

‘Their privilege is their loss’: Placing the intellectual in development theory and practice

Undergraduate Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with honors research distinction* in the undergraduate college at The Ohio State University  
by

Hannah McCandless

The Ohio State University

May 2015

Project Advisor: Dr. Joel Wainwright, Department of Geography

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>PART I: A SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE OF SPIVAK'S 'CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?'</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION TO SPIVAK</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>PART I</b>	<b>11</b>
POWER, INTEREST, DESIRE, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN FOUCAULT AND DELEUZE	12
REPRESENTATION AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS: MARX	19
THE INTELLECTUAL AS COMPLICIT IN SUBJECT CONSTITUTION	25
<b>PART II</b>	<b>27</b>
EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE VIA CODIFICATION OF HINDU LAW	27
DEFINING THE SUBALTERN	29
A FORMULA FOR ADDRESSING IDEOLOGY	32
THE SUBALTERN WOMAN IS DOUBLY IN SHADOW	33
<b>PART III</b>	<b>36</b>
EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND HYPERBOLIC ADMIRATION IN DERRIDA	37
THE 'BLANK PART OF THE TEXT'	40
<b>PART IV</b>	<b>41</b>
WESTERN FEMINISM AND THE SUBALTERN WOMAN	41
"WHITE MEN ARE SAVING BROWN WOMEN FROM BROWN MEN"	44
THE MOMENT OF ESTABLISHING 'GOOD SOCIETIES'	46
<i>SATI</i> AS SANCTIONED SUICIDE: READING THE DHARMASTRA AND THE RG-VEDA	48
THE SUBALTERN CANNOT SPEAK	56

**PART II: PLACING SPIVAK AND MYSELF IN CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT**

**PRACTICE** **58**

---

**‘WHITE MEN SAVING BROWN WOMEN FROM BROWN MEN’ IN A POST 9/11 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA.** **60**

**MY OWN (UN)LEARNING** **71**

**CONCLUSION** **77**

---

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** **80**

---

**REFERENCES** **81**

---

## **Abstract**

This study was born from an attempt to situate my own voice in development theory and practice following a year spent in Arusha, Tanzania. I struggled to justify a desire to address the needs of the poor within an ideological framework of postcolonial and Marxist theory. I turned to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1988 essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' which offers a critique of the role of the Western intellectual as representative of the subaltern. By examining the relationship between power, interest, and desire, Spivak submits that in attempt to critique the West as subject, certain Western intellectuals haphazardly reinforce it. As such, the subaltern cannot speak. Spivak calls particular attention to the plight of the subaltern woman and calls on female intellectuals to critique the positionality of Western intellectuals who attempt to transcend representation. One purpose of this study is to examine how a contemporary capitalist driven development agenda that aims to empower women suffers many of the same failings as the Western intellectual attempting to speak for the subaltern. Such efforts are examples of what Spivak calls 'white men saving brown women from brown men' through the establishment of 'good societies' in which good is conflated with Western. However, a more pressing purpose of this study has been to intentionally explore my own positionality as a Western female intellectual attempting to navigate my own potential contribution to development practice and theory. To address this problem, I offer a critical reading of Spivak's essay and reflect on the ways these concepts manifest in development practice, calling into consideration the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals as well as my experience working in the field in Arusha, Tanzania. I find, just as Spivak found for the postcolonial intellectuals, my privilege is my loss. I discuss the process of unlearning my own female privilege as I recognize that my femaleness is not enough to allow me to listen to and speak for the subaltern woman. Finally, I find that as a

female development theorist and practitioner, I must continuously strive to unlearn my female privilege in order to place my own desires, interests, and place of power as a white woman working in an industry that attempts to save brown women from brown men.

## Introduction

This project has come to fruition a rather circuitous way. It is the tangible product of a months' long study of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It is also a necessary reflection following a year studying and living in Arusha, Tanzania and in anticipation of a career in development theory and practice. Ultimately, this project is in many ways a culmination of my thinking and growing as an intellectual over the past four years at Ohio State University. I first encountered what I will call an 'alterative' lens to the study and critique international development discourse during the spring of my first year at Ohio State University in Dr. Joel Wainwright's "Geography of Development" class. (I use alterative as in alternative to the neoliberal discourse of traditional development theory and practice). I feel lucky that this particular class was my first formal class in development studies as it framed my approach to development over the three years that followed.

Over the past three years I have studied and engaged with Marxist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial texts about development. During the summer of 2014, I completed a study on Kalyan Sanyal's "Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality, and Post-Colonial Capitalism" in combination with Kojin Karatani's "The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange." I mention this project for two reasons. First, I find it worth mentioning that as someone who specializes in East Africa, the two texts that have been the most influential on my theory (Spivak and Sanyal) have been from Indian thinkers, not without consequence. Second, this project framed the theoretical mindset with which I entered a yearlong stay in Arusha, Tanzania.

Sanyal's book discusses what he calls "the wasteland" (Kalyan Sanyal) or areas of urban informal economic activity outside of, but necessary to, the capitalist machine. When I read Sanyal's work, I was planning to spend the academic year that followed in Nairobi, Kenya, a city where such informal spaces are commonplace. I had plans to conduct further investigation into the nature of informal markets in peripheral urban centers with Nairobi as my point of context. However, the security situation leading up to my departure resulted in a sudden cancellation and I had to scramble to make alternative plans to spend time elsewhere in East Africa. In the uncertainty, finding a location where I could best conduct my research was not a priority. I ended up in Arusha, Tanzania. Unlike Nairobi, Arusha is not a massive urban center. It is a semi-urban center with a population of a little over 400,000 people, compared to Nairobi's nearly 7 million residents. I quickly found that a study that attempted to explore informal economic spaces in urban centers would not be easily executed in Arusha. Perhaps it was kismet. Because without this large (and certainly important project) to occupy my time and thought, I found myself reflecting more on my own position in such a place. That is not to suggest that such a reflection would not have occurred in Nairobi, but the reality of life in Arusha provided a unique context. Arusha is the safari hub of East Africa. As such, there is a large ex-patriot population. There is also a palpable colonial legacy in the coffee industry. This is to say that for a city of its size, Arusha has an extremely high concentration of white residents, who also hold a enormous concentration of wealth, even more so than in other African urban and peri-urban centers. It was in this context that I found myself continuously questioning, "What am I doing here?" At different times, the "here" in this question might have referred to Arusha, Tanzania, the African continent, the developing world, this profession, etc. Suffice to say, such questions were not easily answered; and nine months in Arusha did not produce satisfactory answers. I returned to

the U.S. with more questions about the implications and necessity of my own voice in development theory and practice.

It was in the first days of being back that I was invited to participate in a reading group with other advisees of Dr. Wainwright to read Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In the chaos and whirlwind that comes with returning from a yearlong stay in another country, I did not have the time to dedicate to a proper reading of Spivak before our meeting. The morning of the discussion, I finally settled in to read Spivak. Suffice to say, the hour or two that I had dedicated to reading barely got me through the first section. In spite of this, I immediately recognized the importance of Spivak's essay, both in the field of postcolonial studies and for my own purposes of self-discovery. In light of this realization, I determined that the time that I could dedicate to writing a senior thesis would be best used to complete to an intentional reading, critique, and reflection on Spivak's essay; and so this project was born.

I offer this long and necessarily circuitous introduction because I feel obligated to show that the nature of this project is perhaps unique when compared to the traditional senior thesis. The production of this thesis was hardly orthodox, methodological, or organized. I read, I thought, and I wrote; and then I read, thought, and wrote some more, not necessarily always in that order. The purpose of this study was primarily to give myself a means of reflection on how my own positionality has informed my ideology and as a result, the way that I approach my work as both a critic and practitioner of development. In doing so, I have also found that there are implications of Spivak's essay beyond those that effect the individual female intellectual/practitioner. I find that the contemporary capitalist driven development agenda of female empowerment, not unlike

the colonial agenda of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ that Spivak explores, is motivated by a need to establish a ‘good societies’ in order to preserve the interests of the West. As such, the West is reconstituted as sovereign subject, and the subaltern, particularly the subaltern as woman, cannot speak. In light of this diagnosis, I find that it is the responsibility of the female intellectual and practitioner (like myself) to continuously strive to unlearn her own female privilege and recognize her own implication in ‘(white) *women* saving brown women from brown men.’

Before beginning, I offer a few points of clarification. Spivak’s essay has been one of the most controversial and important contributions to postcolonial theory to date. It is without a doubt one of the most well known pieces of Spivak’s work. She began formulating her argument in the early 1980’s, “when the now-familiar terms *postcolonial* and *colonial discourse analysis* were beginning to enter an academic vocabulary” (Jenny Sharpe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 610). The first version of the essay was published in 1983, however the more circulated version used for critique was published in 1988, which is the copy that I have used here.

A second point of clarification addresses the language which I use to discuss the parts of the world that have been referred to historically as the Third World, the Global South, the periphery, etc. The nomenclature that surrounds the division of the modern world could be a thesis in and of itself. Out of habit and convenience, I use the terms ‘developing world’ and ‘periphery’ interchangeably. As Spivak was writing in the 1980’s, she uses the term ‘Third World.’ So when quoting her, this terminology is used. I also frequently refer to the ‘West’ or ‘Western intellectuals.’ Though the division of the world into East and West is dated, the legacy of

Western intellectualism remains, and it is this strain of intellectual production that Spivak calls into question.

In the first section, I offer a summary and critique of Spivak's essay. The reader will find that this summary is necessarily lengthy. The most challenging and most important part of this project was coming to a deep and comprehensive understanding of Spivak's essay (as far as that is possible) and so I use the summary and critique of the essay to demonstrate and explore this understanding. This summary is broken into four parts, corresponding to the four parts of Spivak's essay. In the final section of this paper, I explore the implications of Spivak's essay for contemporary development practice that aims to empower women and girls and address how I understand these implications affect a female intellectual and practitioner of development, such as myself.

## **Part I: A Summary and Critique of Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'**

### **Introduction to Spivak**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian born literary critic. I approach an introduction of Spivak and her work with caution as she has frequently expressed objection to being placed or defined in any essential category of academic discourse. She has been called a Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist and the founder of postcolonial theory (to which she objected). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is likely the best known of her work (perhaps with the exception of her translation of Derrida's 'Of Grammatology') and has garnered much critique and controversy. The piece was first published in 1983, then revised in 1988, and then further revised in 1999. It is a dense and circuitous examination of the Western intellectual's role in the reconstitution of the West as subject and the silencing of the subaltern in contemporary intellectual production that unavoidably operates within global capitalism.

In this section, I have attempted to present a summary of Spivak's essay from behind a 'third wall' that separates the writer from the reader. I did so, not for the sake of the reader, but more for my own sake as I felt that the complexity of Spivak's essay first demanded that I separate my own voice from hers, allowing me to understand the piece in its entirety before offering a critique. However, as I have become familiar with Spivak's piece, I find that there are times that I am compelled to break that third wall and address my own critiques of Spivak's argument.

### **Part I**

In part I of her essay, Spivak examines power, desire, and interest and the ways in which they affect Western attempts to critique the West as subject. Spivak begins the first section of the

essay by claiming that radical intellectual attempts to displace the West as subject actually surreptitiously and unknowingly reconstitute the West as subject because doing so fulfills an unrecognized desire;

*Some of the most radical criticisms coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject.*

*The theory of pluralized “subject effects” gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge.*

*Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by the law, political economy, and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has “no geo-political determinations.” The much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject thus actually inaugurates a Subject (Spivak, 217).*

The ‘radical criticisms’ that Spivak refers to are the writings of some radical theorists; those who, as Spivak later points out, are “our best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other” (272). The certain intellectuals who seem the most dedicated to criticizing the West as Subject are complicit in reconstituting the West as subject. Generally, I find Spivak’s argument extremely compelling and find that her explication and analysis certainly proves her argument. I identify a handful of points throughout the sections that follow which I feel demand critique.

### **Power, interest, desire, and subjectivity in Foucault and Deleuze**

Spivak illustrates her argument by offering a critique of “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.”<sup>1</sup> This conversation captures an

---

<sup>1</sup> This conversation is printed in Michel Foucault’s *Language Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, printed in 1977. For the most part, I cite quotes from this work with their page numbers in the original text as well as the pages numbers in which they are used in Spivak’s essay. However, there are a few instances in which I feel that it is necessary to expand on Spivak’s argument by pulling for the original text, and these instances are cite accordingly.

exchange between Foucault and Deleuze in which they discuss, among other things, power, interest, and desire. Spivak offers a critique of Foucault and Deleuze's disavowal of the complicated networks of power, interest, and desire and their claims that the intellectual must attempt to "know the discourse of society's Other," which Spivak posits is impossible (272). The major points of criticism that Spivak identifies are Foucault and Deleuze's appropriation of Maoism and the workers struggle, their disavowal of ideology, and their fetishization of the concrete. For Spivak, these errors are rooted in an unrecognized desire to maintain the West as subject. Spivak also finds Deleuze's conflation of the double meaning of "representation" to be problematic, but this is explored later.

Spivak first points out that this particular attempt to critique the sovereign subject is presented via the appropriation of Maoism and the worker's struggle. These intellectuals have chosen these movements to name and place their voice while failing to recognize that in this appropriation, they simultaneously render the true owners of these revolutionary movements transparent.

*Intellectuals, however, are named and differentiated; moreover a Chinese Maoism is nowhere operative. Maoism here simply creates an aura of narrative specificity, which would be a harmless rhetorical banality were it not that the innocent appropriation of the proper name "Maoism" for the eccentric phenomenon of French intellectual "Maoism" and subsequent "New Philosophy" symptomatically renders "Asia" transparent (272).*

Spivak articulates a similar critique of Deleuze's claim that "every partial revolutionary attack or defense is in some way linked to the workers struggle" (Foucault and Deleuze, 217 qtd. in Spivak, 272). The unoriginality of Deleuze's claim signals a denial of his (read the intellectual's)

responsibility to adequately deconstruct the heterogeneity of power as such a statement ignores the international division of labor (which, Spivak notes, is typical of poststructuralists). To understand this criticism, we must deconstruct the worker's struggle and understand why ignoring the international division of labor is harmful. The worker's struggle, as theorized by Marx, addresses labor/capital relations within the industrialized core of the global economy. It is therefore, unable (in this simple usage) to capture the complexity of a global capitalist economy for several reasons. First, the workers' struggle is a class struggle. It does not account for a colonial history, which serves as the basis of Western capitalist hegemony. Furthermore, the worker's struggle in isolation cannot account for the peri-capitalist economies dominating the developing world, economies in which an overwhelming majority of economic activity lies outside of the capitalist space (Spivak, 272). So it is in the appropriation of such revolutionary movements that the post-structuralists are just as guilty of rendering the Third World transparent and reconstituting the West as subject as the structuralists they seek to criticize.

Spivak claims that the appropriation of the workers' struggle is driven by desire—a desire to destroy any manifestation of any power. This is illustrated by a passage in which Walter Benjamin comments on Baudelaire's critique of a passage in which Marx describes the “*conspirateurs de profession*,” who have “no other aim but the immediate one of overthrowing the existing government...their anger (is) not proletarian but plebian” (Benjamin, 12 qtd. in Spivak, 273). Spivak claims that Deleuze's appropriation of the worker's struggle is similarly rooted in a desire to be in opposition to power in all its heterogeneity.

Deleuze and Guattari use the following definition of desire as an alternative to that of psychoanalysis:

*Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is rather, the subject that is lacking in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject except by repression. Desire and its object are a unity: it is the machine, as machine of a machine. Desire is machine, the object of desire also a connected machine, so that the product is lifted from the process of producing, and something detaches itself from producing to product and gives a leftover to the vagabond, nomad subject ( Deleuze and Guattari, 26 qtd. in Spivak, 273).*

While this definition in itself merits an entire thesis, the reader is called to specifically note that such a definition implies that all desiring subjects are privy to the same desire machine; the nature of the subject is irrelevant. The ambiguity of the subject here is precisely what Spivak finds problematic. When the connection between desire and subject is taken to be irrelevant, the subject effect that emerges is much like the “generalized ideological subject of the theorist” (Spivak, 273). By positing the subject of desire as irrelevant, the theorist provides for an allowance for the subject of theory to become irrelevant, allowing himself to become the irrelevant subject of theory.

Deleuze and Guattari’s failure to acknowledge the “relationship between desire, power, and subjectivity renders them incapable of articulating a theory of interests” (273); they exhibit an “indifference to ideology” (273). To deconstruct this claim, we have to understand what is meant by desire, interest, and ideology. While Spivak is quick to criticize the definitions of desire

suggested by others, she does not present her own definition of desire or interest and ideology for that matter. (I find that this is harmful to reader and to her argument). However, I believe that in this context, desire refers to the deep wants and aspirations of an individual or a group. Interest, on the other hand, refers to what is advantageous to or to the benefit of a certain individual or group. While Foucault and Deleuze claim that interest always follows desire (Foucault and Deleuze, 215 qtd. in Spivak, 274), Spivak disagrees. Ideology is what connects desire and interest, but they are not necessarily correlated. In *The Politics of Interpretation*, Spivak defines a notion of ideology “as larger than the concepts of individual consciousness and will...Ideology in action is what a group takes to be natural and self-evident...It is both the condition willing and consciously choosing in a world that is seen as a background” (Spivak, “The Politics of Interpretations” 259). I would add that biography determines ideology. While the tangible components of one's identity and their place in society will determine interest, one's intrinsic experience determines desire. Spivak argues that in light of this definition, ideology plays a role in “reproducing the social relations of production” (274). The goal, for Spivak, is not to escape ideology (or avoid it as Foucault and Deleuze do) but to confront one's own place in ideological production and theorize accordingly. Ideology is the discursive context out of which a theory emerges, recognition of which is essential to a developed theory. And so, Spivak's critique of Foucault lies in his indifference to his “own material production in institutionality” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 274). He does not recognize the ways in which his desires and interests form his ideology. Spivak compares these philosophers to the “bourgeois sociologists who fill the place of ideology with a continuistic ‘unconscious’ or a parasubjective ‘culture’” (274). Foucault recognizes the heterogeneity of power but cannot acknowledge where it affects his own ideological production. “An undifferentiated desire is the agent, and power slips into

create the effects of desire: ‘power...produces positive effects at the level of desire--and also at the level of knowledge’...In the name of desire, (these philosophers) reintroduce the undivided subject into the discourse of power” (273). Ironically, Foucault states that power is “always exerted in a particular direction with some people on one side and some on the other” (Foucault and Deleuze, 213). As Spivak points out, such a statement in the midst of conversation in which the international division of labor is not examined signifies that Foucault (and Deleuze) have not (and perhaps cannot) generate a developed theory of their own ideology.

This is further illustrated by the ways in which Foucault and Deleuze come to the self-serving realization that the masses know and can speak for themselves and in turn fetishize the concrete experience of the oppressed. Deleuze references Foucault’s work with prisoners saying this: “It was on this basis that you organized the information groups for prisons (G.I.P), the object being to create conditions that permit the prisoners themselves to speak” (Foucault and Deleuze, 206). Foucault goes on to claim that through this experience he came to recognize that “the masses...know far better than (the intellectuals) and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves” (207).

Unfortunately, Spivak does not pull this quote in its entirety.<sup>1</sup> She leaves out the crucial language in which Deleuze establishes Foucault as subject: “*you organized* the information groups for prisoners...” (207, emphasis my own). In this supposed critique of the sovereign subject, Deleuze claims that the prisoners were *given* the conditions to speak for themselves *through the action* of Foucault as subject. The language of subjectivity and objectivity could not be more

---

<sup>1</sup> Spivak uses only this portion of the quote: “to establish conditions where the prisoners themselves would be able to speak...the masses know perfectly well, clearly...they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well” (Spivak, 274 quoting F&D, 206, 207)

clear; in this supposed critique of the Western intellectual subject, the masses are able to speak only via the action of the Western intellectual *as* subject! Here, I echo Spivak's question, "what happens to the critique of the sovereign subject in these pronouncements?" (Spivak, 274).

Deleuze goes on to claim, "Reality is what actually happens, in the factory, in a school, in barracks, in prison, in a police station" (Foucault and Deleuze, 212). Deleuze has thus deemed ideology unnecessary; if true reality can be grasped from the concrete experience of the oppressed, the theorist need only (re)present that concrete experience. Spivak notes that, not only does this statement "help the positivist empiricism--the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism" (Spivak, 275), it ignores that what is taken to be the concrete experience of the oppressed is *actually* the concrete experience of the intellectual who observes the oppressed and ultimately "diagnoses the episteme" (275). Deleuze and Foucault simply do not recognize that in these remarks they are reinforcing the very social divisions that they have set out to critique. When Deleuze valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, he implies that the power dynamics at play in global capitalism can be observed on the micro level of "what actually happens" on the ground. This is problematized later in the essay when Spivak claims that "the relationship between global capitalism (exploitation in economics...etc.) is so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power" (279). In other words, Deleuze's "reality" is not as such because the micrological experiences that comprise 'what actually happens' on the ground cannot be taken as manifestations of macrological phenomena. Ultimately, Spivak has identified the position of Foucault and Deleuze to be one "that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual" (275).

Spivak's critique of Foucault and Deleuze thus far is of their lack of self-awareness. Foucault and Deleuze have demonstrated that they are oblivious to three key errors:

- the ways in which their appropriation of Maoism and the workers' struggle ignore the international division of labor and thus render the Third World transparent
- the fact that by not recognizing their own implication in intellectual history they are unable to offer a valid critique of the sovereign subject
- and that by valorizing the concrete experience of the oppressed (but only in its presentation *through* the Western intellectual), they unknowingly reinstate themselves as Subject.

For Spivak, the intellectuals must present a developed theory of their own ideology (something I find Spivak does not really do). While efforts to 'invok(e) positionality' (271) may never suffice, the task of the intellectual is to re-present himself or herself rather than represent the oppressed by presenting themselves as transparent. It is this issue of representation that Spivak addresses next.

### **Representation and class consciousness: Marx**

It is in the context, in which the intellectual can erase the lines of the international division of labor and permit prisoners to speak for themselves, that Deleuze casually dismisses the notion of the intellectual as representative. "A theorising intellectual, for us, is no longer a subject, a representing or representative consciousness....Representation no longer exists; there's only action" (Foucault and Deleuze, 206). While Spivak recognizes Deleuze's point that the "opposition between...theory and...practice is made too quick and easy" (Spivak, 275), she finds his conflation of two meanings of representation to be problematic. In order to define and explore the double meaning of representation implied by Deleuze and to show the danger in their

conflation, Spivak turns to Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is an essay in which Marx explores the rise to power of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in France in the 1850's. Spivak focuses on Marx's explication of the ways in which the class struggle in France provided the conditions under which the peasants found in Bonaparte a representative.

Spivak uses a specific passage from Marx's to explore the dual meanings of representation and the related descriptive and transformative definitions of class. Marx uses the German *vertreten* and *darstellen* to differentiate between the two meanings of representation. *Vertreten* is "representation as in politics" (275). It literally translates to 'stand in', and refers to the act of representation in which a representative speaks for those whom they represent. *Darstellen*, is "representation as 're-presentation' as in art or philosophy" (275), a *re*-presentation of reality.

The descriptive definition used by Marx defines class in differential, "in so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that cut off their mode of life, their interest, and their formation from those of other classes and place them in inimical confrontation...they form a class" (Marx qtd. in Spivak, 276). This definition is purely descriptive; there is no sense of class instinct included. Class is presented as artificial and economic, and therefore class agency or interest must also be systematic. Spivak defends Marx by pointing out that he does not strive to produce in his definition of class an "undivided subject where desire and interest coincide" (Spivak, 276) because this descriptive definition, which provides us with a divided subject, creates room for representation. It is specifically *because* the definition of class is descriptive that the class needs a representative: "the (absent collective) consciousness of the

small peasant proprietors class finds its 'bearer' in a 'representative' who appears to work in another's interest" (276). And:

*The small peasant proprietors 'cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, as unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence (in the place of the class interest, since there is no unified class subject) of the small peasant proprietors therefore find its last expression (the implication of a chain of substitutions--Vertretungen--is strong here) in the executive force (Exekutivegewalt--less personal in German) subordinating society to itself' (Marx qtd. in Spivak, 277).*

The French peasants can't represent themselves because they lack a collective consciousness, so they find a representative (in Bonaparte) who necessarily holds power over them, in order to protect them from other classes (since other classes are, according to this descriptive definition of class, in opposition to one another). The political voice of the peasants, which replaces the nonexistent consciousness, is voiced through the power-bearing representative. In the act of representation (*vertreten*), the representative re-presents (*darstellen*) the interest of the class. There is a gap between represented and representative that takes the form of re-presentation of a nonexistent class-consciousness.

Similarly, the subaltern, or any descriptively defined class lacks a collective consciousness. As such, they cannot represent themselves, because there is no collective agency to be represented. Spivak finds that the Western intellectual thus takes it upon him or herself to represent the subaltern. In doing so the Western intellectual (like Foucault and Deleuze) presents themselves as transparent, not recognizing that by attempting to transparently represent (*vertreten*) the consciousness of the subaltern, they are *re-presenting* (*darstellen*) some interpretation of consciousness, because such a collective consciousness does not exist.

With this in mind we can better appreciate Spivak's critique of Foucault and Deleuze. By suggesting that the prisoners, the workers, etc. can know and speak for themselves, these intellectuals suggest that such groups can access a transformative group consciousness and then articulate it accordingly. Based on Marx's passage, we see that this is in fact not possible. The oppressed are defined by the essential categories into which they fall, not by their collective interest. The prisoners, workers, etc. make up 'the oppressed,' a group that is defined only by their lack of power. Such a grouping cannot account for the heterogeneity of those that fall into such a category. To be described as other, is to be defined in differential. There is no agency that can develop out of a group that is only defined by what it is not. The sheer heterogeneity of such a group prevents a transformative consciousness.

Deleuze is able to dismiss representation by running the two definitions (*darstellen* and *vertreten*) together. Under the conditions presented by Deleuze, representation is irrelevant and as such, "The critique of ideological subject-constitution...can now be effaced as can the active theoretical practice of the 'transformation of consciousness'" (Spivak, 275). In other words, if

there is no longer representation (as Deleuze claims), there is no use in critiquing subject constitution because there is no sovereign subject. There is no transformation of the consciousness of those who cannot act and speak because as Foucault says, they do not lack consciousness. For Spivak, this cry that the subaltern are self-knowing and can speak for themselves is unsurprising and unoriginal. For in doing so, the intellectual once again re-establishes themselves as sovereign subject by claiming that they do not re-present, but simply pass on, the concrete experience of the oppressed transparently,

*The banality of leftist intellectuals lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent... (the dual definitions of representation) are related, but running them together, especially in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act and know for themselves, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics” (Spivak, 275-276).*

Deleuze can claim that representation is dead because he does not understand what representation is in both of its forms and, as Spivak claims, it is this differentiation that critics should be critiquing.

This is not to say that class consciousness itself is irrelevant. Rather, for Marx, “class consciousness and the *transformation of consciousness* are discontinuous” (278, emphasis my own). In other words, there may be a collective interest of a given class, but it is not formed via a transformation (aggregation and abstraction) of the consciousness of those individuals who happen to fall into the descriptive category that defines a class. Accordingly, Spivak says:

*The development of a transformative class 'consciousness' from a descriptive class 'position' is not in Marx a task engaging the ground level consciousness...Full class agency (if there were such a thing) is not an ideological transformation of consciousness on the ground level, a desiring identity of the agents and their interest" (277). After all, a descriptive definition of class is "artificial' to begin with" (278).*

To attempt to gather some collective desiring consciousness from an artificially formed class, defined only in differential, would be appropriation. Marx himself is perhaps the best example of this. Marx's articulation of the class struggle did not emerge from a process of methodologically engaging with laborers to gather a concept of what their conditions were. On the contrary, Marx was able to observe and recognize the class struggle where even (perhaps necessarily?) the laborers themselves were not able to do so.

On this note, Spivak points out that even if concrete experience could be transformed into consciousness, it would not be able to capture the macrological (large, diffuse, heterogeneous, historical, and complex) nature of the nature of marginalization. The power relations at play in a global capitalist system are "so macrological that (they) cannot account for the micrological texture of power" (279). So rather than occupying ourselves with the ceaseless task of attempting to understand the nature of power 'on the ground' we should instead consider "theories of ideology--subject formations that micrologically...operate the interests that congeal the macrologies" (279). Thus the project of the critic is to examine how the conflation of the *darstellen* and *vertreten* presents a world in which the re-presentation of the concrete experience

of the subaltern is taken to be class consciousness articulated through the supposedly transparent and non-representing representative.

### **The intellectual as complicit in subject constitution**

By combining a notion of interest motivated only by desire “with the practical politics of the oppressed (under socialized capital) ‘speaking for themselves,’” Foucault and Deleuze “restore the category of the sovereign subject within the theory that seems most to question it” (278).

The following passage illustrates Spivak’s argument by demonstrating *how* the Western intellectual is complicit in preserving the West as subject, despite their attempts to remove the West from subjectivity.

*The issue (in the Foucault and Deleuze conversation) seems to be that there is no representation, no signifier...theory is a relay of practice...and the oppressed can know and speak for themselves...This reintroduces the constitutive subject on at least two levels: the Subject of desire and power as an irreducible methodological presupposition; and the self-proximate, if not self-identical, subject of the oppressed. Further, the intellectuals, who are neither of these S/subjects, become transparent in the relay race, for they merely report on the non represented subject and analyze (without analyzing) the workings of (the unnamed Subject irreducibly presupposed by) power and desire. The produced ‘transparency’ marks the place of ‘interest’; it is maintained by vehement denegation: ‘Now this role of referee, judge and universal witness is one which I absolutely refuse to adopt’....This S/subject, curiously sewn together into a transparency by denegations, belongs to the exploiters side of international division of labor. However reductionist an economic analysis might seem, the French intellectuals*

*forget at their peril that this entire overdetermined enterprise was in the interest of a dynamic economic situation requiring that interests, motives (desires) and power (of knowledge) be ruthlessly dislocated. To invoke that dislocation now as a radical discovery that should make us diagnose the economic (conditions of existence that separate out classes descriptively) as a piece of dated analytic machinery may well be to continue the work of that dislocation and unwittingly to help in securing 'a new balance of hegemonic relations.'* (279-280).

By dismissing representation, Foucault and Deleuze haphazardly reintroduce the West as subject in two ways. First they establish the subjectivity the Western intellectual's unexplored matrix of power and desire. Second, they carelessly claim the subjectivity of the self-knowing subaltern subject. In doing so, they surreptitiously render themselves transparent. They can present the experience of the oppressed and can analyze (though without truly analyzing because they are transparent) the effects of power and desire on subjectivity. However, the transparency that these intellectuals claims signals a vested interest in presenting themselves as such demonstrated by the intellectual constantly denying his role as anything other than transparent participant in the relay between theory and practice (thus ignoring his own role in the network of power, desire, and interest). In such denegations, the intellectual unintentionally places himself on the "exploiters side of the international division of labor" (280). These French intellectuals, who dismiss economic analysis as reductionist, forget that the conditions that have necessitated their critique in the first place were economic. The use of a dislocation of desire, interest, and power in order to dismiss economic analysis thus backfires. In doing so, the French intellectuals are complicit in the epistemic violence of imperialism having secured the social relations in which the West is sovereign subject.

## **Part II**

In part II, Spivak offers the question that is the namesake of her essay—can the subaltern speak? By illustrating epistemic violence through the codification of Hindu law and introducing a definition of the subaltern, Spivak asks ‘can the subaltern speak? Spivak addresses the plight of them subaltern woman, claiming that she is doubly effaced and within the contemporary division of labor in a post-colonial world, women of the urban subproletariat are victims of both the epistemic violence and female exploitation. Finally, Spivak returns to the Foucault and Deleuze conversation to further demonstrate their role in the epistemic violence addressed in this section of the essay.

### **Epistemic violence via codification of Hindu law**

Spivak identifies the “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (281) symmetrical to the project to erase any trace of the Other as Subject as the clearest example of epistemic violence. Foucault’s work, on the other hand, identifies epistemic violence in the redefinition of sanity in European discourse just before the 19th century. Spivak proposes that the two are not discontinuous, but perhaps “dislocated and unacknowledged parts of a vast two handed engine” (281). Thus, she proposes a reconsideration of the hegemonic narrative of imperialism as established by the West as “subjugated knowledge...disqualified as...insufficiently elaborated” (281). Spivak’s goal here is not rewrite history by proposing an alternative description of reality, “the way things really were” (281). Rather, she seeks to explore and critique how one “narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (281).

To illustrate the establishment of a hegemonic narrative of imperialism, Spivak uses the “narrative of the stabilization and codification of Hindu law” (282). However, before doing so, Spivak offers a disclaimer to explain the reasoning behind her choice of the example of Hindu law. Spivak clarifies that the choice of the Indian example is not “a nostalgic investigation of the lost roots of (her) own identity” (281). In fact, her goal is, in part, to reveal how the very nature of such searches for lost nostalgia is harmful to the postcolonial critique. Rather, Spivak has chosen the Indian example because by “accident of birth” (281), this is the context with which she is most familiar. In turn, Spivak also acknowledges that this example is not to be taken as “representative of all countries, nations, cultures, and the like that may be invoked as Other of Europe as Self” (281). I find that this would be an appropriate time for Spivak offer some insight into her own interests and desires and how they inform her ideology, but she does not. As noted earlier, Spivak critiques others for not offering a theory of ideology through an exploration of desire, interest, and power, but does not do so herself.

The codification of Hindu law began with the establishment of a colonial education system. British colonizers sought to establish “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” who might act as “interpreters between” the the colonial government and its subjects (282). It was hoped that in doing so, the educated class could be established as proxies, through which the colonizer could operate the violence of colonialism. “The education of colonial subjects complements their production in law” (282). The colonial educated class went on to produce a body of literature that legitimized legal and epistemic violence through the codification of Hindu law, “the cultural explanations generated by authoritative scholars matched the epistemic violence of the legal project” (282). As a result,

“a version of history was gradually established in which the Brahmans were shown to have the same intentions (thus providing the legitimation for) the codifying British” (282). In other words, Hindu law was, in a sense, re-presented (*darstellen*) through the educated colonial subject representatives (*vertreten*).

Here, Spivak points out that this colonial educated proxy as Other is *not* the Other that Foucault and Deleuze are incapable of accessing. Rather, the Other as Subject is the “general nonspecialist, nonacademic population across the class spectrum, for whom the epistemic operates its silent programming function...men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (282). Spivak points out that when Foucault and Deleuze claim that the oppressed know and can speak for themselves, they write from the oppressor’s side of the international division of labor, under the conditions of socialized capital. In turn, Spivak compels us to consider the opposite side of the international division of labor. And so, it is with this definition of Other as Subject that Spivak offers the powerful inquiry that serves as the namesake of the essay: “On the other side of the international division of labor...inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*” (283).

### **Defining the subaltern**

Before seeking to answer the question, the term ‘subaltern’ must be defined and explored. To do so, Spivak turns to the ‘Subaltern Studies’ group, a group of South Asian intellectuals that explore the post-colonial world from the lens of the non-elite. Specifically, Spivak draws on the work of Ranajit Guha. Guha notes that the hegemonic narrative of colonialism and neocolonialism credits the “making of the Indian...consciousness” to the British colonial rulers

(Guha, 1 qtd. in Spivak, 284). And even the nationalist and neo-nationalist discourses accredit the making of the Indian consciousness to the Indian elite (Spivak, 284). As Spivak points out, to accredit the Indian elite with such an achievement is dangerous as it gives the Western intellectual permission to use the Indian elite as a representative of the Indian as Other, “Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other” (284). It is the project of the Subaltern Studies group to remove the colonizer and the elite from a place of privilege in the narrative of Indian consciousness and instead “rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation” (283). Spivak challenges this task, as it “privilege(s) subaltern consciousness,” which as she explains in section I, is harmful in its assumption of a subaltern consciousness. Despite this critique, Spivak does find Guha’s definition of subalternity to be helpful. Guha presents the following stratification as a means of separating social groups in India:

1. *Dominant foreign groups*
2. *Dominant indigenous groups on the all-India level.*
3. *Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels.*
4. *The terms “people” and “subaltern classes” have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as elite.*

Groups 1 and 2 are considered elite. While group 4 includes the truly subaltern, group 3, demonstrates the heterogeneity of the subaltern class. Those who fall into group 3 differ based on time, region, and perspective. For example, an ethnic group maybe be dominant in one region

but oppressed in another. Based on Guha's stratification, the subaltern can only be defined by what they are not; to subaltern is to be not elite. Spivak acknowledges that this definition "could hardly be more essentialist and taxonomic" (284). However, the difference between this essentialism and the hidden essentialism used by the French intellectuals is that in this context, it is not hidden in "a postrepresentationalist vocabulary" (285). Unlike Foucault and Deleuze, Guha and the Subaltern Studies group are not defining the subaltern as such *while maintaining that they can speak for themselves*. On the contrary, Guha *must* define the subaltern in differential. The subaltern is so heterogeneous and so lacking is class consciousness, as Spivak has pointed out, that there is no other way to define them but in "identity-in-differential" (284).

And so the question of the subaltern studies group, in their attempt to rewrite the development of the consciousness of the Indian nation, becomes "how can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?" (285). Here Spivak brings the reader to consider the difference between visibility and vocality. In order to make visible the plight of the subaltern, there is necessary abstraction. However, as Spivak pointed out in Section I, this is not to say that what is necessary is an abstraction of the concrete experience of the oppressed. So while Foucault is correct in his claim that "to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level" (Foucault, 49 qtd. in Spivak 285), he fails to recognize that "rendering visible" and "rendering vocal" (Spivak, 285) cannot be conflated. While he may have rendered the prisoners visible by elevating them and providing them with a platform to speak as individuals, they did not assume subjectivity; they were not rendered vocal. I return to this dual concept later.

### **A formula for addressing ideology**

Spivak once again returns to the importance of ideology when reflecting on the class consciousness of the subaltern. She examines Ajit K. Chaudhury's (a Marxist from West Bengali) critique of Guha (285). Spivak agrees with Chaudhury's claim that the "Marxist view of the transformation of consciousness involves the knowledge of social relations" (286). However, she takes issue with his reverence toward a pure subaltern consciousness, another example of fetishizing the concrete from a party one would expect to critique it. Chaudhury is obliged by the "heritage of positivist ideology that has appropriated orthodox Marxism" to claim that an "understanding of peasants' consciousness or workers' consciousness in its pure form" should not be forgotten because it "enriches our knowledge of the peasant and the worker" (286). Thus Chaudhury, as an "internationalist" Marxist joins the French intellectuals and the Subaltern Studies group in the "assumption that there is a pure form of consciousness" (286). Spivak writes that in the Subaltern Studies group, the pure form of consciousness is implied, though not appropriately articulated and acknowledged. Spivak again stresses the importance of a developed theory of ideology. She points to Chaudhury's own "association of 'consciousness' with 'knowledge'" (286), which ignores the process of ideological production that must link the two.

Spivak references Pierre Macherey's (a French Marxist) "formula for the interpretation of ideology," (286) which asks a reader to consider ideology in terms of what is *not* being said. Although Macherey clarifies that what a work *does not* say cannot be casually conflated with what it *refuses* to say, it is the refusal that Spivak finds helpful in postcolonial critique. A refusal, contrary to a perhaps ignorant omission, is intentional. "Although the notion 'what it refuses to say' might be careless for a literary work, something like a collective ideological *refusal* can be

diagnosed for the codifying legal practice of imperialism” (286). In other words, the ideology of the Western tradition can be understood by examining the fact that certain Western intellectuals have refused to examine their own positionality. It would thus be the work of the postcolonial intellectual to “measure the silences” (286). However when we consider the “question of the consciousness of the subaltern” as opposed to the codifying legal practice of imperialism, Spivak points out the importance of also considering “what the work *cannot* say” (287). The historian writing on insurgency must recognize that as he or she “transform(s) the ‘insurgency’ into ‘text for knowledge’” they are only “one ‘receiver’ of (the) collectively intended social act” (287). They cannot grasp the consciousness of the insurgent, there is “no possibility of nostalgia for that lost origin” (287). And so, the historian must constantly struggle to “suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of her or her own consciousness” (287) and thus the “post colonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss” (287).

Spivak speaks frequently in the essay about the nostalgia for lost origins. Nostalgia for lost origins is as detrimental to the exploration of social reality as Foucault and Deleuze’s fetishization of the concrete. Almost the opposite of fetishization of the concrete, nostalgia for lost origins fetishizes an imagined reality as opposed to a concrete reality. Just as the consciousness of the subaltern cannot be grasped through an abstraction of concrete experience, it is just as impossibly grasped through nostalgia for lost origins.

### **The subaltern woman is doubly in shadow**

In the discussion of subjectivity and privilege, Spivak compels the reader to consider woman as subaltern by drawing a connection to feminist critique. Spivak claims that in feminist

deconstructive criticisms, a “figure of ‘woman’ is at issue,” but that “the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted *by women themselves*” (287). This is not as such for the subaltern, especially for the subaltern woman. As Spivak has demonstrated, the subaltern is not self-knowing and cannot speak for themselves. And so, “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). The “double efface(ment)” of the subaltern woman is not due to her social marginalization, though Spivak acknowledges there is certainly evidence of this. In other words the double effacement is not due to the intersectional identify of being both subaltern and female (though the subaltern woman is doubly marginalized for this reason). But what Spivak is referring to is the subaltern woman as doubly in shadow because the “ideological construction of gender (that) keeps the male dominant...(is both)...object of colonialist historiography and...subject of insurgency” (287). The colonial subject (read the object of colonialism) and the subject of insurgency within the narrative of colonialism are both male, so where is the subaltern as female?

Spivak illustrates how the woman is doubly in shadow through a deconstruction of the contemporary international division of labor. Spivak explains that the first world (those who invest) and the third world (those countries that are invested in) maintain a contemporary relationship that mirrors the colonial experience. The process of extraction in this contemporary context relies on ‘development’ that does not allow for the teaching of consumerism which is a necessary product of capitalist education systems in the first world because in order to maintain capitalist social relations, the worker must be trained to participate in consumerism. This is not the case for the third world laborers because their supply of cheap labor is necessary for the

continuation of a global capitalist system. In the absence of formal political colonial ruling bodies, extraction is carried out via “indigenous comprador capitalists” who “find the language of alliance politics attractive” (288). Alliance politics refers to the cooperation of different factions in the name of a perceived shared interest. This “belief in the plausibility of global alliance politics is (particularly) prevalent among women of dominant social groups interested in “international feminism”” (288). Subaltern women of the “urban subproletariat,” are most harmed by this structure and are also “most separated from any possibility of an alliance” (288) because they are victims of the “withholding of consumerism and the structure of exploitation,” both founded in “patriarchal social relations” (288). The women most affected by patriarchal structures (the subaltern woman) are the least likely to access or participate in a global feminist alliance. Even if a space is made for such a woman to ‘speak’ (though Spivak has demonstrated the impossibility of such a space being created through the non-representing intellectual), she cannot “know and speak the text of female exploitation” and so, “the woman is doubly in shadow” (288). She is silenced not just in her exploitation, but more so in her inability to voice and understand the text of female exploitation. And if she could understand and voice such a text, she would likely no longer be subaltern.

Spivak points out that by addressing the subaltern woman as doubly in shadow, the intellectual is still not able to overcome the heterogeneity of the Other. There are those who lay at the fringes of the international division of labor, neither completely outside nor completely inside, “whose consciousness we cannot grasp” when we (as intellectuals) create a homogenous version of the Other (288). And so, the project of the postcolonial intellectual is “not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves” (289). To do so is to place our own voice in

the ideological production of discourse. When intellectuals choose to represent (*darstellen*) the Other as the “naturally articulate subject of oppression,” the project of the postcolonial intellectual is to question the implication that the subject of oppression (created *through* intellectual production) is produced as such only through the process of establishing a hegemonic narrative of history.

At the end of section II, Spivak once again returns to the Foucault and Deleuze conversation, noting that their errors of ignoring “both the epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor would matter less if they did not, in closing touch on third-world issues” (289). Deleuze uses the local elite in former French African colonies as the Other and Foucault is unable to place the origins of contemporary power structures in the history of colonial exploitation. These are examples of what Spivak calls “benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other” that plagues contemporary discourses on the Third World in American intellectualism. The former French colonies, defined as Other, are used by the French intellectuals to illustrate a point. Their (the intellectuals’) benevolent invocation of the Other does nothing to remove them (the Other) from that place of objectivity and differential. Once again, Foucault and Deleuze fail to recognize their own place in imperial production; “to buy a self-contained version of the West is to ignore its production by the imperialist project” (291).

### **Part III**

Spivak uses the third section of her essay to explore Derrida’s chapter “Of Grammatology As a Positive Science.” She does so in order to illustrate how the nostalgia for lost origins is harmful

to the “exploration of social realities within the critique of imperialism” (291). Nostalgia for lost origins is the fetishization or reverence for a version of history that is to some extent imagined, a version of history in which the feminine, mystic, and natural are celebrated.

Spivak notes that in general, when contemplating French intellectual work, American academia tends to favor Foucault over Derrida. American academics have noted that Foucault’s work allows the reader to consider political implications beyond the text, but Derrida’s work is overly textual and inaccessible. Spivak favors Derrida, claiming that Foucault’s “substantive concern for the politics of the oppressed”...in fact hides the ways that he privileges the “intellectual and... the “concrete’ subject of oppression” (Spivak, 292). Spivak acknowledges that “Derrida is hard to read” and that “his real object of investigation is classical philosophy” (292). And yet, she finds that there are parts of his work that are helpful for people outside of the First World. Furthermore, while he may be inaccessible to some, “he is less dangerous, when understood than the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresentor who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (292).

### **Epistemic violence and hyperbolic admiration in Derrida**

In “Of Grammatology as a Positive Science,”<sup>1</sup> Derrida addresses the use of deconstruction, a form of critique that examines the relationship between meaning and signifier (language), as a means of adequately critiquing or acting against the epistemic violence of imperialism. Derrida questions whether there is a way in which the grammatology (study of language and writing

---

<sup>1</sup> From Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. Spivak’s reference to Derrida is rarely in large block quotes. She summarizes his argument with quoted terms here and there. Thus, I mostly reference only Spivak’s essay and the pages where these references occur. When quotes worth citing from Derrida are used they are cited accordingly.

systems) can be used to critique the imperialist project without reconstituting the West as Subject. “The question is how to keep the ethnocentric Subject from establishing itself by selectively defining an Other” (292). This is, intrinsically, a project “for the benevolent *Western* intellectual” (292). Spivak points out that in turn, the project of the self-aware Western intellectual at this point in history is to be critical of narratives in which the Other is defined and established only *through* the Western intellectual as ‘transparent’ subject, in other words to “resist and critique ‘recognition’ of the Third World through ‘assimilation’” (292). This is to suggest that the project of the benevolent Western intellectual is to explore and investigate their own voice, it is a project of learning to re-present (*darstellen*) one’s self through an analysis of desire, interest, and power.

For Derrida, in order to approach such a project, one must be able to ask the “first questions” (292), a task impossible in grammatology. Grammatology, “like empiricism...cannot ask first questions...Derrida thus aligns ‘grammatological’ knowledge *with the same problems* as empirical investigation” (292). Derrida illustrates the limits of grammatology by demonstrating how the three prejudices in the histories of writing presented in 17th century Europe provided the “self-justification of an imperialist project” (292). These three prejudices were:

- Theological: “God wrote a primitive or natural script: Hebrew or Greek” (292). Hebrew and Greek, the languages that lay at the foundation of the hegemonic Judeo-Christian position are posited as natural (read superior, enlightenment understanding of natural).
- Chinese: “Chinese is a perfect *blueprint* for philosophical writing, but it is only a blueprint” (292). “True philosophical” writing would take the Chinese blueprint but articulate it in “an easy to learn script that will supersede actual Chinese” (292)

- Egyptian: “Egyptian script is too sublime to be deciphered” (292).

In 17th century Europe, Hebrew/Greek (the origins of European tradition) are presented as the languages of God. Simultaneously, non-European forms of ancient knowledge are dismissed; Chinese as rational but useless in its true form and Egyptian as mystical. However, Derrida makes a crucial clarification necessary to Spivak’s critique: “Far from proceeding...from ethnocentric scorn, the occultation takes the form of an hyperbolic admiration” (Derrida, 80 qtd. in Spivak, 293). The disavowal of Chinese and Egyptian knowledge did not take the form of pure dismissal laced in Euro centrism. It was done surreptitiously through an exaggerated veneration for Chinese and Egyptian, as if to hide the fact that in expressing the utmost reverence for their form they were simultaneously deemed inferior to Hebrew and Greek. Derrida goes on to point out that such coyness is not unique to 17th century Europe. “Our century is not free from it; each time that ethnocentrism is precipitately and ostentatiously reversed, some effort silently hides behind all the spectacular efforts to consolidate an inside and to draw from it some domestic benefit” (Derrida, 80 qtd. in Spivak, 293). This articulates the process that Spivak critiques in sections I and II. As the postcolonial intellectual sets out to critique the West as Subject, power, desire, and interest (“some effort silently hid(ing)”) operate to reconstitute the West as Subject. Derrida calls the postcolonial intellectual to critique the “European ethnocentrism in the constitution of the Other” (Spivak, 293). Spivak appreciates that Derrida’s motivation is philosophical not political and therefore he does not indicate to the reader *what* the critique should be. Rather, he shows that the “European Subject’s tendency to constitute the Other as marginal to ethnocentrism (is) the problem” (293). Spivak points out that this is “*Not* a general problem, but a *European* problem” (293).

### The 'blank part of the text'

Derrida addresses how the consciousness of the subaltern is implied, yet never defined in texts critiquing imperialism; “*thought* is...the blank part of the text” (Derrida, 93 qtd. in Spivak, 294). The postcolonial intellectual, acting in his or her own interest, would prefer that their project be to theorize on that “blank part of the text,” or the consciousness of the oppressed, by writing around its inaccessibility and nonexistence; it is this “inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text (that the) postcolonial critic of imperialism would like to see developed within the European enclosure as *the* place of the production of theory” (Spivak, 294). However, the only way that the postcolonial intellectual can attempt such a task is by “presupposing” that consciousness because to “render...thinking subject transparent or invisible seems, by contrast, to hide the relentless recognition of the other by assimilation” (294). Derrida’s diagnosis does not call the postcolonial intellectual to simply step aside and ‘let the other speak for himself’ but rather to assess the intellectual’s own origin in ideological production.

Derrida finds that the ethnocentrism he has used as an example is simply a symptom of “a general crisis of European consciousness” which is itself part of the greater crisis of “the slow turn from feudalism to capitalism via...capitalist imperialism” (294). For Spivak, this context provides a more interesting backdrop with which to explore the “itinerary of recognition through assimilation” than psychoanalysis and the “figure of woman” (294). Spivak is not concerned with the “invocations of the *authenticity* of the Other” (294). Rather, she is concerned with how the Other is constituted as such. It is in this that Spivak finds Foucault useful as he addresses the “mechanics of disciplinarization and institutionalization...of the colonizer” (294).

## **Part IV**

In section IV, Spivak finds that in asking the question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ specific attention must be given to the woman as subaltern. She examines the plight of the subaltern woman by using the sentence, ‘white men are saving brown women from brown men’ in her examination of the banning of the widow sacrifice in colonial India. Spivak shows that the subaltern woman, whose consciousness is heterogeneous and inaccessible, is mute as she is caught between colonial violence and nostalgia for lost origins.

### **Western feminism and the subaltern woman**

Spivak begins this section of the essay by addressing the ways that Western feminism is incapable of confronting the woman as subaltern. Spivak recognizes the existence of benevolent movements to address the situation of the subaltern woman and does not immediately write them off. “Reporting on, or better still, participating in antisexist work among women of color or women in class oppression in the First World or the Third World is undeniably on the agenda” (295). But, as Spivak claims, it is unavoidable that this work will, “in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be mute as ever” (295). Spivak recognizes the difficulty of contemplating the consciousness of the subaltern woman within “so fraught a field” (295), but demands that the fact that such a project is difficult indicates its significance. The question of the woman as subaltern must be addressed if for no other reason than “to remind the pragmatic radicals that such a question is not an idealist red herring” meant to distract from larger issues. (295). Confronting the woman as subaltern is not the end all be all of feminist projects. But, to ignore the issue is to make a political statement that is ultimately as harmful as the masculine radicalism that attempts to render the investigator transparent. In other

words, to ignore the woman as subaltern is to choose to allow the problems of representation, consciousness, and epistemic violence addressed in the first three sections of the essay to continue.

In light of this, Spivak discusses how a feminist critique of postcolonial discourse demands a systematic unlearning by the intellectual. “In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to and speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* ‘unlearns’ female privilege” (295). Upon reading this, the reader (particularly the female writer reading from within the male dominated field of academia) is likely taken aback by Spivak’s use of the phrase “female privilege” (I certainly was). Upon further reflection, I determined that what is meant is that in learning to *speak to* the subaltern woman, the female postcolonial intellectual will find that her “femaleness” is not enough to connect with the woman as subaltern. (The differentiation between speaking to as opposed to listening to and speaking for is key, as it signifies a conscious decision to avoid the complicated positionality implicit in the represented/representative relationship). The power dynamics that arise from a history of coloniality make the postcolonial intellectual incapable of relating to the woman as subaltern. This process of systematic unlearning is achieved as the postcolonial intellectual learns to critique their (her) own ideology to the best of their (her) ability while avoiding the temptation to represent some lost or muted voice of the subaltern woman. The Subaltern Studies’ project of confronting the woman as subaltern is thus not an attempt to create a consciousness of oppression out of the concrete experiences of those who happen to fall into the essentialist category:

*This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized. Thus, to question the unquestioned muting of the subaltern woman even within the anti imperialist project of subaltern studies is not, as Jonathan Culler suggests, to ‘produce difference by differing’ or to ‘appeal...to a sexual identity defined as essential and privilege experiences associated with that identity’” (295).*

By invoking Culler, Spivak introduces an important division in Western feminism. She explains that U.S. feminism is often criticized by European feminist theorists as lacking in theoretical foundation; in other words, U.S. feminism is placed in opposition to European feminism due to its positivism/essentialism (the two are used interchangeably in this context). Spivak speaks extensively on the nature of this debate, but finishes by pointing out that:

*...if 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, no ingredients for the constitution of the itinerary of the trace of a sexed subject can be gathered to locate the possibility of dissemination (296).*

That is to say that the debate within Western feminism does nothing to help the woman as subaltern as no change of methodology can make that consciousness accessible. That is not to say that using feminist critique to address positivism and the defetishization of the concrete is harmful. In fact, Spivak remains “generally sympathetic” to such efforts (296). She even goes as

far as to suggest that the use of Western thinkers can even be helpful if they mark their positionality<sup>1</sup>.

**“White men are saving brown women from brown men”**

And so “Given these conditions, as a literary critic, (Spivak) tactically confronted the immense problem of the consciousness of the woman as subaltern” (296). Spivak uses the strategy Freud takes up when addressing the woman as scapegoat of deconstructing a large concept within a single sentence.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, as part of her own ‘unlearning project’ and in consideration of her own ideological formation, Spivak addresses her question ‘Can the subaltern as woman speak?’ by presenting this sentence: “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (296).

Spivak offers a few points to clarify what her sentence is *not*. Although it is tempting to suggest that such a sentence demonstrates a collective fantasy of white men signaling a collective itinerary of white men who enjoy repression because it provides an opportunity to save brown women from the collective imperialist enterprise, this is not what Spivak’s sentence is meant to convey. Furthermore, the use of Freud’s strategy is not an attempt to offer an analogy between “transference and literary criticism or historiography” (297). Rather, Spivak finds that Freud’s

---

<sup>1</sup> In her conversation with Jenny Sharpe, referenced here several times, Spivak shares an insight addressing why she finds it important to read Western theory. I found her insight tremendously interesting and find it applicable here as she is discussing the value of Western thought. She says, “You read the West not because everything Western is good, (but) so that you can theoretically apply it to your raw material. Do not read the West because everything Western is bad, so that you can show how Chinese was better. Both are the same thing. Read it because it is there and, in certain respects, it won. They you’ll see that it’s interesting” (Sharpe and Spivak, 621). I love her frank explication. I find for my own reading, this particular quote justified her essay. While she critiques the reconstitution of the West as subject, she draws almost exclusively on Western writers, perhaps because, as she says, in certain respects, they won; and for this they are worth it and interesting to read.

<sup>2</sup> Here Spivak is referencing Freud’s exploration of the singular sentence, “a child is being beaten” in “‘A Child is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions’ published in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 1955. I have chosen not to focus on the applications of Freud here only for the sake of giving other significant parts of Spivak’s essay more attention. However, this note is to offer my recognition of its importance and note an area for further exploration.

use of a single sentence is a useful general methodology and appreciates that through such a sentence, one can “predicate a *history* of repression” (297, emphasis original). Just as Freud’s sentence represents the double origin of the repression (“one hidden in in the amnesia of the infant, the other lodged in our archaic past” (297)), Spivak’s also represents a history of repression with a double origin when contemplating the woman as subaltern, “one hidden in the maneuverings behind the British abolition of widow sacrifice in 1829, and other lodged in the classical and Vedic past of Hindu India, the Rg-Veda and the Dharmasastra” (297).

***Sati: the widow sacrifice and the establishment of ‘good societies’***

In the following passage, Spivak presents a clear and concise explanation of the widow sacrifice and demonstrates how the act of the widow sacrifice exemplifies the plight of the mute subaltern woman. She (the subaltern woman) is caught between two different, yet equally harmful attempts to capture her consciousness. The first is the act of imperial epistemic violence in which the colonist, acting out of benevolence, attempts to ‘save’ the subaltern woman but simultaneously reconstitutes himself (gendered intentionally) as saving subject. The second is the nostalgia for lost origins in which the nativist believes that he captures the consciousness and collective desire of the widows by claiming that the widows participated in the sacrifice because they wanted to die<sup>1</sup>:

*The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for widow would be sati. The early colonial British transcribed it suttee.)*

---

<sup>1</sup> Spivak also points out that the nativists’ nostalgia for lost origins goes even deeper by claiming that *sati* became a form of “reverse social change... ‘to demonstrate, to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To many of them *sati* became an important proof of their conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within” (298).

*The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste- or class-fixed. The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men'...Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'The women actually wanted die.' (297).*

The subaltern woman is caught between the reconstitution of the sovereign subject and the nostalgia for lost origins. Neither captures the inaccessible consciousness. To use Spivak's words, the subaltern woman is 'mute as ever.' In fact, Spivak claims, the two sentences ('White men saving brown women from brown men' and 'The women actually wanted to die') actually "go a long way to legitimize each other" (297) because both symbolize attempts to capture an inaccessible consciousness of the heterogeneous descriptive group: subaltern women. In this vein, Spivak casually offers this thought, "Faced with the dialectically interlocking sentences...the postcolonial *woman* intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis--What does this mean?--and begins to plot a history" (297, emphasis my own). Seemingly without fanfare, Spivak has called us to consider the unique place of the female postcolonial intellectual contemplating the subaltern woman. She returns to this call again in the last line of the essay.

### **The moment of establishing 'good societies'**

Instances of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' manifest in specific moments in which the brown woman is deemed in need of saving from her own kind. Interventions that address the structures of an existing society are made in the name of establishing 'good societies' (or societies that represent the Western understanding of good, just, humane, etc.) in which woman are free agents.

*To mark the moment when not only a civil but a good society is born out of domestic confusion, singular events that break the letter of the law to instill its spirit are often invoked. The protection of women by men often provides such an event...what interests me is that the protection of woman (today the 'third-world woman') becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society which must, at such inaugurative moments, transgress mere legality, or equity of legal policy. In this particular case, the process also allowed the redefinition as a crime of what had been tolerated, known, or adulated as ritual. In other words, this one item in Hindu law jumped the frontier between the private and the public domain (298).*

The British colonizer used this one Hindu tradition, this one moment of domestic confusion, to assert dominance under the stealthy disguise of benevolence, despite having “boasted (their)...absolute...non-interference with native custom” (298). The redefinition of the widow sacrifice as crime, rather than custom, allowed the British to assert colonial dominance (and a colonial legacy) in the name of establishing a ‘good society’; where good means British, Western, and White. In this vein, Spivak finds Foucault’s theoretical description of the episteme helpful, ““The episteme is the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may not be characterized as scientific”” (Foucault, 197 qtd. in Spivak, 298). In other words, the outlaw of *sati* through the epistemic violence of the codification of imperial law simply takes what is ritual and deems it crime, “the one fixed by superstition, the other by legal science” (298). Despite a colonial discourse that might suggest otherwise, Western legal code is not synonymous with ‘truth’—just as Western cannot be carelessly conflated with ‘good’. This story is not unfamiliar. Colonial (and neocolonial) efforts to save brown women

from brown men by thrusting the private choices of women into the public domain are conventional and their role in post-colonial capitalist development will be explored in the following chapter.

Spivak claims that if the abolition of *sati* is in fact the first instance, “the first historical origin” (298), of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men,’ then its originality and significance has been “lost in the shuffle between other more powerful discourses” like those that both create and critique the story of colonial capitalist expansion and Western capitalist hegemony. In light of this, Spivak notes that “given that the abolition of *sati* was in itself admirable, is it still possible to wonder if a perception of the origin of my sentence might contain interventionist possibilities?” (299). In other words, despite any imperial violence implicit in its abolition, does the fact that the abolition of *sati* did save the lives of subaltern women imply that the *perception* of the abolition of *sati* is based on the presupposition that any British intervention is positive?

### ***Sati* as sanctioned suicide: reading the Dharmasastra and the Rg-Veda**

When the subaltern woman is established as object in need of “protection from her own kind,” we can clearly see that imperialism has fully embodied its “image as the establisher of the good society” (299). In light of this, Spivak asks, “how should one examine the dissimulation of patriarchal strategy which apparently grants the women free choice as subject” (299). In other words, the abolition of the widow sacrifice demonstrates the complexity of the colonial effort. It is more than “mere prejudice against people of color” (299). The postcolonial intellectual has to

carefully examine the complexity suggested by the convenient and perhaps motivated use of ‘patriarchal strategy’ to ‘grant the woman free choice’ in the midst of the imperial project.<sup>1</sup>

To address this question, Spivak turns to what she has identified as the second historical origin of her sentence: a reading of the *Dharmasastra* and the *Rg-Veda*, Sanskrit texts addressing Hindu religious and legal duty. Spivak warns the reader that her readings are “not exhaustive...(and are) rather...interested and inexpert” (299).

I find that this clarification is an opportunity to offer a brief critique of Spivak. Spivak has clarified that her reading of these texts is both “interested and inexpert” (299). In the essay, Spivak has a habit of recognizing where her own interests and desires are perhaps motivating an inquiry or statement, but in these instances, it merely that—recognition. She does not offer a critique of *how* her own interests, desires, and power found her ideology. I find that this demands a critique because Spivak fails to participate in the very project that she calls on the postcolonial intellectual to undertake. At the beginning of the essay, she says, “although I will attempt to foreground the precariousness of my position throughout, I know such gestures can never suffice” (271). It seems as though her recognition of the fact that attempts to critique one’s own positionality will never render the intellectual capable of speaking for the subaltern, Spivak has abandoned a meaningful attempt to do so. Instead, she offers remarks like this example. As a critical reader Spivak, who generally agrees with her argument and analysis, I feel compelled to question her seemingly dispirited attempt to invoke her positionality. It is as if Spivak points to her positionality but then asks the reader to accept her argument without presenting an

---

<sup>1</sup> I address this issue more in depth in the following section, with reference to Frantz Fanon’s *Algeria Unveiled* as a second example of a motivated instance of white men saving brown women from brown men.

examination of how it actually *affects* her argument. Ultimately, having read and listened to a number of Spivak's interviews and lectures, I assume that Spivak is not oblivious to this point of critique. In fact, at a few points in the essay, she essentially asks the reader to overlook her own interest and positionality for the sake of the argument being made. And so, in that spirit I offer this critique while maintaining that it does not affect the legitimacy and reverence I find and have for Spivak's argument.

Returning to the reading of the *Dharmasastra* and the *Rg-Veda*: Spivak is particularly interested in the "discourse on sanctioned suicides and the nature of the rites for the dead" (299), because by reading these two together, there seems to be exception for the practice of *sati*.

"The general scriptural doctrine is that suicide is reprehensible. Room is made, however, for certain forms of suicide which, as formulaic performance, lose the phenomenal identity of being suicide" (299). One form of such sanctioned suicide is one that is done in the name of "knowledge of truth" (299) in which the "knowing subject comprehends the insubstantiality or mere phenomenality...of its identity" (299). However, the exception of the widow sacrifice is not *solely* found in this "interior sanction" (299). According to the *Dharmasastra*, suicide is also sanctioned if committed in an act of pilgrimage (this is the exterior sanction as the exception lies in the location). "It is possible for a woman to perform *this* type of (non)suicide" (299). Although Spivak quickly points that this sanction in isolation also does not excuse the widow's suicide, "This suicide that is not suicide may be read as a simulacrum of both truth-knowledge and piety of place" (300). The widow relinquishes her subjectivity entirely and her "dead husband becomes the exteriorized example and place of the extinguished subject and the widow becomes

the (non)agent who ‘acts it out’” (300). Spivak contemplates the issues of subjectivity implied here. The male subject who commits sanctioned suicide is seemingly less remarkable because his subjectivity is assumed. For the female, her choice of self-immolation is “understood...as an *exceptional* signifier of her own desire, exceeding the general rule for a widow’s conduct” (300, emphasis my own). So as the widow *chooses* to relinquish her subjectivity and become the acting non-agent, she establishes her subjectivity, but only because she is not subject to begin with. An extremely simplified analogy can be drawn to compliments that a female might perform some act well in consideration of the fact that she is female (e.g. throwing well or running fast, *for a girl*). The act is impressive *only* because the expectation is that it will not be impressive. The widow sacrifice is remarkable only because *in relinquishing* subjectivity, the widow demonstrates agency, an act unexpected from a female due to her traditional objectivity.

Two contending versions of freedom are thus placed in opposition to each other in the rhetoric surrounding *sati*. On the one hand, the “benevolent and enlightened (Indian nativist) males” recognize the free choice that the women demonstrated (signaling their subjectivity) by choosing to become *sati*. However, we have seen in the complexity of the preceding paragraph that this is not in fact the case. On the other hand, the British in their perception of the practice as “heathen ritual” felt that they were freeing the Indian woman from savage death by banning the practice. The former represents the nostalgia for lost origins, the “ambiguity of the position of the indigenous colonial elite is disclosed in nationalistic romanticization of the purity, strength, and love of these self-sacrificing women” (301). In such hyperbolic admiration, “*sati* (is) ideologically cathected as ‘reward,’ just as the gravity of imperialism was that it was ideologically cathected as ‘social mission’” (301).

While the British colonial government theoretically avoided restricting religious practice in India, they ultimately outlawed the practice after collaboration with the “learned Brahmins” (301). The text of the law illustrates the practice of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ as the justification for the establishment of a ‘good society.’

*‘The practice of Sutee...is revolting to the feeling of human nature...shocking to the Hindoos themselves....(Spivak says this “language celebrated the noble Hindu who was against the bad Hindu,” read, brown man from whom the brown woman needs to be saved) without intending to depart from one of the first most important principles of the system of British Government in India that all classes of the people be secure in the observance of their religious usages, so long as that system can be adhered to without violation of the paramount dictates of justice and humanity...’ (302, parentheses my own).*

The benevolent causes of justice and humanity are used to justify the abolition of the widow sacrifice and thus the establishment of a good society. Spivak points out that the British did not find it necessary to use the imperial legal code to outlaw any other form of sanctioned suicide and they went as far as to classify the widow sacrifice with “murder, infanticide, and the lethal exposure of the very old” (302). To this Spivak says, “The dubious place of the free will of the constituent sexed subject as female was successfully effaced” (302). I find this argument curious. In the midst of addressing this instance of imperial legal violence, Spivak seems to demonstrate the same nostalgia for lost origins that she criticizes as this statement seems to imply that *sati* was, in fact, an act of free will by the sexed subject as female. Spivak’s reading for *Dharmasastra* clearly provides a more complex understanding of the subjectivity of the female

as self-immolating widow. My aim here is not to suggest counter to Spivak's claim, that the widow sacrifice is necessarily and purely a representation of the patriarchy of Hindu society. I think that Spivak shows that the act of widow suicide was not caste not class bound. The heterogeneity of the self sacrificing widows prevents us from identifying a group consciousness that might have motivated the act. Furthermore, I echo Spivak in saying that, "Obviously I am not advocating *for* the killing of widows" (301). I do wish to reflect on *how* the British justified the law and I argue that the justification in the form of saving brown women through the establishment of a good society is indicative of the imperial violence that leaves the subaltern woman mute.

I take this opportunity to point out that in this section of the essay, Spivak repeatedly refers to the sexed subaltern subject as female as being recovered, or as being lost. I believe that this requires critique. The use of such language (lost, recovering, disappearing, etc.) seems to suggest that the subaltern woman was, at one point, not lost and not in need of recovery. After all, in order to disappear, the subaltern woman as subject needs to have appeared to begin with. In this case, are we to understand that at one time, the subaltern woman was subject and owner of a shared consciousness? In section II, Spivak illustrates how a descriptive definition of class does not suggest a class consciousness. In fact, the fact that a class is even defined descriptively prevents the formation of class consciousness because of the sheer heterogeneity collected within a descriptively defined class. And so when Spivak writes about the subaltern woman was subject disappearing, are we expected to assume that the inclusion of an additional essential descriptor (female) to the already descriptive and differential definition of subaltern suddenly allows the subaltern *as female* to have at one time had a group consciousness? I argue that this is not the

case, and Spivak's language is curious, if not careless. The subaltern female has no more potential for a transformative class consciousness than the ungendered subaltern class in its heterogeneity.

Spivak goes on to move through a number of examples from the ancient Hindu texts that she finds pertinent to *sati*. Finally, she addresses the use of the word itself. *Sati* is the feminine form of the Hindu word *sat*, the present participle of "to be" and "as such means not only being but the True, the Good, the Right" (305). But in its feminine form, it "simply means 'good wife'" (305). Spivak draws an analogy between the British use of the word *sati* (or suttee) to codify the abolition of the widow sacrifice and the error made on the part of Columbus in giving indigenous peoples the nomenclature "American Indian" (305). Through using this word, *sati*, as in (merely) the good wife, the British "impose upon those women a greater ideological constriction by absolutely identifying, *within discursive practice*, good-wifeness with self-immolation on the husband's pyre" (305, emphasis original). The widow, like the subaltern as subject, cannot escape objectivity. She is spoken for, benevolently saved from her own, and in the midst of it all, she is caught between subject and object, never fully either; she cannot speak:

*Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world women' caught between tradition and modernization...The case of the suttee as exemplum of the woman-in-imperialism would challenge and deconstruct this opposition between subject (law) and object-of-knowledge (repression) and mark the place of*

*'disappearance' with something other than silence and nonexistence, a violent aporia between subject and object status (306).*

To illustrate this further, Spivak briefly tells the story of the Sati of Hindu mythology. To paraphrase: Sati, the daughter of a god, arrives at her father's court without an invitation. In anger, her father abuses Sati's husband, Siva and in empathetic response, Sati dies in pain. Siva then arrives and in fury avenges her death. Her body is dismembered and dispersed upon the earth, marking places of Hindu pilgrimage (307). This story "reverse(s) every narrateme of the rite: the living husband avenges the wife's death, a transaction between great male gods fulfills the destruction of the female body" (307). Spivak notes that to read this story as proof of a feminism intrinsic to Hindu culture is as nativist and nostalgic for a lost origin as the contemporary use of Sati as a girl's name is imperialist. "There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (307).

In this vein, Spivak questions whether the example of *sati* can be used to understand other examples of interventionist practice. To simply answer yes would be to submit to the nostalgia for lost origins that Spivak has criticized, and so she chooses instead to use the example of the suicide of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri (actually a relative of Spivak's) in 1926 during the struggle for Indian independence to demonstrate the ideology of *sati* in interventionist practice. (Spivak notes that the use of examples is not done to present a *model* for interventionist practice but finds that examples are helpful in their ability to "illuminate a section of the social text" (307)).

Bhuvanewari was involved in the armed struggle for independence. When she could not complete a political assassination that she had been assigned, she hung herself. Knowing that her suicide would be assumed to be in response to an illicit pregnancy, she killed herself while menstruating to be sure that no such assumption could be made. In doing so, Spivak claims that Bhuvanewari “rewrote the social text of *sati*-suicide in an interventionist way” (307). The self-sacrificing widow could not immolate herself during menstruation. She had to wait until four days after the end of her menstruation. Thus Spivak takes Bhuvanewari’s action as a “subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide” (308), but her story is generally unremembered, or at least not revered. Spivak explains that when investigating Bhuvanewari’s suicide she received two responses. The first questioned her curiosity in Bhuvanewari when her two sisters “led such full wonderful lives” (308). The second, from Bhuvanewari’s nieces, cited illicit love as her motivation for suicide; her story is not remembered as Spivak presents it. And so, in the wake of this story, Spivak claims, “The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (308).

### **The subaltern cannot speak**

Spivak ends her essay with the following brief, yet powerful, paragraph:

*The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with “woman” as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish (308).*

By exploring the dual meaning of representation, the discontinuity between a descriptive class and class consciousness, the heterogeneity of the subaltern, the epistemic violence of the creation of a narrative of imperialism, the nostalgia for lost origins, and the abolition of the widow

sacrifice, Spivak has proved that the subaltern cannot speak. In light of this, she finds no virtue in the benevolent take up of the subaltern woman as a righteous cause in the name of international development agenda. Such attempts only illustrate that representation remains a threat to the victim of imperial subject constitution. However, Spivak does not call for an abandonment of the intellectual project. She does not want for the intellectual to throw up their (her?) hands in frustration, as if to say, “then what is to be done?” Instead, Spivak calls on the *female* intellectual to take up the task of learning to re-present herself as she confronts the inaccessibility of consciousness of the subaltern.

## Part II: Placing Spivak and myself in contemporary development practice

In February of 2016, First Lady Michelle Obama spoke at the American Magazine Media Conference in New York City about the Obama administration's Let Girls Learn Initiative. This program is a collaboration between the White House, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Peace Corps to address barriers that prevent girls in the developing world from attending school. In her speech, the First Lady made the following statement:

*When you are a celebrity or the First Lady, you seem untouchable...These girls look at you and think, 'there is no way I can be like her.' I want them to know, I am them and they are me. This is why it is important to connect with these kids, so they can see themselves in me and then they can push that impossibility out of their heads. (Michelle Obama qtd. by Merritt).*

“I am them and they are me.” I stumbled across an article about Obama’s speech in InStyle magazine in early February, while I was in the midst of this month’s long exploration of Spivak’s essay. I was taken aback. While the notion that an education is all that separates Michelle Obama from a young girl living in the slums of Dar es Salaam makes for a good speech, such naive optimism overlooks the imperial and gendered history that created the modern world. Here was a quote, from a woman whom I respect and admire, illustrating the very female privilege that Spivak calls on postcolonial female intellectuals to unlearn. Of course, Michelle Obama is not a postcolonial intellectual.<sup>1</sup> But her quote led me to consider the implications of Spivak’s essay for Western led capitalist

---

<sup>1</sup> I would add that I am also a postcolonial intellectual as I am not a part of the post-colonial population or diaspora. However, I still find Spivak’s essay a useful way to understand my own intellectual positionality.

development projects, like the Let Girls Learn initiative, that are benevolently motivated and attempt to save brown women from brown men through the establishment of good societies. More importantly, this quote provided a significant moment in the unlearning of my own female privilege.

In this section I explore the some of the implications of Spivak's essay for contemporary development practice. In doing so, I draw on Frantz Fanon's *Algeria Unveiled* to further explore how the manifestation of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' under colonialism is mirrored in neocolonial capitalist driven development by exploring the "dissimulation of patriarchal strategy which apparently grants the women free choice as subject" (Spivak, 299). Next, I examine the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals in order to hypothesize that the War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11 justified a shift in Western driven development efforts to empower women, just as the abolition of *sati* was correlated with a change in British colonial strategy in India. I come to the conclusion that through capitalist driven development, 'good societies' are established in the moments in which 'white men save brown women from brown men' in order to preserve and protect Western and U.S. security and trade interests. Thus, the subaltern woman remains mute; the promotion of Western security and trade interests under the guise of Western benevolence cannot access that inaccessible consciousness. While such an agenda may render women more visible, it does not necessarily render them vocal. Finally, I explore my own positionality and role in the 'saving' complex and consider how this project has affected how I acknowledge the intersections of my own interests, desires, and power.

**‘White men saving brown women from brown men’ in a post 9/11 development agenda.**

Examples of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men,’ whether under the guise of colonialism or neocolonialism in the form of capitalist development, are commonplace. My explication here is certainly not comprehensive, as my goal is to make the connection between Spivak’s argument and contemporary capitalist driven development in order to set up the justification for my own reflection as a development theorist and practitioner. That being said, though I don’t address it in adequate depth here, I find that the implications of Spivak’s essay for development practice, especially development practice that operates with the agenda of empowering women worldwide, demands further reflection and critique.

By contemporary capitalist driven development, I am referring primarily to the work of multilateral and bilateral institutions<sup>1</sup> that seek to promote sustainable economic growth and development while simultaneously preserving favorable trade and security conditions for the core nations which lead them. That is not to suggest that the same saving complex does not affect development that operates outside of this level of institutionality. I simply observe that

---

<sup>1</sup> In light of the fact that this argument is framed around the sentence ‘*white men* saving brown women from brown men,’ I find it important to acknowledge that the faces of the institutions that lead capitalist driven development are not strictly white and male. In fact, of the president of the World Bank, the CEO of the IMF, the Secretary General of the UN, the Administrator of USAID, and the President of the United States, not one is a white man. However, the absence of white male faces in leadership does not imply the absence of white male influence. These institutions are historically white and male, and maintain they that legacy. (That being said, I do find that for my own purposes of self-reflection, the notion of white *women* saving brown women from brown men does demand critique and I attempt to address it in the following section).

motivations on an institutional level are more easily identified. I argue that whether benevolently motivated or not, contemporary development programs designed to empower women are the embodiment of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' in the name of establishing good societies that preserve and protect Western trade and security interests. The justifications for Western efforts to empower the subaltern woman are deeper than righteous benevolence. (And Spivak would argue that even a benevolent motivation is not helpful as the subaltern woman is still silenced). When one examines the colonial and neocolonial history of the developing world, interventions are clearly correlated with the needs of the intervening power at the time.

In Frantz Fanon's *Algeria Unveiled*, Fanon describes the French colonial unveiling of the Algerian woman, a powerful example of the saving of brown women from brown men used to establish a good society in the name of colonial interest. Fanon describes the French colonial campaign against women being forced to wear the tradition *haik*, the veil typically worn by North African Muslim women. The French believed that the veil was a symbol of the oppression of women in Algerian society. They used campaigns for 'unveiling' Algerian women as a means of garnering their support for the colonial cause in hopes that the men would follow. "Specialists in so-called native affairs" determined that beneath the seeming patriarchy of Algerian society there was a "structure of matrilineal essence" (Fanon, 37). This perhaps over-simplified version of Algerian culture justified the French's belief that if they could "win over the women...the rest will follow" (37). What could be understood as colonial benevolence for the rights and humanity of the Algerian woman, like that of the British for the self-sacrificing widow, is shown to be a tool used to advance the colonial cause. I have introduced Fanon because I find his analysis of the unveiling of the Algerian woman useful in an examination of contemporary

development practice. By examining the unveiling of the Algerian woman and the abolition of the widow sacrifice in combination as examples of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ through the establishment of good societies, we can better understand the complexities of contemporary capitalist driven development in which female empowerment is on the agenda.

In 2012, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) hosted Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen on a panel discussion entitled, ‘Securing the Future We Want: Gender Equality, Economic Development, and Environmental Sustainability.’ During the conversation, Sen stated that the “agency and freedom (of women) are among the crucial means for enhancing development” (Amartya Sen quoted "Empowering Women Is Key to Building a Future We Want, Nobel Laureate Says"). This is the rhetoric that surrounds contemporary efforts to empower women and girls in the developing world. Female empowerment is understood to be a “multiplier effect across all other development areas” (“Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment”) and there is certainly evidence to prove this.<sup>1</sup> I am not arguing that against the fact that female empowerment is a useful tool for driving development in other key areas. I simply find that the justification for such a project is similar to the motivation of the French to unveil the Algerian woman; female empowerment is a means to an end. By saving brown women from brown men,

---

<sup>1</sup>The IMF estimates that “if women farmers have the same access as men to productive resources such as land and fertilizers, agricultural output in developing countries could increase by as much as 2.5 to 4 percent.” Additionally, there is significant evidence that when women have more financial control over the household spending decisions, their children are healthier and more likely to attend and stay in school. There are also a number of positive linkages between the level of a mother’s education and the health outcomes of her children. Finally, there is evidence, particularly in India, that when women serve as economic, political, and social actors, their communities are more likely to have access to clean water, sanitation, and other public goods (Revenga, Ana, and Sudhir Shetty).

the Western driven development industry establishes ‘good societies;’ they “secure the future *we want*.” This future is not simply one in which there is clean water and universal education for all. The future that justifies institutional development intervention is highly political and economic. For instance, the mission statement of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is to “partner to end extreme poverty and promote resilient, democratic societies *while advancing our (US) security and prosperity*” (“Mission, Vision and Values,” emphasis my own). In her essay, Spivak cites Mike Davis’s view that:

*It was...the global logic of counter-revolutionary violence which created conditions for the peaceful economic interdependence of a chastened Atlantic imperialism under American leadership...It was multi-national military integration under the slogan of collective security against the USSR which preceded and quickened the interpenetration of the major capitalist economies, making possible the new era of commercial liberalism which flowered between 1958-1973 (Davis, 9 qtd. in Spivak, 290).*

Davis presents the context out of which the contemporary development machine has grown. The justification for Western involvement in the periphery has changed its tune over the past two centuries. If Christian mission and the white man’s burden justified imperial expansion, and counter revolutionary violence justified Western military, political, and economic involvement in the developing world during the second half of the 20th century, then development today is justified by a doctrine of universal human rights that happens to simultaneously guarantee U.S. national security and trade interests.

Events, customs, policies, and practices that in some way threaten these rights become the singular events of domestic confusion which Spivak identifies as the moment of opportunity for the white man to justify intervention in order to save brown women from brown men:

*To mark the moment when not only a civil but a good society is born out of domestic confusion, singular events that break the letter of the law to instill its spirit are often invoked. The protection of women by men often provides such an event...what interests me is that the protection of woman (today the 'third-world woman') becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society which must, at such inaugurative moments, transgress mere legality, or equity of legal policy (Spivak, 298).*

Spivak finds that the British abolition of *sati*, and the necessary “leap of *suttee* from private to public” is clearly correlated with the British colonial strategy transitioning from commercial to administrative (298). A similar correlation can be seen in post 9/11 Western development strategy. Perhaps the most tangible example of Western development agenda is the development goals established by the United Nations. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which became the official agenda of the Western development machine following their inception in 2000, outlined eight target areas upon which development investment in the proceeding decade should focus (“About the MDGs”):

1. To eradicate extreme poverty and
2. To achieve universal primary education
3. To promote gender equality and empower women
4. To reduce child mortality
5. To improve maternal health

6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. To ensure environmental sustainability
8. To develop a global partnership for development

Implementation and success of the MDGs was evaluated in 2015 and the goals were replaced by a new and more extensive set of goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ("Sustainable Development Goals."):

1. **Poverty** - End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. **Food** - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. **Health** - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. **Education** - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. **Women** - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. **Water** - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. **Energy** - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and clean energy for all
8. **Economy** - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. **Infrastructure** - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. **Inequality** - Reduce inequality within and among countries

11. **Habitation** - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. **Consumption** - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. **Climate** - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. **Marine-ecosystems** - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. **Ecosystems** - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. **Institutions** - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. **Sustainability** - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Female empowerment and gender inequality were and are on the agenda of both the MDGs and the SDGs. However the Sustainable Development Goals specific target areas illustrate a shift toward making what was formerly private, public just as the colonial British thrust the private custom of self-immolation into the public sphere. The MDGs were developed and discussed in the years leading up to the millennium, in a pre 9/11 world. The events that occurred on September 11, 2001 mark a distinctive shift in U.S. foreign policy. Just as the Cold War dictated the agenda of U.S. foreign policy during the late 20th century, the War of Terror has drastically changed the way that the West engages with the rest of world. The British shift in colonial

strategy from commercial to administrative is correlated with the pulling of *sati* from private to public. Similarly, the War on Terror and post 9/11 foreign policy has justified a similar shift in development agenda in which the private lives of women are deemed public. This shift is visible when one examines the difference between the way that the MDGs (pre 9/11) and the SDGs (post 9/11) address female empowerment. The following table presents the goals, targets, and indicators for both the MDGs and SDGs respective goals addressing female empowerment<sup>1</sup>:

Millennium Development Goals	Sustainable Development Goals
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women	Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
<b>Targets/Indicators</b>	
<b>Target 4.</b> Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
9. Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education (UNESCO)	<b>Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres</b> , including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
	<b>Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.</b>
10. Ratio of literate women to men, 15-24 years old (UNESCO)	Recognize and value <b>unpaid care and domestic work</b> through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies

---

<sup>1</sup> From "Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women." and "Sustainable Development Goals." And "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment."

	and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
	Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life
<b>11.</b> Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector (ILO)	<b>Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights</b> as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences
	Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as <b>access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.</b>
<b>12.</b> Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament (IPU)	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women
	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all level

I have bolded specific measures that clearly make what was previously private for women, public. While the MDGs focused on school enrollment and political representation, the SDGs enter the home of the woman, even explicitly articulating a need to infiltrate the private sphere. The difference between the nature of the indicators in the MDGs and SDGs is striking. Just as

the practice of *sati* was thrust from the private to the public sphere, just as the Algerian woman's wearing of the veil was deemed a public matter, the private lives of women have been made public under the SDGs. In the name establishing good societies, in which the interests of the West are preserved, brown women are being saved from brown men.

An agenda that attempts to address oppressive practices committed against women is not in and of itself harmful. My argument certainly does not condone the patriarchal oppression that results in the risk factors that the SDGs seek to address. In fact, it is in the dichotomy of this patriarchy and the motivated attempts of the development institutions to end these practices that deem the subaltern woman mute. Spivak makes the same argument regarding *sati*:

*Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world women' caught between tradition and modernization...a violent aporia between subject and object status (Spivak, 306).*

Despite the fact that such an agenda is in part motivated by Western interest, I believe that the agenda itself is not illegitimate. However, a careful distinction must be made between what renders the subaltern woman visible versus what renders her vocal. Foucault may render the prisoners visible in his information groups for prisoners, we have seen that they did not by default become vocal. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals might bring woman's issue to the forefront of the mainstream development—they might render the subaltern woman visible—but they do nothing to render her vocal.

I would like to note that I have identified a correlation, not *necessarily* a causation. The Sustainable Development Goals do not explicitly identify the global War on Terror as a motivation for the shift apparent in the SDGs. I also found a surprising lack of theoretical reflection on the subject. That being said, I would posit that this correlation, in light of the shift in U.S. foreign policy post 9/11 suggests a certain amount of causation. As I have shown, Spivak's essay demonstrates that historically, the interests of Western intervening nations have motivated interventions in the developing world. What I have presented is a suggestion, and I find that further exploration is needed of the correlation between the War on Terror and recent development agenda.

Whether it is Michelle Obama declaring her solidarity with the subaltern woman at the American Magazine Media Conference, Amartya Sen explaining the merits of investing in women before the UN, or a global development agenda that uses the liberation of brown women for the preservation of Western interest, the subaltern woman remains mute. The efforts to champion the subaltern woman and lift her from marginalization do not unlock the consciousness of the subaltern woman. While the development agenda that prioritizes female empowerment certainly begs the postcolonial intellectual to consider the matrix of interests, power and history that motivates it, the agenda itself is not unwelcome. Certainly, programs that are designed with the agenda of empowering women and girls are likely to create some sort of the good for the individuals involved. However, such efforts do nothing for the muted and inaccessible consciousness of the subaltern woman. While an agenda that seeks to empower women may have the potential to render the subaltern woman visible, in some respects, it does nothing for the inaccessible consciousness. Caught between Western benevolence and Western economic and security interests and ongoing patriarchal oppression, the subaltern woman *still* cannot speak.

## **My own (un)learning**

It seems as though I could not have encountered Spivak at a more appropriate time in my own intellectual and professional journey. After spending my junior year in Tanzania, I returned to Columbus overwhelmed by the prospect of navigating my final year of undergrad and my plans for the following years in the wake of such an experience. The week I returned to the U.S., I read “Can the Subaltern Speak” for a reading group, unaware of the subject matter. It seems almost uncanny that as I was struggling to determine how I could place my voice and purpose within the development field, Spivak’s essay fell into my lap. Over the months that followed, I felt that Spivak’s essay demanded further exploration and reflection and chose to use a reading of Spivak to better understand my own positionality as both a theorist and practitioner. Over the past several months, my exploration of Spivak has paralleled my process of preparing and planning for my career following the completion of my undergraduate degree, not without consequence. Spivak’s essay allowed me to contemplate my need to unlearn female privilege and consider my own complicity in ‘white men saving brown women from brown men.’

To begin, I feel compelled to offer some clarifications in light of the argument I have presented thus far. I do not find contemporary capitalist driven development efforts, like those inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals ill intentioned. I stipulate that they are benevolence in the name of preserving Western interest. I also find that such initiatives are often colored by a brand of international (read Western) feminism that leaves the subaltern woman mute and simultaneously provides a righteous justification for Western involvement in the periphery. However, just as Spivak, in her critique of the abolition of the widow sacrifice, is not advocating *for* the killing of widows, I am certainly not arguing *for* the continued marginalization of girls and women in the developing world. My critique of development practice that aims to empower

women is not meant as a call for its abolition. In fact, I intend and expect that my career will find me a part of that very project. I wish to only explore how I, as a Western woman inspired by Spivak, can approach my own work in such field while conscious of my own positionality.

As such, I am a feminist. I am also a white American. I am not a white feminist. In a time and a practical field in which ‘white feminism’<sup>1</sup> is hegemonic, I am moved to acknowledge how my own whiteness and Westernness unavoidably color the brand of feminism to which I adhere. I believe that girls should go to school. I believe that women should have the freedoms and opportunities available to men. In such statements I find that I have implicated myself within ‘white *women* saving brown women from brown me.’ Immediately, I question whether this is in any way an improvement over ‘white *men* saving brown women from brown men.’ In that moment of uncertainty, I turn to Spivak who in the last line of her essay calls on the “female intellectual as intellectual” to attend to the “circumscribed task” (Spivak, 308). In other words, as a white woman, inclined to contribute to the perhaps righteous effort of saving brown women, I am among those called by Spivak to unlearn my privilege and attempt to re-present myself in order to critique the epistemic and colonial violence committed against the subaltern as female.

My own experience as a woman has admittedly contributed to how I contemplate the plight of the subaltern woman. I do not ignore that, by accident of birth, my race, nationality,

---

<sup>1</sup> A feminism that overlooks the ways in which other intersectional identities affect the experience of being female, such as race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc. It is called such because historically mainstream feminist discourse has been developed by (primarily well educated white) women who did not have to considering the intersectionality of other marginalized identities in the experience of being female. Thus the brand of feminism that emerged conflated the feminist experience with the white feminist experience.

socioeconomic status, family structure, etc., have contributed to my realization of freedom and opportunity. In other words, I acknowledge my privilege. And I have found, as Spivak may have predicted, my privilege is my loss.<sup>1</sup> I am attempting to acknowledge my own positionality in order to understand how my own interests, desires, and ideology interact with my position of relative power. But, ultimately, such “gestures can never suffice” (271). Spivak has shown us that to be subaltern, is to be inaccessible. Based my reading of Spivak, I would add that to be a white, western, feminist intellectual is to be *unable to access*. I have learned, both through my experience living and working in Tanzania, my activism in racial justice here in the United States, and my intentional reading of Spivak, that my privilege is my loss. Despite my benevolence, I will never be able to speak *for* the subaltern woman, this much is clear from Spivak’s argument. The subaltern woman is unavoidably mute. But I also find that the project of speaking to (or listening to) the subaltern woman is not easily done. This is unfortunate as this is the space in which Spivak claims that the female intellectual unlearns her female privilege (295).

While living in Tanzania, I found the social stratifications of society difficult to cross. As a white American student, there to study and intern with a grassroots NGO, my social interactions were primarily with educated middle class/elite African Tanzanians, Tanzanians of Indian descent<sup>2</sup>, and other Western ex-patriots living and working in Tanzania. As a Westerner, I was

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Spivak’s observation that in encountering the struggle to overcome one’s won consciousness when writing about the insurgency, the postcolonial intellectual learns that “their privilege is their loss” (287).

<sup>2</sup> Due to the commercial history between East Africa and Southern Asia, there is a large population of originally lower caste Indians living in Tanzania who immigrated in search of economic opportunity and potential for social advancement. This has resulted in a tense relationship between Tanzanians of Indian descent and African Tanzanians as the Asian Tanzanian population tends to hold a high concentration of wealth.

automatically given access to the elite groups (groups 1, 2, and to some extent, 3) from the stratification that Spivak borrows from Guha (284). This is not say that I had no contact with women who would fall into the category of subaltern. In fact, the subaltern woman was all around me. She was woman from whom I bought vegetables or the woman who came once a week to help my host mother clean our home. However, when I did find myself in situations in which I could *speak to* these women, I often found myself at a loss. Unlike Michelle Obama, I did not encounter the subaltern woman and feel that ‘she was me and I was her.’ Though I speak fluent Swahili, our shared femaleness was not enough. While I could marvel over her child or discuss the price of avocados, my whiteness, my Westernness—my general privilege—formed the intangible barrier between us. In these situations, I slowly realized the need to unlearn my female privilege.

As a young, well meaning activist and intellectual, it was tempting to approach the subaltern woman as some object whom I could interview, whose life I could analyze, whose story I could carry back with me to the U.S. and use as the justification for some righteous project. In fact, while in Tanzania, I felt compelled to design and conduct a research project that did this very thing. It wasn’t until I returned the U.S., greeted by Spivak’s impassioned argument that I understood why such a project would have been in vain. While it may have served my own interest, in that I would have produced a piece of research that I could tote back into my life in American academia, it would do nothing for the subaltern woman. It would only have fetishized the concrete experience of a handful of subaltern women and presented the aggregation of their experience as consciousness, thus reconstituting myself as subject of knowledge of the consciousness of the subaltern female. In her 2002 conversation with Jenny Sharpe, Spivak reflects on the meaning of fieldwork,

*The patient effort to learn without the goal of transmitting that learning to others like me, it seems, can be described...as fieldwork...My goal is not to produce well-written texts about those experiences. If that were so, then I would not be able to learn because my energies would be focused toward digesting the material for production.” (Sharpe and Spivak, 620)*

Here is another significant moment in my unlearning. In order to unlearn my female privilege, I must abandon the goal of producing well-written texts about those experiences that attempt to speak for the subaltern woman.

The unlearning of female privilege is not a project that I believe can be accomplished in one nine-month stay or one year of engagement with Spivak’s text. I believe that I will spend my entire career continuously attempting to unlearn my female privilege. It seems that a defining moment in the unlearning process, is the realization that no amount of humility or benevolence can allow the female intellectual or practitioner to access consciousness of the subaltern woman. Such a consciousness simply does not exist due to the heterogeneity and double effacement of the subaltern woman. Furthermore, female intellectual must recognize that she cannot listen to and speak for. Such a project must be abandoned in exchange for learning to speak to the subaltern woman. This is not say that listening to is irrelevant. There is a distinction between listening to in order to speak to, and listening to in order to speak *for*.

At this point, I call into consideration the fact that I don’t anticipate a life or career strictly in academia. While I intend for my theory to center my work, I expect to spend at least the beginning of my professional life in the field, working in development practice. This is an important distinction. As I anticipate leaving the academic space (at least temporarily), I am

forced to consider how the theory that I have become so invested in will affect my practical work. Even Spivak feels that there is a necessary separation between her literary critique and her political activism (Sharpe and Spivak, 615). In her interview with Jenny Sharpe, she discusses instances in which she draws on metaphors and techniques in the field that may be frowned on by critical postcolonial or feminist discourse. Spivak says she “knowingly uses them strategically” (615) in order to achieve her task at hand. Similarly, I anticipate that in working for the machine that is the development industry, I will, on occasion, engage in practices that I could critique from the lens of the critical intellectual. In those moments, I might strategically maintain a separation between my theory and practice while recognizing that a constant process of questioning, learning, and unlearning is healthy for the development practitioner.

In her interview with Sharpe, Spivak compares her fieldwork with subaltern women to her work teaching at American universities, “If we really feel,” Spivak says, “that we are in our profession because we want to do what we’re doing, then our engagement with the world’s disenfranchised women has to be as thick as the engagement with our students” (615). This quote seems an appropriate way to conclude my reflections. If I really feel, that I am in this profession because I want to do what I’m doing, then I must commit to allowing my engagement with the world’s disenfranchised women to be thick, intentional, and meaningful. I will seek to speak to, knowing that I cannot speak for. I will recognize that my privilege is my loss, and remain aware of my complicity in the reconstitution of the Western subject implicit in ‘white men (or women) saving brown women from brown men.’ I will do all of this because I have, through this project, come to understand that the subaltern woman cannot speak.

## Conclusion

In 1999, over ten years after “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was first published, Spivak published *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In the book, Spivak dedicates a chapter entitled “History” to rewriting the fourth section of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Towards the end of the chapter, she reflects on the powerful and emotional last few sentences of her essay in which she declares that, “the subaltern cannot speak.” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 308). Spivak calls this a “passionate lament...an inadvisable remark” (Spivak, “History” 308). In hindsight, Spivak claims that her remark was out of frustration specifically to the failure of Bhuvanewari’s female family members to recognize in her suicide the subaltern rewriting of the widow suicide. “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” (“History” 309).

Spivak distances herself from her claim that the subaltern cannot speak. She even suggests that Bhuvanewari, as subaltern woman, (though Spivak recognizes she was not *truly* subaltern) is actually able to speak *through* Spivak herself! “I am able to read Bhuvanewari’s case and therefore she *has* spoken” (“History” 309). Upon reading this, I immediately thought of the French intellectuals who claimed that the prisoners could speak for themselves, but *only* under the conditions that Foucault himself had provided. In attempting to tame her remarks, Spivak has reconstituted herself as subject.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Spivak ends the chapter by mentioning another female family member of both herself and Bhuvanewari who emigrated from India to the U.S. and was promoted to an executive position within a transnational corporation, “She will be helpful in the emerging South Asian market precisely because she is a well-placed Southern diasporic” (“History” 310). Just paragraphs after Spivak backs away from one radical claim, she offers another, saying that this young relative of Bhuvanewari’s actions are “a historical silencing of the subaltern” and that “Bhuvanewari hanged herself in vain” (311).

To Spivak's disavowal, I ask, what of the reconstitution of the sovereign subject? What of the nostalgia for lost origins? What of the conflation of *darstellen* and *vertreten*? What of the inaccessible and nonexistent class-consciousness? What of 'white men saving brown women from brown men'? What of the establishment of good societies? I cannot accept that Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak was simply an emotional overstepping in that one moment because her *entire* essay laid the foundation for such a claim. While Spivak may distance herself from the claim, I maintain that the subaltern, especially as female, cannot speak, perhaps not now more than ever.

Using Spivak's essay, I have explored the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals as semioses of a contemporary development agenda that prioritizes female empowerment—the saving of brown women from brown men, in order to preserve Western interest through the establishment of good societies. I find that, caught within colonial legacy, patriarchy, Western benevolence, and Western interest, the subaltern woman remains mute. The brand of international feminism that in part motivates these attempts to empower her, fails to recognize the sheer heterogeneity of her existence.

In light of this, I have asked myself what this means for me, a white American woman beginning a career in both development practice and theory. I am specifically drawn to Spivak's call to the female intellectual to unlearn her female privilege and learn to speak to, rather than for, the subaltern woman. Through my reading of Spivak, I have identified my task. As a white woman,

---

complicit in the saving of brown women from brown men, I must abandon the temptation of sheer benevolence and acknowledge my inability to speak for the subaltern woman.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Joel Wainwright for your mentorship and teaching throughout my undergraduate career. Beginning with “Geography of Development” to the completion of this project, I am grateful for your encouragement, guidance, and your introducing me to this intellectual journey. I also thank Dr. Denise Noble and Dr. Ted Sammons for serving on my defense committee and for supporting my academic journey through your dedicated and passionate teaching.

I am grateful to Lainie Rini and Henry Peller, for their friendship, support, and willingness to discuss Spivak, Sanyal, Karatani, and the plight of being a young Marxist at length over many cups of coffee. And finally, I thank my parents. Despite a general lack of amusement for piles of books on Marxist theory, my use of words like positionality and subalternity, and four years of rants about the hegemony of capitalist development, I am eternally grateful for your support and dedication to raising a daughter who feels compelled and empowered to embark on such a project as this. This didn't happen by accident, so I thank you.

## References

"About the MDGs." UN Millennium Project. UNDP, 2006. Web. 28 Mar. 2016.

<<http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/>>.

Anderson, Perry. In the Tracks of Historical Materialism. Verso, 1983. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism. Trans. Harry Zohn. Verso, 1983. Print.

Davis, Mike. "The Political Economy of Late-Imperial America." *New Left Review* 143 (1984): Print.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Richard Hurley. Viking Press, 1977. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. "Of Grammatology as a Positive Science." *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.

"Empowering Women Is Key to Building a Future We Want, Nobel Laureate Says." UNDP. N.p., 25 Sept. 2012. Web. 28 Mar. 2016.

<<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2012/09/27/empowerin-g-women-is-key-to-building-a-future-we-want-nobel-laureate-says.html>>.

Fanon, Frantz. "Algeria Unveiled." *A Dying Colonialism*. Grove Press, 1965. Print.

Foucault, Michel, and Gilles Deleuze. "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Cornell University Press, 1977. 205–217. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1972. Print.

- “Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.”: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform." Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. United Nations, 2015. Web. 28 Mar. 2016. <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/women/decisions>>.
- "Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women." Millenium Project. UNDP, 2006. Web. <<http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/gti.htm#goal3>>.
- Guha, Ranajit. *Subaltern Studies I: Writing on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford University Press, 1982. Print.
- Marx, Karl. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.” *Marx: Later Political Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 1996. 31–127. Print.
- Merritt, Jennifer. “Michelle Obama to Girls Everywhere: ‘I Am Them and They Are Me.’” *InStyle Magazine* 2 Feb. 2016. Web.
- "Mission, Vision and Values." USAID. N.p., 2016. Web. 28 Mar. 2016. <<https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/mission-vision-values>>.
- Revenga, Ana, and Sudhir Shetty. “Empowering Women Is Smart Economics.” *Finance and Development* (2012): n. pag. Web. 28. Mar. 2016. <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2012/03/pdf/revenga.pdf>>
- Sanyal, Kalyan. *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism*. Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Sharpe, Jenny, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Politics and the Imagination.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.2 (2002): 610–624. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson. Univ of Illinois Pr, 1988. 271–313. Print.

-----, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Interpretations." *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (1982): 259–  
278. Print.

"Sustainable Development Goals." United Nations. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Mar. 2016.

<<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>>.