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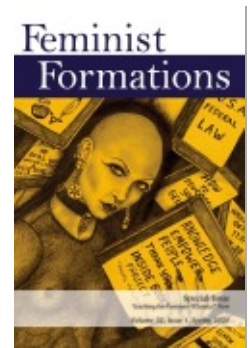
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“Can the Subaltern Speak” to My Students?

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is one of the most frequently assigned works of feminist, postcolonial theory in the Anglo-American academy. The essay, which was published in multiple versions beginning in 1983 and which contains nearly one hundred endnotes, is also widely understood to pose a tremendous challenge to students and teachers encountering it for the first time. It is, in short, a hard essay to teach. This article argues that feminist pedagogues must nevertheless strive to equip both undergraduate and graduate students with the critical tools and desire to read Spivak’s essay now, in the twenty-first century. It offers methods for approaching the text in the classroom and reflects on the author’s experiences teaching and studying the essay; it also references interviews with other teachers of the essay and offers provisional exegesis of some of Spivak’s arguments. The essay pays particular attention to Spivak’s titular question, arguing that the question itself has become a contribution to feminist scholarship.

Keywords: feminism / pedagogy / postcolonialism / Spivak, Gayatri C. / subaltern / theory

January 27, 2019. The longest government shutdown in US history had just ended. Around eight hundred thousand government employees had gone without pay, but Donald Trump was still throwing tantrums over funding for a US-Mexico border wall. The annual Women’s March was over, too; it transpired without fanfare, despite the fresh wound of Brett Kavanaugh’s appointment to the Supreme Court over the protests and pained testimony of sexual assault-survivor Christine Blasey Ford. In Virginia, schoolteachers were about to join the nationwide RedForEd walkouts to demand adequate, equitable pay and public-school funding. The forcible separation of migrant parents and guardians

from their children was ongoing. Worldwide, headlines were grim: ill-fated negotiations over Brexit; a flailing Congress Party struggling to rally an opposition to India's Hindu-fundamentalist ruling party; economic crises in countries including Zimbabwe and Venezuela; refugee crises in countries including Syria and Bangladesh; famine in Yemen; fatal floods in Indonesia; everywhere warming oceans, species extinction, ecological devastation, disappearing polar ice.

And I was on social media, avoiding the news. A post on “Academic Twitter” caught my eye. David Hollingshead, a postdoctoral scholar at Princeton, had tweeted that one of his skills is “summarizing ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ extremely efficiently on the fly.”¹ He posted screenshots of a text-message exchange with a friend:

“ok wait so what is the can the subaltern speak REALLY about,” the friend texted.

“i mean what was it about i totally forgot.”

Then, Hollingshead’s reply:

The first part is Spivak Reading an interview with Foucault and Deleuze where they fetishize the position of the subaltern as the site of an unmediated truth, then it discusses why Derrida’s seemingly “apolitical” interrogation of the space of enunciation Actually has better politics than F & D, then it offers an example of how claiming to speak on behalf of the subaltern or having unmediated access to their speech is often a form of colonialism in the case of the outlawing of sati, widow sacrifice, and it ends with an instance in which the widow, even when she “speaks” in the context of her act, can never do so “directly” or escape the problem of “representation” (darstellung and vertretung) [sic].

The post got 200 “likes” and 15 “retweets” and drew a number of appreciative comments:

“I would endorse this skill on your LinkedIn.”

“Damn. I wish you would have had this convo with your bud back before I took my orals.”

“I never understood it until now.”

Until Now

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” might be one of the most frequently assigned works of feminist theory in the Anglo-American academy. That is an educated guess, if not an empirical claim. As an undergraduate in Literature (2003–2007) and graduate student in Rhetoric (2009–2016), I was assigned the essay numerous times in courses on international feminisms, postcolonial studies, the institutional history of women’s studies, Marxism, South Asian Anglophone literature, and world literatures. I am using the word

“assigned,” as opposed to “taught,” deliberately, because, to echo the Twitter commenter, I’m not sure I understood the essay until recently either.

To be clear: my limited understanding had little to do with Spivak’s text, which, while dense and rigorous, can be made incredibly lucid. Indeed, Hollingshead’s tweet got my attention because it both captured the mythology around Spivak’s essay as impenetrable, and, with its easily digestible “summary” (notwithstanding small errors), gave the lie to such imaginings. The tweet caught my attention for another reason, too. As an English professor at a research university in the American Southwest, as one of few faculty here working explicitly on postcolonial theory, and because I am a woman of color and a South Asian Anglophonist and therefore, in Jennifer Nash’s (2019, 100) words, also expected “to perform and embody the analytic,” I’ve been asked multiple times to give guest presentations on the essay in other people’s classes. True to the dictum that the best way to understand something is to try to teach it, I realize now that I never totally grasped Spivak’s argument, despite all those classes in which I studied the essay, despite having written about it in my doctoral qualifying examinations, and despite being a PhD with a graduate certification in women’s studies. I have enough confidence in my education that this realization hasn’t just festered as imposter syndrome. But it has made me wonder if we can ever really “learn” an essay like “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Or, to ask the question from my professorial vantage, can the essay be “taught”?

If by “teaching” we mean fully explicating the essay’s historical contexts, theoretical intertexts, and arguments for students reading it for the first time (and here I’m primarily thinking of undergraduates), then, no, I don’t think the essay can be taught, nor is teaching “Can the Subaltern Speak?” our task. In what follows, I’m going to argue that we can, however, equip students with the critical tools and desire to read and reread the essay *now*, at the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century, in the Twitter-era of nonstop information-overload, in the often-apocalyptic-seeming end times of heightened ethnonationalisms, global climate crisis, and entrenched neoliberal finance capital.² For those of us teaching in the United States, the task is particularly crucial; we have made our institutional homes in a country that is aggressively curtailing the rights of immigrants, asylum-seekers, minorities, and women, that protects corporate speech over individual lives, that is dismantling public infrastructure against the desires of its citizens, and that has largely shirked its responsibilities to the rest of the world. It is our charge to teach students the work of thought: how to think hard and how to think about hard things. As Donna Haraway (2016, 47) writes, if we are going to be at all “response-able” to the present, “we must think.” We have to teach our students how to ask questions that might have many answers, or none. Spivak’s essay is where we start.

According to Google Scholar, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” has been cited over twenty-thousand times. This is almost certainly an underestimation, as there are volumes dedicated to the exegesis of this single essay. The most

significant is Rosalind Morris's 2010 edited collection, appropriately subtitled "reflections on the history of an idea", which gathers analyses by eminent scholars including Ritu Birla, Partha Chatterjee, Pheng Cheah, Drucilla Cornell, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. In her introduction, Morris notes that "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is about far more than its titular provocation. In just over thirty pages, Spivak takes on "the s/Subject of history, the [international division of labor], the contemporary relevance of Marxism, deconstruction, Asia, Europe, gender, [and] capitalism's worlding of the world" (Morris 2010, 1). The far-reaching nature of the essay accounts in part for its uptake across fields and disciplines, far beyond both the poststructuralist theoretical conversations into which it intervenes and the historical context of colonialism in South Asia from which it draws its examples. I am flagging the reach of the essay up front because, in what follows, I risk talking about the essay as if it starts and stops with its title. My References include a number of works that the interested reader-scholar can consult in order to better grapple with the intricacies of Spivak's essay, but the goal of the present discussion is more modest. I'm going to thrust the essay across a desk over a competing stack of books and media and hope that it lands. I am going to hold "Can the Subaltern Speak?" up to the light for any one of us who feels it would be easier to leave it behind in the 1980s—*too hard, better not to, will the students even get it?*—and dare each one of us to turn the page.

The Question

Can the subaltern speak? *Can the subaltern speak?* Consider the powerful rhetoric and mutability of those words, which have been revised, extended, and reworked so many times across the critical humanities and social sciences that you could organize an entire course around variations on the question across the disciplines. Week 1: "Who can speak?"; Week 2: "Can the subaltern speak?"; Week 3: "Silencing Sycorax"; Week 4: "How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other?" Then, in the following weeks: "Can the subaltern vote?"; "Can the subaltern ride?"; "Can the subaltern be seen?"; "Can the subaltern be heard?"; "Can the subaltern act?"; "Can the subaltern eat?"; "Can the subaltern shop?"; "Can the subaltern plan?"; "Can the subaltern teach?"; "Can the subaltern right wrongs?"; "Can the subaltern shout (and smash)?"; "Can the settler speak?"; "Can the thing speak?"; "Can the clinical subject speak?"; "Can the queen speak?"; "When the subaltern speak, what do they say?"; "Listening to the subaltern"; "Is the subaltern resilient?"; "The subaltern will never speak"; and "The subaltern can dance, and so sometimes can the intellectual."

With the exception of the questions on subaltern feeling, which come from José Esteban Muñoz (2006), I pulled these titles from a moment's search on Google (and there were many more pages to click through besides). I reproduce them here as initial evidence of the fact that Spivak's question has itself become a contribution to knowledge. The question—*can the subaltern speak?*—does

not simply prime or motor an argument; it *is* an argument. It does not simply set up the investigation that follows; the form of the question itself becomes a method of inquiry. It is both a point of departure and a point of arrival. It begs an answer; it begs two answers; there are many; there are none. As readers, we begin thinking with Spivak about whether or not there is a position of enunciation available to the subaltern, broadly construed. We end up asking the same question, but having wrestled with the limits and possibilities of its very premise. After Spivak, we may never be able to answer the question, but we do know that it's intellectually irresponsible not to ask.

"Can the subaltern speak?" is a field-clearing question. As Amitava Kumar (2000, 4) notes, multiple generations of postcolonial scholars have since "made their task the study of the politics of representing the Other. . . . There is now no escaping the questions 'who is speaking here, and who is being silenced?'" It is also a "teaching question," a question that is, in Saikat Majumdar's (2019) definition, "big and sweeping," that "drive[s] a passion for learning and provide[s] an understanding of the discipline in a historical capacity, even though it is hard to come up with answers that might add to our knowledge." I would argue that it is a worthy pedagogical task just to get our students to *hear* Spivak's question—to *really* hear it—and some of its reverberations. What constitutes an efficacious speech act? Who can speak for themselves, and who is spoken for by the other? Why and how am I speaking, and what authorizes my speech? What are the conditions of possibility for us speaking and learning together in this classroom? What do speaking, learning, and teaching have to do with power, desire, and interest? And how does Spivak's question prime us to take on the million-dollar concept that undergirds all artistic production and humanistic inquiry: representation?

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" begins with Spivak's critique of the "postrepresentationalist vocabulary" (1988, 254) of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, who argue that "the oppressed can know and speak for themselves" (247) and that "no theorizing intellectual can represent those who act and struggle" (242). At first, readers might be inclined to think that these are politically virtuous forms of refusal because, as we have often been told, "speaking for" someone else is a kind of violence. Well, yes, speaking "for" or "over" someone can be violent, but is it always?³ It is significant that Spivak reads Foucault's and Deleuze's claims alongside the famous line from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—"They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (244)—which also serves as an epigraph to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). For Said, the Marxist truism sets up his analysis of Orientalist philology's discursive construction of its Eastern Other, its modalities of "speaking for" that became an entire "school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples, and localities" (203). The promise of "self-representation" appears, at first blush, like a counter to this. But Spivak deconstructs the line and the passage in which it appears in Marx with recourse to the original German,

showing how Foucault and Deleuze run together the distinction between two forms of representation, *darstellen* and *vertreten* (representation as in art or philosophy, in the domain of ideology, as portrait; versus representation as speaking for, in the domain of politics, as proxy), “in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act, and know for themselves” (244).

For readers who are intimidated by or unfamiliar with French theory, it helps to remember that Foucault and Deleuze are not, in the final instance, Spivak’s target (though she delights in decentering them and highlighting the comparative political radicalism of Derridean deconstruction). They are simply stand-ins for knowers who valorize the subaltern as subject and fetishize the empirical reality of the oppressed other *over there*, which is to say, somewhere else. Such knowers want their marginalized, hitherto silenced others to know themselves, to know what they want, and to desire in accordance with their interests. Spivak quotes Foucault on this point—“the masses *know* perfectly well . . . they know far better than [the intellectual] . . . they certainly say it very well”—and Deleuze, who adds, “Reality is what actually happens in a factory” (241). Such rhetoric should be strikingly familiar to today’s readers, as it is characteristic of our contemporary political discourse. Reality, we are given to believe by the American media, is what happens in the Rust Belt, in flyover country, in the heartland, “in a factory.” During the 2008 election, for example, Republican candidates and conservative pundits argued that Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher, aka. Joe the Plumber, knew “far better” than the “intellectual” Barack Obama about small businesses and tax policy and a few other things besides. By that same token, and mindful that Spivak’s critique does not spare the left, wouldn’t we feminists love it if Trump’s white women supporters stopped voting “against their interests”?

Again, Spivak’s critique of Foucault and Deleuze is much bigger than Foucault and Deleuze, and it extends importantly to the historiographic project of subaltern studies.⁴ The philosophers claim that the oppressed “*can speak and know their conditions*” (Spivak 1988, 252); the historians are interested in recovering the “voice-consciousness” of the subaltern (255). But whether *letting* the other speak or *making* the other speak or assuming that if the subject were to speak her truth it would set her free and rewrite history, the point is that in neither case do we escape the discursive trap in which the subaltern not only does not have the agency to choose to speak, but also must speak in a way that is always already audible, legible, and recognizable to those who are passing her the proverbial microphone in the first place.

Pooja Rangan’s *Immediations* (2017) on contemporary humanitarian documentary is a generative intertext to introduce to students at this point. In readings of films like *Born into Brothels* (2004), which follows the children of prostitutes in Kolkata, India, and *Trouble the Water* (2008), which focuses on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Rangan argues that the conventions of popular documentaries that purport to “give voice” to subaltern subjects end

up restricting those subjects, delimiting their self-expression to very particular modes of preauthorized speech, and ultimately “regulating what does and does not count as human” (8). Though Rangan does not rely on Spivak to make her argument, I read *Immediations* as an extended response to “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Rangan’s questions are slightly different, though: Can the subaltern *not* speak? Does she have the right to remain silent? Can she be left alone? It’s no more virtuous to “let” or “make” the subaltern speak than it is to speak “for” her, Rangan argues in a Spivakian vein, because we only ever hear what we are primed to hear. Moreover, those who specifically attempt to retrieve the subaltern’s voice-consciousness—to translate autistic speech via subtitles and voice-overs, to give another one of Rangan’s examples—tend to ignore the voice she already has.⁵

The Answers

Can the subaltern speak? In the process of writing this piece, I found my first copy of Spivak’s essay; it’s a worn PDF printout of the 1988 version (more on versions of the essay shortly), and it’s covered with my original marginalia. I assumed the map of my first encounter with Spivak would be embarrassing, and in places it is, but it’s also quietly reassuring evidence that you can get quite a lot out of an argument even if it’s way beyond your comprehension. Ignorance, it turns out, is quite a teacher.

At the top of the first page, I’ve appended a question, so that the title reads, “Can the Subaltern Speak? . . . truth to power?” Not so far off the mark. Only now I better understand that “speaking truth to power” is insufficient if “power” is not willing or able to hear the truth. As Spivak herself has written, the politics of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is the “politics of demanding and building infrastructure so that when subalterns speak they can be heard” (2000a, xx). My college-self asked a lot of questions back to Spivak. In response to her rendering of the questions of the Subaltern Studies Collective (“How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?”), I’ve written, “Are these the questions we should be asking, too?”⁶ Then, there are others in the margins: “How is the West itself constructed?” “Does the Subject always establish itself by defining the Other?” “What is female agency versus how is it constructed?” I have circled key words and phrases that, in retrospect, are really key: “desire”; “interest”; “counterhegemonic ideological production”; “ideological subject-constitution”; “essentialist, utopian politics”; “epistemic violence of imperialism”; “imperialist subject-production.” In a section in which Spivak champions Derrida over Foucault and Deleuze, my college-self has drawn an arrow pointing back to doubly underlined text: “the PROBLEM: ‘masquerading as absent nonrepresenters.’” I’ve marked out the “CONCLUSION” with similar flourish: “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.”

What does the return to my university marginalia reveal? That reading for keywords can be incredibly generative. That asking questions of questions is potentially as productive as highlighting answers. That Spivak was guiding my thinking through texts I hadn't heard of, never mind read. It also, however, reminds me that I spent a long time laboring under the misconception that Spivak is arguing that "the subaltern cannot speak" because I only read one version of her essay. In fact, the essay is not one, and its provisional answer isn't either.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" was first delivered as a speech, "Power and Desire," in 1983. It was published in 1985 as "Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice" in the short-lived journal *Wedge*. A longer iteration appeared in the much-cited 1988 volume *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson. In 1999, the essay was revised and republished in the "History" chapter of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

In the course of this writing, I spoke with half a dozen colleagues in a range of public and private, research and liberal arts universities about their experiences teaching the essay. Five of the six reported teaching the 1988 version to undergraduates, over either one or two class sessions. The students to whom I was recently invited to present the essay had been given that version as well. It matters which version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is assigned, because Spivak explicitly revised a key part of the essay's argument between 1988 and 1999. The revision appears in her retelling of the story of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, which closes both versions of the essay.

Because Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri is often read as the exemplary "subaltern," I want to pause here for an overdue moment on that concept. Many definitions of "the subaltern" emerge implicitly and explicitly in Spivak's essay and appear in some readings of it: the working class, the peasant, the proletariat, the oppressed, the woman, the colonized, the silenced, the dominated, even the wretched of the earth. These are in some ways misleading near-synonyms, and commentators have frequently had to re-define Spivak's subject in the process of analyzing her essay. Eva Cherniavsky (2011, 157) defines the subaltern as "one whose agency is not legible within the field of the political—of political subject constitution—in which the investigator conceives his inquiry." Cheah (2010, 181) writes that the subaltern is "the name for a consciousness that exceeds and cannot be comprehended within the enclosure of disciplinary knowledge-production and intellectual activism because the traces of such a subject have been obliterated by the epistemic violence of colonial subject making through the codification of indigenous law and education." The latter part of Cheah's definition is significant, for before Spivak raises the question of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri's speaking, she investigates a specific instance of the construction of the colonized woman subject as sati. Sati is the nominally Hindu practice of "widow sacrifice," or self-immolation on the deceased husband's funeral pyre.

British colonial administrators sought to abolish the practice in India in the eighteenth century, but they first had to determine whether or not it was, in fact, codified by “Hindu law.” This was, Spivak shows through readings of legal and religious texts, an impossible thing to adjudicate, and in the process, the sati herself (“sati” being both a practice and the name for the woman-practitioner) was caught “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation . . . between tradition and modernization” (1988, 280). There is no space from which such a subject can speak, Spivak writes, because she can neither become sati nor reject sati outside of her discursive construction by Hindu patriarchy, on the one hand, and British colonial rule, on the other.

The above account is too quick, I know, and inadequate to the task of explicating Spivak (which I didn’t promise to do, I have to remind myself). But it is intended to suggest how we might get from the historical specificity of the sati to many of the contemporary instantiations of the sexed subaltern caught between tradition and modernization. The veiled Muslim woman, for instance. Nasia Anam told me that when she teaches Spivak’s essay, she emphasizes its transnational and transhistorical reach, drawing a line between the phenomenon of sati in British-colonized India and the anti-burqa fever, or *l’affaire du foulard*, that has fueled Islamophobia in France. Anam pluralizes the subaltern, describing for her students how Dalit women, Muslim women, Adivasi women, and others are all “doubly in shadow.” In the interest of connecting with her American students, Anam also relates Spivak’s argument—including the famous line, “Clearly, if you are poor, Black and female you get it in three ways” (1988, 266)—to Black feminist theorizations of intersectionality.⁷ “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation,” each of these figures, and I’m again quoting Spivak, “disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world-woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (280).

Back to Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri’s story as Spivak tells it in 1988:

A young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father’s modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuvaneshwari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself. (281–82)

Spivak first reads this story as a “subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide” (282). She acknowledges Bhuvaneshwari’s radical attempt to head off the likely reading of her suicide, but then notes that one of Bhuvaneshwari’s nieces nevertheless persisted in describing her suicide, many years later, as “a case of illicit love” (282). This misreading in part motors Spivak’s famous initial

conclusion: “The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read. . . . The subaltern cannot speak” (282–83).

In her response to the Morris volume, Spivak explains what drove her assessment in 1988: “I saw that, in two generations, women in the family had forgotten how to read her” (230). In the 1999 version of the essay, Spivak goes back to complicate her initial reading. Revealing that Bhuvanewari was her grandmother’s sister, Spivak explains that the failure to read does not mean that Bhuvanewari failed to speak. Describing her earlier conclusion as “inadvisable,” Spivak writes,

Bhubaneswari attempted to “speak” by turning her body into a text of woman/writing . . . I am able to read Bhubaneswari’s case, and therefore she *has* spoken in some way. . . . All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception. That is what speaking is. (64)

In 1988, “the subaltern cannot speak.” In 1999, “she *has* spoken in some way.” These divergent readings of Bhuvanewari’s story appear at first like negative and affirmative answers to Spivak’s titular question. But the answers are not at all mutually exclusive. By turning the question of whether Bhuvanewari can speak into a question about who was and is listening, who can be heard by whom, and what “valid institutional background” is required for resistance to “be recognized” (228), Spivak turns our attentions away from searching out the true, authentic voice of the subaltern and redirects us toward the problem of the subaltern’s construction, “the *mechanics* of the constitution of Other” (265). As Cherniavsky (2011, 159) puts it, “the subaltern subject’s muteness” is actually “our incapacity to hear from her what we do not already know to know.”

There are other differences between the versions of Spivak’s essay, and assessing each rephrase is beyond the scope of this discussion. To give just one more example, consider the move from “post-colonial intellectual” to “female intellectual” between 1985 and 1988.

Representation has not withered away: in spite of the heterogeneous information-retrieval about her, the monolithic subject assigned the proper name “Third World Woman”—consolidating a certain desire for the narcissistic Other—stands as evidence. The post-colonial intellectual—as *intellectual*—has a circumscribed task of recording this evidence, which she must not disown with a flourish. (1985, 131)

Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish. (1988, 283)

What might this revision tell us about the interdisciplinary rubrics within which Spivak was writing in the 1980s and through which her work was made legible? Does the move from “post-colonial” to “female” signal an expansion or

retraction of Spivak's target audience? In the second version, does she wish to increase the intellectual's task beyond "recording evidence" to something else, maybe the task of "un-learning our privilege as our loss" (1990, 9) or what she would later call "learning to learn from below" (2000b, 333)?

Spivak's revisions, big and small, present an invigorating pedagogical opportunity. For one, introducing students to multiple versions of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a way to guard against what Roanne Kantor described to me as the ironically "extractive" treatment the sophisticated essay often gets, "as if it were only a shell to hold the aphorism at the center, like a tootsie pop." Also, it is a rare thinker who has the intellectual integrity to change her mind and the audacity to display before readers the process of that change. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is an iconic text that was written relatively early in Spivak's career. As a result, there are numerous essays and interviews in which she reflects on her argument: its uptake, missteps, revisions, aspirations, and applications to an ever-moving present. These reflections have been deconstructed in turn, yielding what I take to be the most clarifying insight to date—namely that, to quote Cherniavsky (2011, 157), the proposition that "the subaltern cannot speak" was then and is now "a report on the condition of the intellectual." Because Spivak is still learning the lessons of her own foundational inquiry, we have the privilege of reading, learning, and unlearning beside her.

Changing Our Minds

What does it mean to change one's mind? The phrase is doubly resonant. To change one's mind is to change how one thinks about something, but to change one's mind is also to transform oneself.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a difficult essay to get through. It's theoretically dense and historically specific. Its prose is at times opaque. Put simply, it's hard. In the first draft of this essay, I wrote that we should embrace the essay's difficulty and teach it anyway, but I made the claim in an offhand way that risked reproducing the nefarious conventional wisdom that ethnic subjects are inscrutable, and that postcolonial, feminist, and critical theorists sacrifice political efficacy for jargon.⁸ That was not at all my point, and so I have been tempted in this revision to make the opposite claim: that the essay's arguments are evident, that the writing is plainly navigable and clear. But that's not right, either.

As a feminist pedagogue, I want to acknowledge that "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a challenge. It is a text that very few of us can read alone. We need others—teachers, writers, critics, scholars, fellow students—to read it with us, sometimes for us. We need each other; we need the classroom.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" demands humility, understanding, and patience. Unless you have a uniquely privileged group of students who have had substantial coursework in critical theory, Continental philosophy, and Marxism,

in addition to South Asian history and a reading knowledge of German, and so on, you should expect significant gaps in students' background knowledges. To mitigate this, Spivak's essay is often taught in "Introduction to Theory" courses, in which students can be primed with excerpts from Marx, Foucault, and Deleuze. Rangan was a teaching assistant for an undergraduate course on "Text, Media, and Culture" at Brown University some years ago; she recalls that Spivak's essay was assigned only after students had read Marx, Freud, Foucault, Saussure, and Benveniste. Even in such classrooms, however, you are teaching Spivak's elaboration of the subaltern to students who haven't read Antonio Gramsci. You are explaining her theorization of interests to students who have only read ten pages of Marx. You are undertaking the fraught elaboration of widow burning to students who know little South Asian history, never mind the disciplinary conventions of South Asian historiography. Spivak's Foucault may not sound to them like their Foucault, who may only be the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* (1975) or *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1976).

"I think that for undergrads, and even most graduate students, to tussle with Spivak on the grounds of theory is a fool's errand," Kantor told me. She consequently assigns "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in courses that are explicitly about situations of speaking, as in audiobooks and documentary film, and which lend themselves to an investigation of the titular question as both figurative and literal. Other literature professors I spoke to teach the essay without any theoretical prereading and alongside novels like Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Mahasweta Devi's *Hajar Churashir Maa* (1974; translated from Bengali by Samik Bandyopadhyay as *Mother of 1084*), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) in order to emphasize for students the dialectic between political and aesthetic representation.

Lest it sound like I am lamenting students' deficient backgrounds and prescribing ways to transcend "their" limits, let me state clearly that I am hyper-aware of the limitations I still bring to Spivak's text today. For example, I haven't read every text that Spivak cites, nor followed up with each of her ninety-two footnotes. I've read only part of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and a motley assortment of his other texts. I have never studied Sanskrit. I do not read or write in German. The crucial *darstellen* versus *vertreten* distinction that motors Spivak's first major argument is one I can only ever grapple with in translation. *Darstellen* versus *vertreten*; they are tropology and political representation for me; the specificity of the German is always eclipsed by the English gloss.

In *Unthinking Mastery* (2017), Julietta Singh credits Spivak with directing our "attention to the essential unmasterability of literature." Spivak's work, Singh explains, has enabled a critical "reframing of reading and teaching" as deconstructive practices that can "lead us toward our vulnerabilities" (22). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is not strictly a work of literature, but it, too, leads readers toward our vulnerabilities, tests us in ways we do not expect, and strives to open

us up to otherness and other ways of conceiving otherness. The essay demands that we adopt a pedagogical ethic consonant with that of Jacques Rancière's (2007) "ignorant schoolmaster," who ignores the inequality between teacher and student so as not to stultify the latter with avowals of her ignorance relative to the former's expertise. My deficits as a scholar heighten my attunement to the challenge students face when faced with an essay like Spivak's. After all, who among us only ever teaches texts over which we have total mastery, texts we are able to translate fluently into other languages, texts whose every reference and intertext we can speak to with unambiguous authority, which we can explain to students once and for always?

Speaking Together

I began this essay with a reference to January 27, but the date itself is irrelevant. It simply represents one conjuncture of contemporary speech acts—protests, testimony, consumption, tweets, and marked deaths—that I am arguing we are better equipped to grapple with in the wake of Spivak's classic essay. I am revising this paragraph on August 8, in the aftermath of the mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton and after the death of feminist literary giant Toni Morrison, who made the subaltern sing. In Mississippi yesterday, hundreds of parents were rounded up and deported during an unexpected ICE-raid, and images of sobbing, abandoned children are all over the indifferent news. I am writing this sentence on August 12, having just read about the Trump administration's plan to bar immigrant-recipients of government benefits from getting Green Cards and the most recent gutting of the Endangered Species Act. And this one on August 15, in the wake of the Indian government's sudden overturning of Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which outlined the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, and simultaneous imposition of a total communications blackout in the militarily occupied state. "The silence is the loudest sound," Arundhati Roy (2019) pointedly observed, adding that we must "wait for Kashmir to speak."

Can the subaltern speak? Now? Spivak's question sounds on.

But that's not where I want to leave things. In closing, I want to go back in time to the context of the essay's emergence, to the 1980s, to a period of tremendous intellectual fervor and production in feminist theory. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was and is in the company of a number of other classic essays and books I can't bear to relegate to the endnotes: Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1983); Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" (1984); Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984); Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987); Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987); Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989). And that, of course, is just the beginning of a list. I offer it as a reminder that when Spivak was problematizing the practices of "speaking for" and "making

speak” and advocating that we instead “speak to” the subaltern, Trinh was working to theorize a form of “speaking nearby” that “does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place” (qtd. in Chen 1992, 87). When Spivak was instructing us into a form of critical unlearning, Spillers was writing a history of racialized violence that would remake both gender and the human as analytic categories.⁹

In the preceding pages, I have tried to offer a range of points of entry into “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that might serve the contemporary student and teacher. In the process, I hope to have shown that what might seem on the surface in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” like a privileging of articulate speech was also always about embodied and relational communication, about bodies speaking and listening and seeing and struggling together. It is telling that in her introduction to *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999b, xi), Spivak specifically writes that her “book belongs on the same shelf” as that of other woman of color feminists and radical Black feminist thinkers. In thinking the construction of the subaltern and her intellectual, Spivak did not have to think alone. When it comes to teaching “Can the Subaltern Speak?” today, neither, happily, do we.

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Notes

1. Hollingshead’s tweet and the replies it garnered are available online from https://twitter.com/dee_bee_h/status/1089555467037224960.

2. It is ironic that Twitter, maddening exemplar of our digital public sphere, has become a space to discuss and absorb the lessons of an essay like “Can the Subaltern Speak?” A megaphone for some (that day, Trump was tweeting “fake news” accusations to nearly sixty-three million followers), Twitter is a black hole for most others: an echo chamber of personal ephemera, wry commentary, and undirected screams. There’s a whole lot of speaking, in other words, but no real guarantee that anyone is being heard.

3. For an instructive take on this question, see Alcoff 1995.

4. The Subaltern Studies Collective was founded in 1982 and included historians Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Gyanendra Pandey, as well as Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, and David Hardiman. Spivak was also a critical member and critic of this group and its intellectual projects. The goal of subaltern studies was to critique both colonialist and nationalist perspectives on South Asian historiography specifically and the historiography of colonized countries more generally. In particular, the elite subject of history was to be replaced by the subaltern. There are numerous readers and volumes that collect essays written by members of the Collective, many of whom have also written significant monographs. To begin, see Guha and Spivak (1988) and Guha (1997).

5. This paragraph borrows language from a longer essay in which I explore, among other things, the relationship between Rangan’s *Immediations* and “Can the Subaltern Speak?” See Srinivasan (2020).

6. While I was in the process of revising this essay, my friend, the philosopher-activist Chiara Ricciardone, invited my participation in a special forum for *The Philosopher* on the subject of “Questioning Power.” She asked me to write in response to the question, “What question should we be asking?” I have finished these thoughts on Spivak with her vital question in mind (again, it turns out!).

7. For a discussion of the way that the discipline of women’s studies understands the relationship between “intersectionality” as a Black feminist theoretical intervention and “transnationalism” as a woman of color (and more specifically South Asian) rubric, see Nash (2019), chap. 3. Curiously, Nash does not mention Spivak or “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in this chapter nor in her larger project. The omission is revelatory, I think, of significant fractures between the “transnational” and the “postcolonial” as knowledge projects: the former is rooted in feminist cultural studies, the latter in South Asian historiography and Anglophone literary criticism.

8. Spivak’s supposed inscrutability is by now so well-traveled a trope that the Irish novelist Sally Rooney uses her work as a knowing prop to describe the intellectual pretensions of college-age protagonist Frances in her 2017 *Conversations with Friends*: “Afterward I lay on my side with *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* propped half-open on the pillow beside me. Occasionally I lifted a finger to turn the page and allowed the heavy and confusing syntax to drift down through my eyes and into my brain like fluid. I’m bettering myself, I thought. I’m going to become so smart that no one will understand me” (90–91). Spivak has herself commented on such characterizations of her prose. Dinita Smith’s 2002 *New York Times* profile begins with Spivak ventriloquizing a routinized objection: “They have read Gayatri’s paper. . . . And they said they couldn’t understand it.”

9. For a critical essay that reads together Spivak and Spillers (among others), see Cherniavsky 1996.

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