, my final discussion of widow-sacrifice[5] may gain added significance.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Hindu Law, insofar as it can be described as a unitary system, operated in terms of four texts that "staged" a four-part episteme defined by the subject's use of memory: *sruti* (the heard), *smriti* (the remembered), *sāstra* (the calculus), and *vyavahāra* (the performance). The origins of what had been heard and what was remembered were not necessarily continuous or identical. Every invocation of *sruti* technically recited (or reopened) the event of originary "hearing" or revelation. The second two texts—the learned and the performed—were seen as dialectically continuous. Legal theorists and practitioners were not in any given case certain if this structure described the body of law or four ways of settling a dispute. The legitimation, through a binary vision, of the polymorphous structure of legal performance, "internally" noncoherent and open at both ends, is the narrative of codification I offer as an example of epistemic violence.[6]

Consider the often-quoted programmatic lines from Macaulay's infamous "Minute on Indian Education" (1835):

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.[7]

The education of colonial subjects complements their production in law. One effect of establishing a version of the British system was the development of an uneasy separation between disciplinary formation in Sanskrit studies and the native, now alternative, tradition of Sanskirt "high culture." In the first section, I have suggested that within the former, the cultural explanations generated by authoritative scholars matched the epistemic violence of the legal project.[8]

Those authorities would be *the very best* of the sources for the nonspecialist

5. Suttee (from the Hindu *sati*, literally "devoted woman"), the Hindu custom of a widow's being cremated on the funeral pyre of her husband.

6. That is, the British Empire's imposition of "binary vision" in place of the existing set of beliefs, the "polymorphous" Hindu Law.

7. Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education," in *Selected Writings*, ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 249 [Spivak's note]. Macaulay (1800–1859), English historian and statesman.

8. In suggesting that the organization and production of knowledge within academic disciplines acts with and reinforces more overtly political and legal accumulations of power, Spivak follows Foucault.

French intellectual's entry into the civilization of the Other.[9] I am, however, not referring to intellectuals and scholars of colonial production, like Shastri,[1] when I say that the Other as Subject is inaccessible to Foucault and Deleuze. I am thinking of the general nonspecialist, nonacademic population across the class spectrum, for whom the episteme operates its silent programming function. Without considering the map of exploitation,[2] on what grid of "oppression" would they place this motley crew?

Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, Aboriginals, and the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat. According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World,[3] under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) and mutatis mutandis the metropolitan[4] "third world feminist" only interested in resistance within capital logic, the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here) *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*

We have already considered the possibility that, given the exigencies of the inauguration of colonial records, the instrumental woman (the Rani of Sirmur) is not fully written.[5]

Antonio Gramsci's[6] work on the "subaltern classes" extends the class-position/class-consciousness argument isolated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.[7] Perhaps because Gramsci criticizes the vanguardistic position of the Leninist intellectual,[8] he is concerned with the intellectual's rôle in the subaltern's cultural and political movement into the hegemony. This movement

9. I have discussed this issue in greater detail with reference to Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Urizen, 1977), in "French Feminism in an International Frame," in *In Other Worlds*, pp. 136–41 [Spivak's note]. KRISTEVA (b. 1941), Bulgarian-born French philosopher and psychoanalyst.

1. Mahamahopadhyaya Shastri (active 1920s), described by Spivak earlier in the chapter as a "learned Indianist, [and] brilliant representative of the indigenous elite within colonial production.".

2. That is, the map of the colonized non-Western world, a map absent from Western thought.

3. The highly industrialized (largely Western) nations in a global economy, which dominate the "underdeveloped" countries of the "third world," many of which are former colonies.

4. Of or pertaining to the "mother country," as distinguished from its colony.

5. In an earlier chapter, Spivak discusses at length how the British in 1815 prevented the widow-suicide of the widow of the deposed leader of the province of Sirmur, arguing that their intervention was based on a misunderstanding of Hindu practice, served the British's administrative needs in Sirmur, was conducted with an almost parodic British reverence for "legality," and completely obscured the Rani's motives and wishes.

6. Italian Marxist (1891–1937; see above), best-known for his notions of "cultural hegemony" (the manufactured consent that legitimates a dominant group and unifies a society) and the "organic intellectual" (someone, regardless of profession, who directs the ideas and aspirations of the particular social class to which he or she "organically" belongs). In his *Prison Notebooks* (published 1948–51), he applies the word *subaltern* to the proletariat.

7. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), an analysis by the German social, economic, and political theorist KARL MARX (1818–1883) of the dictatorship (later emperorship) declared by President Louis Bonaparte of France in 1851. Spivak argued earlier in her text that Marx explores the "gap" between "class-position" (a group's location in the economic relations of production) and "class-consciousness" (a group's ability to represent to itself the interests that stem from its class position).

8. That is, the position of the Russian revolutionary V. I. Lenin (1870–1924), contrary to Marx's own theory, that the proletarian revolution must be led by a vanguard (i.e., the Bolsheviks).

must be made to determine the production of history as narrative (of truth).[9] In texts such as *The Southern Question*, Gramsci considers the movement of historical-political economy in Italy within what can be seen as an allegory of reading taken from or prefiguring an international division of labor.[1] Yet an account of the phased development of the subaltern is thrown out of joint when his cultural macrology[2] is operated, however remotely, by the epistemic interference with legal and disciplinary definitions accompanying the imperialist project. When I move, at the end of this essay, to the question of woman as subaltern, I will suggest that the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency.[3]

The first part of my proposition—that the phased development of the subaltern is complicated by the imperialist project—is confronted by the "Subaltern Studies" group.[4] They *must* ask, Can the subaltern speak? Here we are within Foucault's own discipline of history and with people who acknowledge his influence. Their project is to rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation. This is indeed the problem of "the permission to narrate" discussed by Said.[5] As Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of the collective, argues,

> The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism . . . shar[ing] the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness—nationalism—which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions, and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings—to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas.[6]

Certain members of the Indian elite are of course native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous.

Against the indigenous elite we may set what Guha calls "the *politics* of the people," both outside ("this was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter") and inside ("it continued to operate vigorously in spite of [colonialism], adjusting itself to the conditions prevailing under the Raj[7] and in many respects developing entirely new strains in both form and content") the circuit of colonial

9. That is, a way of seeing the world shared by those individuals won over to the hegemonic view.
1. Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, trans. Pasquale Verdicchio (West Lafayette, Ind.: Bordighera, 1995) [Spivak's note].
2. Prolonged discourse.
3. That is, by colonial and postcolonial economic and political arrangements that place women and men at odds with one another.
4. A group of radical historians in India—in particular, the editorial collective of the annual publication *Subaltern Studies* (founded in 1982)—who worked to recover the struggles of the poor independent of elite nationalism and to reconstruct peasant consciousness.
5. Edward W. Said, "Permission to Narrate," *London Review of Books*, February 16, 1984 [Spivak's note]. SAID (b. 1935), Palestinian-born American theorist of postcolonialism and political activist.
6. Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies* 1 (1982): 1 [Spivak's note].
7. British colonial rule in India.

production. I cannot entirely endorse this insistence of determinate vigor and full autonomy, for practical historiographic exigencies will not allow such endorsements to privilege subaltern consciousness. Against the possible charge that his approach is essentialist, Guha constructs a definition of the people (the place of that essence) that can be only an identity-in-differential. He proposes a dynamic stratification grid describing colonial social production at large. Even the third group on the list, the buffer group, as it were, between the people and the great macro-structural dominant groups, is itself defined as a place of in-betweenness. The classification falls into: "dominant foreign groups," and "dominant indigenous groups at the all-India and at the regional and local levels" representing the elite; and "[t]he social groups and elements included in [the terms "people" and "subaltern classes"] represent[ing] *the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the "elite."*[8]

"The task of research" projected here is "to investigate, identify and measure the *specific* nature and degree of the *deviation* of [the] elements [constituting item 3] from the ideal and situate it historically." "Investigate, identify, and measure the specific": a program could hardly be more essentialist and taxonomic. Yet a curious methodological imperative is at work. I have argued that, in the Foucault-Deleuze conversation, a post-representationalist vocabulary[9] hides an essentialist agenda. In subaltern studies, because of the violence of imperialist epistemic, social, and disciplinary inscription, a project understood in essentialist terms[1] must traffic in a radical textual practice of differences. The object of the group's investigation, in this case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite—is a *deviation* from an *ideal*—the people or subaltern—which is itself defined as a difference from the elite. It is toward this structure that the research is oriented, a predicament rather different from the self-diagnosed transparency of the first-world radical intellectual. What taxonomy can fix such a space? Whether or not they themselves perceive it—in fact Guha sees his definition of "the people" within the master-slave dialectic[2]—their text articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility. "At the regional and local levels [the dominant indigenous groups] . . . if belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all-Indian groups *acted in the interests of the latter and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being.*"[3] When these writers speak, in their essentializing language, of a gap between interest and action in the intermediate group, their conclusions are closer to Marx than to the self-conscious naivete of Deleuze's pronouncement on the issue. Guha, like Marx, speaks of interest in terms of the social rather than the libidinal being. The Name-of-the-Father imagery in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* can help to emphasize that, on the level of class or group

8. Guha, pp. 4, 8 [Spivak's note].
9. That is, a vocabulary that champions difference and the undecidable.
1. In terms of a search for the "true" or "essential" voice of Indian resistance to the British.
2. As set forth by the German philosopher GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807; see above): he tells of two self-consciousnesses that confront each other and fight for mutual recognition. One wins the battle and the other loses, but each gets recognition and thereby identifies him- or herself through the eyes of the other.
3. Guha, 1 [Spivak's note].

action, "true correspondence to own being" is as artificial or social as the patronymic.[4]

It is to this intermediate group that the second woman in this chapter belongs.[5] The pattern of domination is here determined mainly by gender rather than class. The subordinated gender following the dominant within the challenge of nationalism while remaining caught within gender oppression is not an unknown story.

For the (gender-unspecified) "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary[6] has not been left traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?

My question about how to earn the "secret encounter" with the contemporary hill women of Sirmur[7] is a practical version of this. The woman of whom I will speak in this section was not a "true" subaltern, but a metropolitan middle-class girl. Further, the effort she made to write or speak her body was in the accents of accountable reason, the instrument of self-conscious responsibility. Still her Speech Act[8] was refused. She was made to unspeak herself posthumously, by other women. In an earlier version of this chapter, I had summarized this historical indifference and its results as: the subaltern cannot speak.

The critique by Ajit K. Chaudhury, a West Bengali Marxist, of Guha's search for the subaltern consciousness can be taken as representative of a moment of the production process that includes the subaltern.[9] Chaudhury's perception that the Marxist view of the transformation of consciousness involves the knowledge of social relations seems, in principle, astute. Yet the heritage of the positivist ideology[1] that has appropriated orthodox Marxism obliges him to add this rider: "This is not to belittle the importance of understanding peasants' consciousness or workers' consciousness *in its pure form*. This enriches our knowledge of the peasant and the worker and, possibly, throws light on how a particular mode takes on different forms in different regions, *which is considered a problem of second order importance in classical Marxism*."[2]

This variety of "internationalist Marxism," which believes in a pure, retrievable form of consciousness only to dismiss it, thus closing off what

4. That is, the Name-of-the-Father, a term used by the French psychoanalyst JACQUES LACAN (1901–1981) to refer to the father in the Symbolic realm (not a biological entity), which marks the child's entrance into language-based experience.
5. Bhunaneswari Bhaduri, discussed later in this selection.
6. That is, the history of its constitution as a subject—and hence the erasure of its heterogeneity—by epistemically violent discourses.
7. That is, the contemporary equivalents of the Rani of Sirmur.
8. An allusion to the speech act theory of the English philosopher J. L. AUSTIN (1911–1960), who considered all the actions typically performed in speaking (here the reverse is suggested: an action serves as an utterance).
9. Since then, in the disciplinary fallout after the serious electoral and terrorist augmentation of Hindu nationalism in India, more alarming charges have been leveled at the group. See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 68, 194, 207–11; and Sumit Sarkar, "The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 30, 1993, pp. 163–67 [Spivak's note].
1. The sociopolitical program that takes knowledge and meaning to derive solely from what can be empirically observed.
2. Ajit K. Chaudhury, "New Wave Social Science," *Frontier* 16.24 (January 28, 1984), p. 10. Emphasis mine [Spivak's note].

in Marx remain moments of productive bafflement, can at once be the occasion for Foucault's and Deleuze's rejection of Marxism *and* the source of the critical motivation of the subaltern studies groups. All three are united in the assumption that there *is* a pure form of consciousness. On the French scene, there is a shuffling of signifiers: "the unconscious" or "the subject-in-oppression" clandestinely fills the space of "the pure form of consciousness." In orthodox "internationalist" intellectual Marxism, whether in the First World or the Third, the pure form of consciousness remains, paradoxically, a material effect, and therefore a second-order problem. This often earns it the reputation of racism and sexism. In the subaltern studies group it needs development according to the unacknowledged terms of its own articulation.

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced.[3] The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is "evidence." It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.

In the first part of this chapter we meditate upon an elusive female figure called into the service of colonialism. In the last part we will look at a comparable figure in anti-colonialist nationalism. The regulative psychobiography of widow self-immolation will be pertinent in both cases. In the interest of the invaginated spaces[4] of this book, let us remind ourselves of the gradual emergence of the new subaltern in the New World Order.[5]

* * *

I am generally sympathetic with the call to make U.S. feminism more "theoretical." It seems, however, that the problem of the muted subject of the subaltern woman, though not solved by an "essentialist" search for lost origins, cannot be served by the call for more theory in Anglo-America either.

That call is often given in the name of a critique of "positivism," which is seen here as identical with "essentialism." Yet Hegel, the modern inaugurator of "the work of the negative," was not a stranger to the notion of essences. For Marx, the curious persistence of essentialism within the dialectic was a profound and productive problem. Thus, the stringent binary opposition between positivism / essentialism (read, U.S.) and "theory" (read; French or Franco-German via Anglo-American) may be spurious. Apart from repressing the ambiguous complicity between essentialism and critiques of positivism (acknowledged by Derrida in "Of Grammatology as a Positive Science"[6]), it also errs by implying that positivism is not a theory. This move allows the emergence of a proper name, a positive essence, Theory. And once again,

3. I do not believe that the recent trend of romanticizing anything written by the Aboriginal or outcaste intellectual has lifted the effacement [Spivak's note].

4. An allusion to the *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) championed by the French feminist HELÈNE CIXOUS (b. 1937) and a description of Spivak's method, which folds together various arguments rather than laying them out in a linear progression.

5. A phrase coined by George Bush (b. 1924; 41st U.S. president, 1989–93) to describe what was needed after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe to replace East-West cold war rivalries.

6. A section of *Of Grammatology* (1967; trans. 1977 by Spivak), by the French deconstructive philosopher JACQUES DERRIDA (b. 1930).

the position of the investigator remains unquestioned. If and when this territorial debate turns toward the Third World, no change in the question of method is to be discerned. This debate cannot take into account that, in the case of the woman as subaltern, rather few ingredients for the constitution of the itinerary of the trace of a sexed subject (rather than an anthropological object) can be gathered to locate the possibility of dissemination.[7]

Yet I remain generally sympathetic to aligning feminism with the critique of positivism and the defetishization of the concrete. I am also far from averse to learning from the work of Western theorists, though I have learned to insist on marking their positionality as investigating subjects. Given these conditions, and as a literary critic, I tactically confronted the immense problem of the consciousness of the woman as subaltern. I reinvented the problem in a sentence and transformed it into the object of a simple semiosis.[8] What can such a transformation mean?

This gesture of transformation marks the fact that knowledge of the other subject is theoretically impossible. Empirical work in the discipline constantly performs this transformation tacitly. It is a transformation from a first-second person performance to the constatation in the third person.[9] It is, in other words, at once a gesture of control and an acknowledgement of limits. Freud provides a homology[1] for such positional hazards.

Sarah Kofman has suggested that the deep ambiguity of Freud's use of women as a scapegoat may be read as a reaction-formation to an initial and continuing desire to give the hysteric a voice, to transform her into the *subject* of hysteria.[2] The masculine-imperialist ideological formation that shaped that desire into "the daughter's seduction"[3] is part of the same formation that constructs the monolithic "third-world woman." No contemporary metropolitan investigator is not influenced by that formation. Part of our "unlearning" project is to articulate our participation in that formation—by *measuring* silences, if necessary—into the *object* of investigation. Thus, when confronted with the questions, Can the subaltern speak? and Can the subaltern (as woman) speak? our efforts to give the subaltern a voice in history will be doubly open to the dangers run by Freud's discourse. It is in acknowledgment of these dangers rather than as solution to a problem that I put together the sentence "White men are saving brown women from brown men," a sentence that runs like a red thread through today's "gender and development." My impulse is not unlike the one to be encountered in Freud's investigation of the sentence "A child is being beaten."[4]

7. An allusion to Derrida, one of whose important works is titled *Dissemination* (1972).

8. Process of meaning making, of producing signs. The "sentence," given below, is "White men are saving brown women from brown men."

9. In speech act theory, an utterance that describes a condition, fact, or state of affairs; in contrast, a performative utterance does something (e.g., saying, "I promise to . . ." makes a promise). By writing in the 3d person, Western scholars hide the performative nature of their work, which creates a particular way of seeing the "facts."

1. An example of similarity in structure due to similar development; like the scholars, the psychoanalyst SIGMUND FREUD (1856–1939) turned the performatives of his own 1st-person claims and his patients' appropriated 2d-person accounts into 3d-personal "empirical" statements of scientific "fact."

2. Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985) [Spivak's note].

3. A reference both to Freud's work on female hysteria (viewed as a symptom of frustrated sexual desire for a male authority figure) and to *The Daughter's Seduction* (1982), a book by Jane Gallop that describes feminist appropriations of Freud.

4. Freud, "'A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James

The use of Freud here does not imply an isomorphic analogy between subject-formation and the behavior of social collectives, a frequent practice, often accompanied by a reference to Reich,[5] in the conversation between Deleuze and Foucault. I am, in other words, not suggesting that "White men are saving brown women from brown men" is a sentence indicating a *collective* fantasy symptomatic of a *collective* itinerary of sadomasochistic repression in a *collective* imperialist enterprise. There is a satisfying symmetry in such an allegory, but I would rather invite the reader to consider it a problem in "wild psychoanalysis" than a clinching solution.[6] Just as Freud's insistence on making the woman the scapegoat in "A child is being beaten" and elsewhere discloses his political interests, however imperfectly, so my insistence on imperialist subject-production as the occasion for this sentence discloses a politics that I cannot step around.

* * *

A young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father's modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhubaneswari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered, in a letter she had left for her elder sister, that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself.

Bhubaneswari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. While waiting, Bhubaneswari, the *brahmacārinī*[7] who was no doubt looking forward to good wifehood, perhaps rewrote the social text of *sati*-suicide in an interventionist way. (One tentative explanation of her inexplicable act had been a possible melancholia brought on by her father's death and her brother-in-law's repeated taunts that she was too old to be not-yet-a-wife.) She generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny), in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male. In the immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity. The displacing gesture—waiting for menstruation—is at first a reversal of the interdict against a menstruating widow's right to immolate herself; the unclean widow must wait, publicly, until the cleansing bath of the fourth day, when she is no longer menstruating, in order to claim her dubious privilege.

In this reading, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc,

Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 17:175–204. For a list of ways in which Western criticism constructs "third world women," see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Mohanty et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 51–80 [Spivak's note].

5. Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957). Austrian psychoanalyst whose *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) exemplifies a radical attempt to psychoanalyze a whole society.

6. Freud, "'Wild' Psycho-Analysis," in *Standard Edition*, 11:221–27. A good deal of psychoanalytic social critique would fit this description [Spivak's note]. Freud warns against "wild" psychoanalysis that jumps to conclusions without the slow accumulation of information and the relationship between patient and therapist necessary for psychoanalytic treatment.

7. Female member of the Brahmin (upper) caste (Hindi).

subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide as much as the hegemonic account of the blazing, fighting, familial Durga.[8] The emergent dissenting possibilities of that hegemonic account of the fighting mother are well documented and popularly well remembered through the discourse of the male leaders and participants in the Independence movement. The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read.

I know of Bhubaneswari's life and death through family connections. Before investigating them more thoroughly, I asked a Bengali woman, a philosopher and Sanskritist whose early intellectual production is almost identical to mine, to start the process. Two responses: (a) Why, when her two sisters, Saileswari and Raseswari, led such full and wonderful lives, are you interested in the hapless Bhubaneswari? (b) I asked her nieces. It appears that it was a case of illicit love.

I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark.

In the intervening years between the publication of the second part of this chapter in essay form and this revision, I have profited greatly from the many published responses to it. I will refer to two of them here: "Can the Subaltern Vote?" and "Silencing Sycorax."[9]

As I have been insisting, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was not a "true" subaltern. She was a woman of the middle class, with access, however clandestine, to the bourgeois movement for Independence. Indeed the Rani of Sirmur, with her claim to elevated birth, was not a subaltern at all. Part of what I seem to have argued in this chapter is that woman's interception of the claim to subalternity can be staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogeneous circumstances. Gulari[1] cannot speak to us because indigenous patriarchal "history" would only keep a record of her funeral and colonial history only needed her as an incidental instrument. Bhubaneswari attempted to "speak" by turning her body into a text of woman / writing. The immediate passion of my declaration "the subaltern cannot speak," came from the despair that, in her own family, among women, in no more than fifty years, her attempt had failed. I am not laying the blame for the muting on the *colonial* authorities here, as Busia seems to think: "Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'—section 4 of which is a compelling explication of this role of disappearing in the case of Indian women in British legal history."[2]

I am pointing, rather, at her silencing by her own more emancipated granddaughters: a new mainstream. To this can be added two newer groups: one, the liberal multiculturalist metropolitan academy, Susan Barton's[3] great-granddaughters; as follows:

8. In Hindu mythology and religion, one of the many forms of Devi (the divine mother goddess). She is a warrior, often represented with 8 or 10 arms; each hand holds the special weapon of the other gods.

9. Leerom Medovoi et al., "Can the Subaltern Vote?" *Socialist Review* 20.3 (July–September 1990): 133–49; and Abena Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique*, no. 14 (winter 1989–90): 81–104 [Spivak's note]. Spivak's original essay was "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

1. The family name of the Rani of Sirmur.

2. Busia, "Silencing Sycorax," p. 102 [Spivak's note].

3. The daughter whose mother refuses to acknowledge her as her own in Daniel Defoe's

As I have been saying all along, I think it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting, in order precisely to be more effective in the long run. Our work cannot succeed if we always have a scapegoat. The postcolonial migrant investigator is touched by the colonial social formations. Busia strikes a positive note for further work when she points out that, after all, I am able to read Bhubaneswari's case, and therefore she *has* spoken in some way. Busia is right, of course. All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception. That is what speaking is.

I acknowledge this theoretical point, and also acknowledge the practical importance, for oneself and others, of being upbeat about future work. Yet the moot decipherment by another in an academic institution (willy-nilly a knowledge-production factory) many years later must not be too quickly identified with the "speaking" of the subaltern. It is not a mere tautology to say that the colonial or postcolonial subaltern is defined as the being on the other side of difference, or an epistemic fracture, even from other groupings among the colonized. What is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks?

In "Can the Subaltern Vote?" the three authors apply the question of stakes to "political speaking." This seems to me to be a fruitful way of extending my reading of subaltern speech into a collective arena. Access to "citizenship" (civil society) by becoming a voter (in the nation) is indeed the symbolic circuit of the mobilizing of subalternity into hegemony. This terrain, ever negotiating between national liberation and globalization, allows for examining the casting of the vote itself as a performative convention given as constative "speech" of the subaltern subject. It is part of my current concerns to see how this set is manipulated to legitimize globalization; but it is beyond the scope of this book. Here let us remain confined to the field of academic prose, and advance three points:

1. Simply by being postcolonial or the member of an ethnic minority, we are not "subaltern." That word is reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space.
2. When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony. Unless we want to be romantic purists or primitivists about "preserving subalternity"—a contradiction in terms—this is absolutely to be desired. (It goes without saying that museumized or curricularized access to ethnic origin—another battle that must be fought—is not identical with preserving subalternity.) Remembering this allows us to take pride in our work without making missionary claims.
3. This trace-structure (effacement in disclosure) surfaces as the tragic emotions of the political activist, springing not out of superficial utopianism, but out of the depths of what Bimal Krishna Matilal has called "moral

novel *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). The South African writer J. M. Coetzee uses Susan Barton as the narrator for much (but not all) of his retelling of the Robinson Crusoe story in his novel *Foe* (1987), a retelling that Spivak discusses at length in chapter 2 of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

love." Mahasweta Devi,[4] herself an indefatigable activist, documents this emotion with exquisite care in "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha."

And finally, the third group: Bhubaneswari's elder sister's eldest daughter's eldest daughter's eldest daughter is a new U.S. immigrant and was recently promoted to an executive position in a U.S.-based transnational. She will be helpful in the emerging South Asian market precisely because she is a well-placed Southern diasporic.

> For Europe, the time when the new capitalism *definitely* superseded the old can be established with fair precision: it was the beginning of the twentieth century . . . [With t]he boom at the end of the nineteenth century and the crisis of 1900–03 . . . [c]artels become one of the foundations of the whole of economic life. Capitalism has been transformed into imperialism.[5]

Today's program of global financialization carries on that relay. Bhubaneswari had fought for national liberation. Her great-grandniece works for the New Empire. This too is a historical silencing of the subaltern. When the news of this young woman's promotion was broadcast in the family amidst general jubilation I could not help remarking to the eldest surviving female member: "Bhubaneswari"—her nickname had been Talu—"hanged herself in vain," but not too loudly. Is it any wonder that this young woman is a staunch multiculturalist, believes in natural childbirth, and wears only cotton?

1983 1988, 1999

4. Indian author (b. 1925), who writes in Bengali; some of her work has been translated into English by Spivak. Matilal (1935–1991), Indian philosopher who taught at Oxford University for many years.

5. V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (London: Junius: Chicago: Pluto, 1996), pp. 15, 17 [Spivak's note].

GLORIA ANZALDÚA
b. 1942

Mexican American writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa self-consciously embodies the longings, critical consciousness, and contradictions of so-called identity politics. She both speaks from her perspective as a lesbian Mexican American *and* belies any simple categorization of individuals through their ethnic origins or sexual orientation. We are all mixtures, she insists, and she calls for a new *mestiza* (mixed or hybrid) consciousness to replace "the policy of racial purity that white America practices." Her work simultaneously celebrates and explores the difficulties of multicultural identity.

Anzaldúa comes from a seventh-generation Mexican American family that settled in the Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas. After her father died when she was fifteen, she worked as a farm laborer for a time to help support her family. The only member of her family with any education beyond high school, she received her B.A. from Pan-American University in 1969 and an M.A. in English and education from the University of Texas at Austin in 1972. After teaching at a high school for migrant