

Deconstructing the Moment of Representation with Spivak and Derrida  
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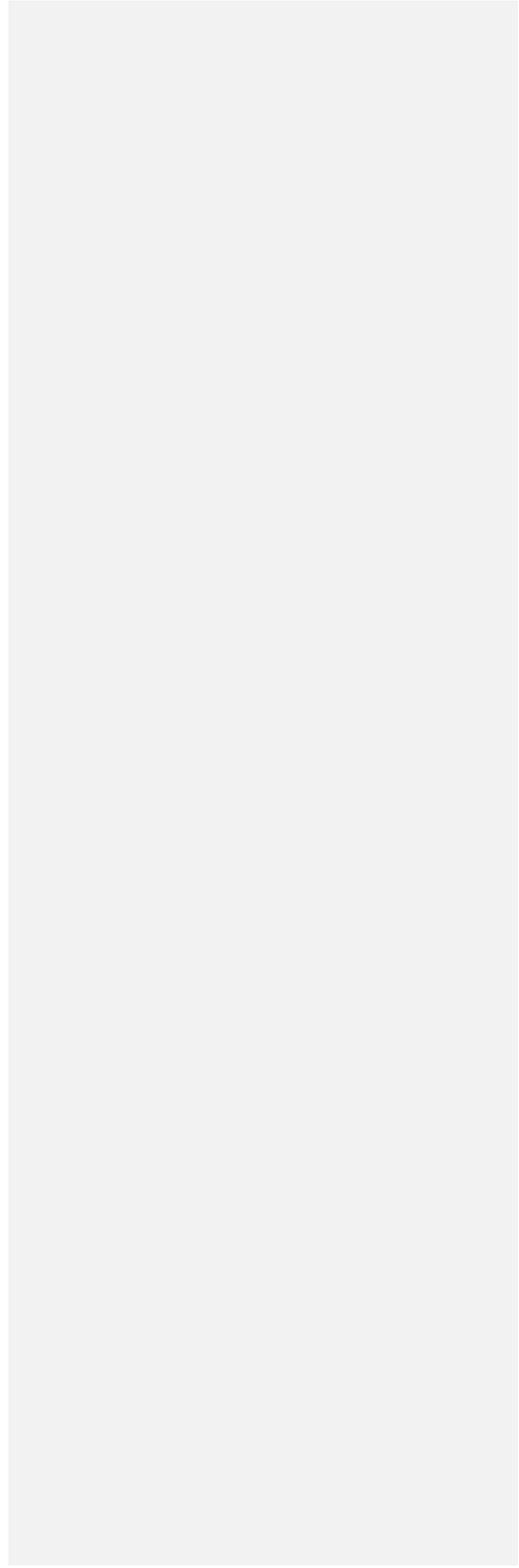
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**Abstract.**

This essay aims to employ a deconstructive understanding of identity and representation in order to identify what an ethical approach to representation should look like, especially with regard to the empowerment of minority and marginalized groups. I turn to Gayatri Spivak and Jacques Derrida who provide the framework for my scope of inquiry. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak problematizes the aim of postcolonialism to constitute a postcolonial identity by giving voice to indigenous cultural narratives that counteract dominating Western imperialist ideologies. The problem with this aim lies in its tenuous commitment to a stable, persistent ‘truth’ of identity that can be understood apart from context, which, according to Spivak, results in the failure to recognize how the “epistemic violence” of imperialism has obstructed the subaltern subject’s ability to both speak and be heard. To justify Spivak’s concerns, I will look to her foundation in Derridean deconstructive analysis, which is built upon the premise that all meaning resides in the unstable relations between signifiers, rather than a fixed referent. With her Derridean background, Spivak advocates for strategic essentialism as a way for marginalized groups to achieve discursive power. Due to well-known dangers of essentialism that are highlighted by a deconstructive lens, however, I argue for a representational approach that goes *beyond essentialism* and seeks to produce an *illimitable subjectivity* by allowing room for change and possibility. With this goal in mind, I then offer potential strategies for the empowerment of minority and marginalized groups.



**Introduction.**

What does it mean to represent and be represented? Why do we need an accountability of representation? At first glance, these questions seem axiomatic. We know the answer already. Of course representation matters— power is exercised in using words, speech, and imagery to portray subjects in a certain way, for it dictates the kinds of spaces, status, and relations which subjects can occupy. We can be aware of how words and images inform our knowledge and attitude toward subjects, but often, we are not. In our awareness, however, we often separate the thing itself from its representation, with the assumption that there is more ‘beneath the surface’— that there is a truth to be gotten right or wrong. The representation is regarded as a poor stand-in for the thing itself— a pale copy, or even worse, a derivative which, through its unavoidable *difference*, ends up distorting the original. As such, the ‘re-presentation’ or derivative tends to be placed in a subordinate, collateral relation to the ‘presentation’ or original. While representation matters, it is safe to say that it has no definitive bearing on the identity of the represented, which beneath it all, retains the same essence it always had.

Is this right? To challenge this preconception, we must consider what happens in moments of representation: not just of individuals, but groups, histories, and cultures. We never get the ‘full picture,’ but simply what is present to us, be it speech, written lines, a story, or image. And yet those signifiers are enough to transgress time and space and generate meaningful concepts through their relationships with other signifiers. Just a single, transient moment of representation can typify an object and bid certain associations or connotations to mind, regardless of how ‘truthful’ or accurate they may be. This happens all the time, with first impressions, stereotypes, and general misconceptions that we carry wittingly or unwittingly. Because of this, we can recognize that truth is one thing, while the meaning we grasp is quite

another. ‘True meaning,’ whatever that may be, is elusive.

Despite this, the idea of truth as persistent, fixed, meaning-in-itself has taken hold of philosophers for centuries. When Jacques Derrida developed what is commonly referred to as “deconstruction” during the 1960s-70s, he untethered meaning from its privileged relationship to truth— from a fixed referent— and designated it instead as the product of *difference*, which emerges expressly through the appearance of objects in time and space, in *relation* to each other, and never by themselves. By asserting that meaning resides in the unstable relations between signifiers, he challenges the notion of an “absolutely signified content, an absolutely identifiable or univocal meaning” which transcends its context.<sup>1</sup> His theories have been met with confusion, criticism, and outright rejection, yet Derrida’s enormous influence on contemporary philosophy, and other disciplines such as comparative literature and linguistics besides, is indisputable. Unsurprisingly, his influence extends to ethico-political theory as well, where the issue of human representation is concerned.

The Bengali scholar, literary critic, and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is renowned for applying deconstructive criticism to postcolonialism, an academic discipline tasked with responding to the ideological consequences of imperialism and colonialism by instating new narratives from the ex-colonial subject’s point of view. As a postcolonial theorist, the majority of Spivak’s work is concerned with the ethico-political responsibility we have to the Subaltern: marginalized members of society whose voices are not heard, and as a result, lack discursive power. In her best-known essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she chronicles the historical and ideological factors that have led to the Subaltern’s inability to speak and thereby achieve political agency. Her central question of the Subaltern’s agency, and the dissenting

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Rapaport, *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 9.

answer she gives in response, has labeled her an iconoclast in her field. This is little wonder, considering that as a self-labeled “deconstructivist,” Spivak attributes her own work to be heavily influenced by Jacques Derrida, another iconoclast of his time.

In this essay, I will examine Gayatri Spivak’s characterization of the Subaltern, and present the problem that she identifies with postcolonialism’s attempt to establish counter-narratives by allowing room for subaltern peoples to speak for themselves, in their own voices. The problem with this aim lies in its tenuous commitment to a stable, persistent ‘truth’ of identity that can be understood apart from context, which, according to Spivak, results in the failure to recognize how the “epistemic violence” of imperialism and colonialism has obstructed the subaltern subject’s ability to both speak and be heard by the ‘center.’ To justify Spivak’s concerns, I will turn to her own foundation in Derridean deconstructive analysis. I will then present Spivak’s own sanctioned method of recourse for the Subaltern—the use of strategic essentialism in moments of representing—along with its potential drawbacks. In response to strategic essentialism, I will engage with the same Derridean framework that Spivak employs in order to explore the possibilities of an approach to representation that goes *beyond essentialism* and seeks to produce an *illimitable subjectivity* that allows room for change and possibility, instead of closing off, limiting, reducing, and resisting change. Finally, I aim to determine what these investigations yield as far as viable strategies for the empowerment of minority and/or marginalized groups.

Having set the stage for my thesis, I will now return to the question of what it means to represent and be represented, and offer Spivak’s critique of postcolonialism as insight.

## **I. Spivak and the Silencing of the Subaltern.**

### *The Aim of Postcolonial Studies*

Postcolonial studies emerged as a discipline after the end of World War II and gained traction in the 1970s-80s, following the widespread decolonization of countries in Africa, Asia, and the West Indies. At the time of World War I, European powers held sovereignty over approximately 85% of the globe, but sustained losses from World War II, a changing global politics, and various external pressures made this no longer feasible. More and more colonies began to assert their independence through various ways, which led to the unraveling of Western imperialism over the next several decades. Between 1945 and 1960 alone, three dozen new states in Asia and Africa achieved autonomy or outright independence from their Western colonial rulers. These events, and the growing critiques of imperialism and Eurocentrism that followed, mark the era referred to as postcolonialism.

After being liberated from their former rulers, newly formed independent nations faced the heavy task of determining themselves, not just politically and economically, but culturally as well. They sought to assert control over not only territorial boundaries—albeit ones carved out by the imperial powers—but also their language and history. The sheer extent of imperialism's impact on colonial education, institutions, and infrastructure, however, has complicated the way decolonized peoples express and view their cultural identity. What remains of the 'native' psyche, of an indigenous past and culture after Western history has been taught and its values imposed over decades of rule? What does "postcolonial" even mean if former colonies are by no means free of colonial influence? Along with the struggle for former colonies to apprehend themselves comes their struggle to be recognized by former oppressors, which can only be done by appealing to *their* politics, in *their* language. If the West continues to dominate political and

intellectual discourse as its main authoritative Subject, how can formerly subjugated peoples overcome their subordination as an objectified 'Other'?

These are questions that concern scholars of postcolonialism. As an academic discipline, postcolonial studies aims to respond to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism by critically examining the uneven power relationships that sustain colonialism and neo-colonialism, including the social, political, and cultural narratives surrounding the colonizer and the colonized, and in doing so, to tip the scales and constitute a postcolonial subject through establishing narratives from their point of view. To claim subjectivity (and thereby be ascribed agency), one needs to have an established identity with a traceable history, and above all, a voice to represent that identity and history. Who can know themselves better than the postcolonial subject? Hence postcolonialism's aim to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subjugated under various forms of imperialism by allowing them to speak for themselves, in their own voices, and in doing so, to determine their own postcolonial identity.

The postcolonial subject's ability to speak was brought into question, however, by Gayatri Spivak in her best-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which occupies a pivotal role in postcolonial theory for applying deconstructive analysis to Marxist and feminist theories as well as Subaltern Studies. In writing on subalternity, Spivak places herself within the scope of the Subaltern Studies Collective, a group of South Asian scholars concerned with forming a new narrative of South Asian history in light of the end of the colonial era. While many thinkers have contributed to the analysis of subalternity both inside and outside South Asia, "the crucial marker, and the orienting question, of Spivak's particular intervention within the theorization of subalternity revolves around the question of gender."<sup>2</sup> In her essay, Spivak focuses primarily on

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<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Morris, introduction to *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 10.

the subaltern as female, and sharply exposes the historical and ideological factors that have led to the production of subalternity before giving her own sobering pronouncement: “The subaltern cannot speak.”<sup>3</sup> To argue otherwise—that the Subaltern subject *can* speak meaningfully or authoritatively on their own behalf, and that one simply needs to listen—is to misunderstand the extent to which **historical and ideological context** has conditioned not only the Subaltern’s permissible speech acts, but their very subjectivity as it is produced and understood.

Commented [1]: historic representation?

Before one can engage with the implications of Spivak’s claim, it must first be understood what “the subaltern” refers to and what comprises “subalternity,” both in a general context pertaining to Subaltern Studies and to Spivak’s original essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

#### *Who are the Subaltern?*

The term “subaltern” was first used by the Italian Marxist theorist and politician Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-35):

...[Gramsci’s use of the term subaltern] seems to precisely denote subordinate groups such as the rural peasantry in Southern Italy, whose achievement of social and political consciousness was limited and their political unity weak. In so far as the subaltern had not achieved consciousness of their collective economic and social oppression as a class, the subaltern is quite different from the industrial proletariat.<sup>4</sup>

The use of “industrial proletariat” in this passage is a nod to Marxist theory and designates the class of wage workers engaged in industrial production and whose chief value is derived from their ability to work. These workers feature in the hegemonic structure of the economy by comprising the exploited base. The subaltern, in contrast, do not toil under the economic,

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 96.

political, or military control of the state. Instead, subaltern groups, which comprise “men and women among the illiterate peasantry, Aboriginals, and the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat,”<sup>5</sup> exist outside of society’s established institutions and lack citizenship and involvement in the institutional sphere, and with it, a political and economic identity. Therefore, they lack class consciousness and the class interests that go with it. In her essay, Spivak appeals to a passage from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* in describing the situation of the subaltern:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection amongst peasant proprietors, the identity of their interests forms no community, no national linkage and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or constitutional convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.<sup>6</sup>

These words of Marx apply fittingly to the subaltern. Spivak goes on to stipulate that Marx’s “model of social incoherence” implies “not only a critique of the subject as *individual* agent but a critique of the subjectivity of a *collective* agency.”<sup>7</sup> The subaltern may have self-interests, but they are incapable of asserting *class* interests due to their lack of a political identity arising from a unified class consciousness. Crucially, subalternity is *not* a social class or a national or political identity in itself, but rather, an “identity-in-differential” defined by the historian Ranajit Guha as the difference between the “total Indian population and all those described as the ‘elite.’”<sup>8</sup> It is a “place of in-betweenness” whose indeterminacy creates “many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants” all of whom may belong under the umbrella

Commented [2]: It's related to class!

Commented [3]: Clarify this. It's not about nationality!

We need a clearer understanding of whom it can apply to, and whether class is always necessarily a part of it.

Mark Spivak's redefinition. She's building off of Marx and Gramsci and Guha, but how is she broadening it?

Look back to Bhubaneswari to flesh this out.

<sup>5</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 37.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: Postmodern Interpretations*, ed. Mark Cowling and James Martin (1852; repr., London: Pluto Press, 2002), 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

term of ‘people’ or ‘subaltern groups.’<sup>9</sup> The very discontinuity of subalternity itself poses a challenge which the Subaltern Studies group must confront if they are to carry out their project to “rethink Indian colonial historiography” from the subaltern perspective, whatever that may be.<sup>10</sup> We can surmise, however, that the very abstraction of subalternity as a ‘non-elite’ differential denotes their marginalization and unrecognizability in relation to the ‘center,’ or elite. Thus, subalternity can be understood as a position of being denied the means through which people have a voice in society—participation and recognition in established institutions.

Postcolonialism refers to subalternity as a position shared predominantly by decolonized peoples of South Asia and Africa who occupy the lowest strata of society, but Spivak clarifies that “Simply by being postcolonial or a member of an ethnic minority, we are not ‘subaltern.’ That word is reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space.”<sup>11</sup> To be situated in subalternity is to be buffered by individuality, unaware of one’s place in relation to the collective, disconnected from resources that could otherwise be gained through membership in a union strengthened by communication and solidarity. Thus, heterogeneity and marginalization both contribute to what Spivak asserts is the most crucial aspect of subalternity: lack of voice. In her introduction to “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Rosalind Morris writes: “Subalternity is not that which could, if given a ventriloquist, speak the truth of its oppression or disclose the plenitude of its being...For, in Spivak’s definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed.”<sup>12</sup> Specifically, it is discursive power that is withheld from the subaltern. The inability to speak and be heard constitutes their ‘nature,’ and only once their

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<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 80.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Morris, introduction to *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 8.

nature is shifted from subalternity can they speak. To discern whether this is possible, we will now follow Spivak as she traces the conditions that have led to subalternity in the first place.

### *The Role of Ideology and Representation*

Why can't the subaltern speak? Spivak attributes the production of subalternity as a structured *silencing* to historical and ideological factors arising from imperialism and colonialism. Specifically, she identifies three effects that imperialism's global capitalistic endeavors have had on colonial social production at large: 1) "the subject-production of worker and unemployed within nation-state ideologies in its Center"; 2) "the increasing subtraction of the working class in the Periphery from the realization of surplus value and thus from 'humanistic' training in consumerism"; and 3) "the large-scale presence of para-capitalist labor as well as the heterogeneous structural status of agriculture in the Periphery."<sup>13</sup> All of these factors have contributed to subalternity by enforcing social stratification while inhibiting the development of class consciousness. The most vital element to recognize at play here, however, is ideology—the set of beliefs and values that underlie and are reproduced by social relations. Spivak invokes Michel Foucault in stating that "a developed theory of ideology [must] recognize its own material production in institutionality, as well as in the 'effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge' (*Power/Knowledge* 102)."<sup>14</sup> The ideology of the West, in particular, signifies a hierarchical divide between the 'Center' (structures and institutions affiliated with imperial powers which benefit from exploitation) and 'Periphery' (areas subjected to exploitation) which is reflected in Western narratives of history and

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<sup>13</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

intellectual discourse. Spivak warns that such ethnocentrism in the production of knowledge, and the intellectual's complicity in it, cannot be ignored.

To illustrate this, Spivak refers to a 1972 conversation between two esteemed French intellectuals—Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze—called “Intellectuals and Power.” In this conversation, Foucault and Deleuze emphasize the most important contributions of French poststructuralist theory in Spivak’s view: “first, that the networks of power/desire/interest are so heterogeneous, that their reduction to a coherent narrative is counterproductive—a persistent critique is needed; and second, that intellectuals must attempt to disclose and know the discourse of society's Other.”<sup>15</sup> Even so, says Spivak, “the two systematically and surprisingly ignore the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history” throughout the conversation.<sup>16</sup>

Such omissions are revealed through Foucault and Deleuze’s commitment to the struggling workers’ agency manifested as desire, which propels them on the path to revolution: “In the name of desire, they tacitly reintroduce the undivided subject into the discourse of power.”<sup>17</sup> Their own maintenance of desire *undifferentiated* by ideology leads to:

...an unquestioned valorization of the oppressed as subject, the ‘object being,’ as Deleuze admiringly remarks, ‘to establish conditions where the prisoners themselves would be able to speak.’ Foucault adds that ‘the masses know perfectly well, clearly’—once again the thematics of being undecieved—they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well’ (FD 206, 207).<sup>18</sup>

As Spivak observes, this stance only indicates their firmly ensconced position within a decidedly Western framework which produces subjects as desiring workers and consumers through

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

capitalist ideology. It *cannot* pertain to the international division of labor, or in other words, the non-Western global stage procured through capitalism. Why? Because when goods are produced in developing nations and immediately transferred to the developed nations instead of being sold in the local market, the “link to training in consumerism is almost snapped.”<sup>19</sup> To ensure a cheap labor force in the so-called ‘Third World’ periphery, workers must *not* be systematically trained in a consumer ideology which, Spivak notes, would have “prepared the ground for resistance through the coalition politics Foucault mentions”<sup>20</sup> by entitling them to the desire for quality goods as well as protective labor rights.

Yet again, Foucault and Deleuze’s commitment to the “ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern,”<sup>21</sup> as Spivak puts it, is the result of a failure to acknowledge ideology’s role in subject-constitution. By ignoring ideology, Spivak argues, they ignore the problem of representation, for it is “The refusal of a sign-system [that] blocks the way to a developed theory of ideology in the ‘empirical.’”<sup>22</sup> She targets Foucault and Deleuze’s reading of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, whose original German denotes two different (yet related) senses of representation used in the political context: *Vertretung*, ‘speaking for’ or ‘proxy’; and the economic context: *Darstellung*, ‘re-presenting’ or ‘portrait.’ These differences become buried when translated to a single word in English. As such, Foucault and Deleuze slide over the contrast between the two senses ‘proxy’ and ‘portrait’ and miss their vital complicity, which would have required them to acknowledge the constitutive power that accompanies any attempt to represent another, and thereby question their own impact as investigators. Instead, they presuppose a “surreptitious subject of power and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34.

desire marked by the transparency of the intellectual”—a subject who can speak, act, and know their own conditions.<sup>23</sup> This notion, Spivak warns, belongs to the “exploiters’ side of the international division of labor,”<sup>24</sup> and is problematic in that 1) it gives “unquestioning support to the financialization of the globe”<sup>25</sup> and advancement of capitalist neocolonialism which operate under the banner of ‘development’ by constructing financial motives; and 2) it absolves the need for any critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formations and systems of political economy.

Above all, however, it shunts the problem of representation. Spivak argues that adopting theories which *avow* ideology and its reproduction of social relations is crucial for understanding the relations between desire, power, and subjectivity. Rather than reintroducing the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire, however, theories of ideology *must* pay strict attention to the category of representation in its two senses, and how “the staging of the world in representation—its scene of writing, its *Darstellung*—dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes,’ paternal proxies, agents of power—*Vertretung*.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, they must recognize how the manner in which subjects are represented, in literature, art, public spaces, and so on, informs abiding attitudes toward those subjects, and thus contributes to a broader ideology with powerfully constituting effects. This can be seen through the West’s pervasive portrayal of the non-European subject throughout history as unenlightened, uncivilized, exotified, and ergonomically backwards, clearly in need of an external aide to march them along the path to development. A striking example of this is Rudyard Kipling’s infamous poem titled “The White

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 33.

Man's Burden," whose chauvinist sentiment was used to justify imperialism. Above all, Spivak writes, "...the clearest available example of such epistemic violence was the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other."<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the "epistemic violence" of imperialism—which is precisely what Foucault and Deleuze ignore—has much to answer for in producing the muted plight of the subaltern. Spivak states that in the constitution of that Other of Europe, "great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary— not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law." This erasure of history effectively reduces the Other from subject status (having agency) to object status (lacking agency). Speaking of object status, no member of the Other is objectified more thoroughly than the subaltern woman, for whom Spivak is most concerned. The ideological construction (read: representation) of gender keeps the male dominant at all times as "an object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency...If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."<sup>28</sup> There can be no agency for the subaltern woman when she is signified as the object of her husband. Even when imperialism intervenes to establish the "good society," it is "marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind."<sup>29</sup> Spivak refers to *sati*, the Hindu ritual of widow- immolation that was outlawed in India during British rule: "The gravity of sati was that it was ideologically cathected as 'reward,' just as the gravity of imperialism was that it was ideologically cathected as 'social mission.'"<sup>30</sup> The subject of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 56.

female is caught somewhere in between these oppositions, just like subalternity itself:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuffling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development.<sup>31</sup>

Spivak diagnoses this peculiar fate of the subaltern woman as an "aporia," or confusion.<sup>32</sup> Her subject status is only rendered when she has the opportunity to annihilate herself, forcing her to disappear, while her object status is rendered whenever she has the opportunity to present herself, making her speech meaningless unless construed through a patriarchal lens. Spivak uses the example of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman who hanged herself after realizing she could not go through with a political assassination she had been entrusted with as a member of an armed resistance group fighting for Indian independence. To avoid her death being misread as a way to escape the shame of an illegitimate pregnancy (which according to the dominant patriarchal narrative was the only conceivable reason women could have to hang themselves), Bhubaneswari waited until menstruation signaled her lack of pregnancy before she committed suicide. And yet, fifty years later, misbegotten love was framed as her motivation anyway, by women in her own family. Her attempt to speak had failed.

Spivak's declaration, "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read," comes as a reaction to Bhubaneswari's tragic story.<sup>33</sup> Even though Bhubaneswari, a member of the bourgeois Independence movement, cannot be considered a 'true' subaltern, Spivak argues that as a woman, she lays claim to subalternity by virtue of women's silencing through various circumstances, one being a lack of institutional validation thanks to an obstructing patriarchal

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 63.

ideology:

The point I was trying to make was that if there was no valid institutional background for resistance, it could not be recognized. Bhubaneswari's resistance against the axioms that animated sati could not be recognized. She could not speak. Unfortunately, for sati, a caste-Hindu practice, there was an institutional validation, and I unraveled as much of it as I could. My point was not to say that they couldn't speak, but that, when someone did try to do something different, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation.<sup>34</sup>

The problem of validation is one of Spivak's biggest concerns, especially in spheres of academic discourse possessed by the Center, which aim to produce knowledge of the Periphery, or marginalized and thereby underrepresented subjects.

#### *Spivak's Concern with Marginality*

In an essay titled "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value," Spivak discusses the occupation of identity in the sphere of academic discourse when used particularly towards the goal of giving 'marginality' a subject-position in literary and cultural critique. She declares, "Every academic knows that one cannot do without labels," basing this remark on the fact that "Presumed cultural identity often depends on a name" that is distinguishable from others if it wishes to not only be recognized by the Center, but also represented in the Center's institutions of power.<sup>35</sup> Oftentimes, however, a "cultural identity is trust upon one because the centre wants an identifiable margin..." and in such cases, if not all, "claims for marginality assure validation from the centre."<sup>36</sup>

Such "claims for marginality" are troubling for Spivak due to the authorization they require to determine who can make these claims. How does one exhibit 'true' marginality? Is

<sup>34</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "In Response: Looking Back, Looking Forward," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 228.

<sup>35</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value," in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 221, 219.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

there a genuine Bengali, for example, and if so, what is the ‘authenticity’ that the name is supposed to identify? She holds that post-colonialism is coded by the effects of imperialism to the extent that the marginal figure cannot speak unless they are positioned within and in relation to the dominant discourse: i.e. identify as “Third World” with full consciousness of their marginal status. Thus, we are unable to know what the authentic, purely indigenous inhabitant is without appealing to its representation in Western spaces, in terms of Western concepts and ideology:

... whatever the identitarian ethnicist claims of native or fundamental origin [nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, even culturalism]... what is being effectively reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of whose production was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. They’re being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept metaphors for which no historically adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space, yet that does not make the claims less important. A concept metaphor without an adequate referent is a catachresis. These claims for founding catachresis also make postcoloniality a deconstructive case.<sup>37</sup>

It may be troubling to imagine that as a self-ascribed postcolonial herself, Spivak can reject the notion of a ‘genuine essential referent’ or ‘pure marginal figure’ that exists outside of its relation to the center. What emerges instead of an ‘authentic,’ ‘native or fundamental origin,’ however—the catachresis—is not an emptiness or a loss. Nor is it an inner truth or fact of identity that remains unsalvageable, either. What we must learn by Spivak’s disclosing of the term, however, can only be done by returning to her deconstructive influences, which are reflected in her treatment of the subaltern throughout her work. At the end of the original version of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak states:

I have attempted to use and go beyond Derridean deconstruction, which I do not celebrate as feminism as such. However, in the context of the problematic I have addressed, I find his morphology much more painstaking and useful than Foucault's and Deleuze's

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 225.

immediate, substantive involvement with more 'political' issues—the latter's invitation to 'become woman' - which can make their influence more dangerous for the US academic as enthusiastic radical. Derrida marks radical critique with the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation. He reads catachresis at the origin. He calls for a rewriting of the utopian structural impulse as 'rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us'. I must here acknowledge a long-term usefulness in Jacques Derrida which I seem no longer to find in the authors of *The History of Sexuality* and *Mille Plateaux*.<sup>38</sup>

We have already seen that Foucault and Deleuze's "substantive involvement with more 'political' issues" fails Spivak through its lack of commitment to the role that ideology plays through representation. So how does Derrida provide a better account? It turns out that Derridean deconstruction can take us far in understanding how a *signifying* context at large has conditioned not only the Subaltern's permissible speech acts, but their very subjectivity as it is *produced* and *understood*.

## II. A Recourse in Derrida.

Jacques Derrida is an important figure in comparative literature and the philosophy of language for having developed the 'theory of deconstruction,' also referred to as deconstructive analysis, which is built upon the premise that all meaning resides in the unstable relations between signifiers, rather than a fixed referent. This theory was introduced into philosophical literature by his best-known work *Of Grammatology*, which was actually translated into English by Gayatri Spivak herself. Through Derrida, we can come to view the 'historical and ideological context' which I have referred to previously throughout this essay, as a context of *signifying* marks or events from which all meaning is derived. This will be crucial if we are to understand the notion of the catachresis the way Spivak has framed it for postcoloniality.

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<sup>38</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, 104.

*Breaking Down the Ontic/Ontological Distinction*

Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is largely a response to the history of philosophy, particularly the ideas of Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Searle, and Saussure. One of its main targets is Heidegger's ontic-ontological distinction. For Heidegger, the ontological, which relates to a pure essential 'being,' comes before the ontic, which denotes the contextual, embodied expression and experience of 'being' in the 'real' world. In this hierarchy, the sense of 'being' or presence occupies the highest rung, and is where the notion of a fixed, immutable, accessible truth comes from. The ontic expression is merely a derived representation of the ontological, and as such, offers only a subjective, biased access to the truth. Derrida challenges this view by asserting that the possibility of the very concept of 'being' or existence is conditioned by its context— not merely the presence of objects, but the relation between them. Given the division of space that must be produced at the same time that objects appear, how can one say that 'being' comes first? Rather than 'being,' it is the difference between objects that enables us to make sense of them. The ontic-ontological distinction itself, then, is nothing but a derivative of the "originary" of difference:

To come to recognize, not within but on the horizon of the Heideggerian paths, and yet in them, that the sense of being is not a transcendental or trans-epochal signified ( even if it was always dissimulated within the epoch ) but already, in a truly unheard of sense, a determined signifying trace, is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference... entity and being, ontic and ontological, "ontico-ontological" are, in an original style, derivative with regard to difference; and with respect to what I shall later call difference, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring.<sup>39</sup>

Along with this difference, which by definition emerges from the relation of objects to each other, comes a necessary *deferral* of meaning resulting from the possibility of other objects

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<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (1976; repr., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 23.

coming into relation. This is known as *differance*. Yet again, if the only way we can understand objects is by their relation to each other, then what is signified can only be understood in terms of difference. Objects are ‘read’ in terms of their inescapable relations to other objects.

Therefore, all objects must be signifiers, for there can be no signified that ‘transcends’ these relations and remains ‘absolute and irreducible.’ Given this fact, how can we possibly attempt to get past any kind of contextual, embodied ontic presentation to an ontological being-in-itself?

This is where Derrida takes down Heidegger’s notion of truth, through the “destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of truth...[which is] more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos...”<sup>40</sup> Thus, Derrida transfers the source of meaning from an absolute, essential referent to *differance*—that which emerges expressly through the appearance of objects in time and space, in *relation* to each other, and never by themselves.

What follows from Derrida’s concept of *differance* is that meaning is never finalized, but rather suspended. The relations between signifiers change over time, old ones fade, and new ones come into play; thus, there is always the possibility for new meaning to be created. Due to the instability of the context of signifiers, meaning itself becomes unstable, for there can no longer be a complete, coherent text that converges onto a single meaning. However, just because meaning is never finalized, doesn’t mean it’s indeterminable. One can still find a meaning even if the meaning doesn’t occur on its own or in itself. Our ability to grasp meaning—indeed, to possess any concepts in the first place, is given through what Derrida refers to as the *trace*.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 10.

*Deriving the Trace*

The ‘trace’ may be described as something that’s not quite present or manifest— a sense emanating from the chain of signifiers building and contrasting with each other. It is meaning unfurling and constituting itself with each additional signifier that comes into place:

The trace, where the relationship with the other is marked, articulates its possibility in the entire field of the entity...The field of the entity, before being determined as the field of presence, is structured according to the diverse possibilities— genetic and structural— of the trace...the trace whereof I speak is not more natural (it is not the mark, the natural sign, or the index in the Husserlian sense) than cultural, not more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual.<sup>41</sup>

The trace is what enables us to grasp meaning not simply from words we read (in which the meaning alters and shifts as you go along), but any kind of text that is ‘readable’ in terms of difference; this includes bodies, marks, inscriptions, drawings, clothing and hairstyle, gestures, movement, shapes, and even sounds. In fact, as Derrida says, “difference cannot be thought without the trace,”<sup>42</sup> for it is what allows us to make comparisons and evaluate objects in terms of their relation to other objects.

So too do we display textuality— the ability to be ‘read’ through any kind of signifying mark or event. As subjects, we don’t just ‘read’ other people, we read ourselves in order to understand who we are, and we must constantly revise our understanding of ourselves based on what other people ‘read’ about us as well. The possibilities for our own subjectivity is also a function of the context we are in, which puts us in relation to other people. Our identity is constructed in terms of the signifiers we identify with that pertain not only to gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, but also to our occupation, our marital status, what activities we do, etc. Whether we are considered to be “talented,” “funny,” or “hard-working,” or some dynamic

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 57.

mixture of these qualities, this is made possible through the trace, which connects our experiences, expressions, desires, and responses, and allows a conceivable idea of who we are to take shape, based on what is apparent to us. And it will *always* take shape, even as it also changes over time. It is impossible for us not to try to extract a universal insight, for that is how we come to make sense of ourselves and everything in our world in the first place. Our very commitment to the ontological, or a stable fact of identity, is reflective of our inescapable propensity to derive the trace.

#### *Meaning Through Context*

Unlike signifiers themselves, the trace is not immediate; rather, it is what is interpreted from those signifiers. Thus, meaning occurs through the very reading of textual elements—an act of interpretation. This is not to say that “anything goes,” for if that were the case, meaning wouldn’t hold at all. The possibilities for meaning are dependent on its conditioning by context, just as language is also governed by the evolving conventions or grammatical rules which make it understandable. The conditions for the possibility of meaning are endless and ever-changing, but they may include intention, social conventions, institutional validation, cultural context, law, practices, ritual, precedent, and so on. Thus, for a speech act to be misread, or construed as meaningless, it must be conditioned by a context in which there is either a) no precedent or institutional validity, and/or b) an obstructing ideology which bends and restricts all possible interpretations through its own lens. These are the same factors which prevented Bhubaneswari’s death from being read in any way other than an attempt to escape the shame of pregnancy. Just as context may enable interpretations, it can also limit them. Therefore, as Spivak has argued, we

must be aware of how signifying contexts which systemically marginalize groups of people also tend to silence them by rendering their speech acts illegible.

As a more immediate consequence of Derrida's theory of deconstruction, all that is relevant to the existence of meaning is the relation between signifiers, or the signifying context. No longer can meaning be attributed to the "inside," the "essence," or the "truth" of something which is not present to us. Rather, it's what's on the outside, that puts us in relation to others, that counts—the mark, the difference, anything that appears to us and can then be interpreted and re-interpreted in different contexts through its iterability or 're-presentability.' If this were *not* the case, i.e. if there was such a thing as a definitive and absolute identity that transcends context, it would have to be frozen in time and space, with no relations outside of itself, no past history, no possibility for being represented and reinterpreted, and thus, no possibility for future change or evolution. Can such a thing truly exist? Even inert objects can't be characterized like this—they too are enmeshed in relations with other objects and have a history and trajectory. It goes to show that this imagining of things in themselves, as having a pure, timeless, pre-existing essence, (which is often termed *essentialism*, although Derrida refers to it as *idealization*) is again, only made possible through the re-presentability of particular, embodied, contextual objects. Each signifying mark or event makes possible "a certain identity in repetition that is independent of the multiplicity of actual events."<sup>43</sup> Thus, if we return to the language of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, *vertreten*, to 'speak for,' becomes akin to *darstellen*, to 're-present.'

Spivak states:

The relationship between the two kinds of representation brings in, also, the use of essentialism because no representation can take place— no *Vertretung*, representation—

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 57.

can take place without essentialism. What it has to take into account is that the ‘essence’ that is being represented is a representation of the other kind, *Darstellung*.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, no one can ever simply speak for another person without commanding what can possibly be read and perceived about them, which is then always, inevitably traced to yield a meaning or quality which becomes integral to their identity and existence.

What we have gained through Derridean deconstructive analysis is an understanding of identity as no longer grounded in a discrete, fixed, ontological status. At once knowable and ineffable, the self has become a catachresis—commensurate to an ever-changing host of signifiers, from which a fluid, interminable meaning can be traced, yet no adequate referent persists. The catachresis itself cannot be considered a threat to the postcolonial identity, because it is rather a site for possibilities that lie ahead, of new signifiers and new concepts. It offers the chance for a restructuring of the discourse, and thus, for new meaning which isn’t already so fully saturated by imperialism and colonialism.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the catachresis can offer *agency* to those who recognize meaning as negotiable. This is affirmed through Spivak’s statement which marks her deconstructive intervention within postcolonialism as follows: “Postcoloniality as agency can make visible that the basis of *all* serious ontological commitment is catachrestical, because negotiable through the information that identity is, *in the larger sense*, a text.”<sup>46</sup>

### III. Spivak’s Strategic Essentialism.

It is now possible to see how Spivak can problematize the notion of an authentic self based on her deconstructivist understanding of meaning as untethered to a fixed referent in itself.

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<sup>44</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Practical Politics of the Open End,” interview by Sarah Harasym, in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (1987; repr., New York: Routledge, 1990), 109.

<sup>45</sup> Jerry Miller, Haverford College, Haverford, PA, April 25, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Spivak, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value,” 229.

But what does she recommend as a recourse for the subaltern, if subalternity means ‘to be silenced?’ In order to address their need for recognition and inclusion by the center, Spivak advocates for strategic essentialism, which is an attempt to ‘negotiate’ the ‘basis of serious ontological commitment’ through the reshaping of signifiers and their relations, by “provisionally choos[ing] a name that will not keep [one] in (the representation of) a margin so thick with context.”<sup>47</sup>

#### *Choosing a Name (Claiming Subjectivity)*

Strategic essentialism is a move which allows disparate groups to act cohesively by provisionally adopting essentialist foundations as a “strategy for collective representation in order to pursue chosen political ends.”<sup>48</sup> Essentialism posits pure, essential, universal, ahistorical, and shared qualities to identities, thereby severing them from context. This is done strategically to concretize the identity and make it more of an umbrella term for heterogeneous groups. By solidifying and fixing the “We” so that it becomes easily recognizable, and thus legitimated by the center, this can allow groups to enter spaces of power. Spivak uses her own choice of the institutional appellation of ‘teacher’ to illustrate the use of strategic essentialism, because “It is, most often for such speakers and audiences, writers and readers, a university, that I am a university teacher. That context is in its own way no thinner, but at least speaker and audience share it most obviously.”<sup>49</sup> By choosing the name of ‘teacher,’ Spivak promotes an aspect of her identity that will not fail to hold discursive power, yet also lacks the dangers that occur with the name “Asian/Indian/Bengali/Third World,” in that her agenda would be questioned as the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>48</sup> Raksha Pande, “Strategic Essentialism,” *The International Encyclopedia of Geography*, (Newcastle: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1-6.

<sup>49</sup> Spivak, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value,” 221.

“expos[ing] of an imagined enemy.”<sup>50</sup>

When strategic essentialism is applied to the identity of ‘woman’ as another example, it is said that women are naturally more nurturing, emotional, and relationship-centered, and that these traits are necessary in certain spheres. Even though it is understood that not all women may have these qualities, occupying essentialism strategically requires commitment to these qualities as being fundamental to ‘womanhood,’ otherwise it will not work. ‘Womanhood’ thus becomes a recognizable entity, taking on a kind of power as more and more women affirm it and invest themselves in it. Thus, strategic essentialism unifies a body of diverse people with a single name and identifiable meaning, allowing them to stake their place in public discourse. Most importantly, strategic essentialism is adopted by groups in order to represent themselves, and in doing so, they take their own subject constitution into their own hands rather than allow others to do it.

### *The Dangers of Essentialism*

Spivak acknowledges the double-edged sword that comes of upholding essentialist claims, which her deconstructivist background also enables her to anticipate. While bestowing strength in unity, it leaves very little room for diversity or freedom in one’s identity. Taking up strategic essentialism necessarily means “total identification” with the essentialist claims in order to present a coherent front. Spivak quotes Ranajit Guha, an influential member of the Subaltern Studies group, as follows: “Any member of the insurgent community who chooses to continue in such subalternity is regarded as hostile towards the inversive process initiated by the struggle

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 223.

and hence as being on the enemy's side' (EAP, 202)."<sup>51</sup> Not all members within a group will wish to displace their individuality and wholeheartedly commit to an umbrella identity; the ones that do not and choose to persist in subalternity, however, will not be responded to kindly because they subtract from the group's power by not conforming to their essentialist claims. As such, a danger can arise where certain kinds of representations get privileged over others, for chiming with the essentialist strategy. In light of this conflict, Spivak views "the task of the 'consciousness' of class or collectivity within a social field of exploitation and domination [as] necessarily self-alienating."<sup>52</sup>

In her defense of strategic essentialism, however, Spivak again displays her virtuosic understanding of deconstruction by rooting her stance in her belief that one cannot fight against essentialism and win, for we are bound to essentialize and extract a universal insight no matter what. As we have learned from Derrida, this is how meaning is created anyway, through deriving a trace. Spivak argues that "since the moment of essentializing, universalising, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it."<sup>53</sup> So, if we want to change our positionality through reconstructing the discourse (rearranging the relation between signifiers), then we can only do so effectively by essentializing strategically—deciding collectively on a meaning we want, and then reiterating it through adopting certain signifiers. It won't work all the time, because again, meaning lies in what is read, not in signifiers themselves. But by being in

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<sup>51</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, (New York: Routledge, 1996), ???.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-215.

<sup>53</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," interview by Elizabeth Grosz, in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (1985; repr., New York: Routledge, 1990), 109.

command of your signifiers, you are commanding what others may read (not how they read it, but what they read). It is going to shape their viewing regardless. This is what it means to stand up for yourself, and in the same act, to create yourself. The more people who do it, the more effective it will be in solidifying a shared identity for a group of people. And that is again where the strategy part comes into play, bestowing an agency on those who employ it in the aim of controlling their own narrative, and in doing so, claiming and determining their own subjectivity.

As Spivak has demonstrated, however, being heard is certainly not easy for marginalized groups who remain enmeshed in a historical and contemporary context that excludes them from spaces of power, due to the institutionalized production of discourse that continues to objectify them as ‘Other.’ She acknowledges that although one chooses strategically to occupy an essentialist position, there is a certain lack of freedom involved for the postcolonial figure in doing so: “Claiming catachreses from a space that one cannot not want to inhabit and yet must criticize is, then, the deconstructive predicament of the postcolonial.”<sup>54</sup> Spivak’s hope, however, is that once people of marginalized backgrounds have *accessed* spaces of power, they can leverage their position to perform a different kind of representation:

It is my hope that this sense will put a particular constraint upon the metropolitan marginal or indigenous elite, in whose ranks I can belong, not to produce a merely ‘antiquarian history’ which seeks the continuities of soil, language and urban life in which our present is rooted and, ‘by cultivating in a delicate manner that which existed for all time,...tr[y] to conserve for posterity the conditions under which we were born’ (LCP, p. 162).<sup>55</sup>

Here, it seems as though Spivak is offering an intimation of a kind of strategic occupation which resists essentialism and the appeal for authenticity. What kind of representation would this look like? I will now attempt to explore the capacity of moments of representation to leave meaning

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<sup>54</sup> Spivak, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value,” 228.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

open and allow greater room for change and possibility, rather than to close off possibilities for new meaning by limiting, reducing, and resisting change. For lack of a better term, I have chosen to call this an approach that goes ‘beyond essentialism.’

#### **IV. Beyond Essentialism.**

Spivak is right about the inevitability of essentialism. By stepping beyond essentialism, I am paradoxically claiming a ‘truth’ as well: that the only things essential are movement, change, temporality, and historicity—can this be captured? I will argue that it can be made possible by committing to a Derridean view of meaning predicated on a dynamic, evolving context. Given the unstable and temporal nature of the self that emerges from a Derridean perspective, it leads me to wonder if our notion of authenticity doesn’t necessarily have to mean essential, fixed, unchanging, or belonging to a singular perspective or experience. What if, during crucial moments of representation, we chose to pursue a different view of authenticity, which acknowledges the dynamism and the plurality of experiences and identities which are fundamental to ourselves as being human? A kind of authenticity that resists essentialism by being expressed over time, and having no pure correspondence— where one is true to oneself only, in that one is changing.<sup>56</sup> To assert otherwise by positing essential, ahistorical claims would be to deny not just the plurality of experience, but the very ‘nature’ of human beings as temporal and dynamic.

#### *Authenticity in Context*

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<sup>56</sup> Jerry Miller, Haverford College, Haverford, PA, Dec. 12, 2017.

The first objective of my approach to move beyond essentialism is to locate an accountability of representation that isn't predicated on a fixed, immutable truth of identity. Clearly, we can still have an accountability of representation, even if there is no authentic referent. What is this accountability to? A new notion of authenticity purported by Derrida and Spivak as being grounded in historical and contemporary context. Instead of severing oneself from context by positing pure, essential, universal, ahistorical qualities, a strategy should be to employ rigorous contextualization. By tracing as much of the entire field as possible, the relationships between signifying marks and events through space and time, one may demonstrate the heritage that all things possess, which informs their value and positionality in relation to other things. History and relationality should be represented in such a way that anticipates its own divide, in full awareness of possible meanings which can emerge 'later,' or 'elsewhere.' This can be the work of any person and any discipline, and only requires a steady commitment to the continual process of learning and unlearning.

#### *An Illimitable Subjectivity*

The second objective of my approach is to explore the possibility of representing oneself in a way that also doesn't limit oneself. A strategy would be to make a point of offering not just one signifier, but multiple signifiers in moments of representing, in order to forge new connections between these signifiers and 'break the mold,' so to speak—to express an illimitable subjectivity through the claiming of "this" signifier *and* "that" signifier, and so on. This is something that the Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz describes as "simultaneity," which he opposes to the punitive "trap" of authenticity that only serves to invalidate people who don't rigorously conform to a certain archetype. Oftentimes, resistance to occupying moments of

self-representation is based in people's reluctance to boil themselves down to a single, recognizable identity, to reduce themselves to one aspect, and in doing so, risk rejection by their communities. No one should have to do this. By acknowledging the self as a multiplicity, this would challenge the idea that one's entire self-worth rests on a single, transient aspect. Furthermore, by demonstrating that one can be a woman, a Bengali, a feminist, and a philosopher *as well as* a teacher (as Spivak herself is), this may promote an expectation for the additional signifier, or that 'third' category that dismantles the binary. It may advance the acceptance of further change and possibility as well as intersectionality.

Not only that, but whenever a plurality of signifiers is brought forth, it can serve to release people from the confines of stereotyping by making it more difficult to categorize others in terms of their signifiers. The more frequently it occurs, the less abnormal it will become to encounter certain signifiers joined together. Supposing, however, that there exists a mutually undermining tension between signifiers—such as in the case of 'soldier' + 'woman,' for example—the interaction between them will produce a confusion that might be resolved by asking questions, digging deeper to understand the context that makes it so. At the very least, it will raise alertness to the question of normativity and require one to engage with it somehow. (All tension is productive in that way.)

To use multiple signifiers such as race along with class, occupation, etc. in moments of representing, would attempt the opposite of 'color blindness,' whereby the race marker is erased in order to make something appear 'objectively' valuable apart from race. Now, something can appear valuable *with* race, or *with* class and gender and sexuality—not in spite of it. By bringing a wider context into view, this can challenge the stereotype effect of having people assume that certain groups are naturally predisposed to this or that. Also, by highlighting differences *within*

identity groups instead of erasing them (for example: straight women, gay women, black women, Asian women, white women, trans-women), this strategy erodes rigid boundaries that allow groups to close themselves off from other groups. It could promote a more dynamic intermingling based on the areas where people overlap in aspects of their identities. On the other hand, what if this enforces boundaries rather, making it impossible for groups to achieve collective agency? Reconciling individual identity and group identity is a difficult question to work out, and it is unclear whether strategic essentialism should be amended at all when it comes to fostering a collective agency. The resolution here, however, isn't relevant to my main question as follows: is an illimitable understanding of identity possible, even with our inability to avoid essentializing?

Presumably, we would still essentialize, but it would be a different sort of essentialism, where the essence we derive is that meaning is based in context and thus subject to temporality, possibility, change, movement, and contingency, thanks to Derrida. We can already see the effects of this sort of discourse playing out on liberal college campus and places where there is high diversity. What's happening there? Difference is acknowledged, not subsumed. More kinds of intersectional narratives are being told, and more and more, they are being heard. Context is becoming more and more essential to our understanding of cultures, identities, behavior, socioeconomic status, and so on. This must keep going. But the thing that must be acknowledged, which enables all these pieces to fit together, is that all meaning in the first place comes from being aware of difference, or the relation between signifiers. By recognizing this, one will know the actualizing power that lies in representations of all forms.

### V. A Practical Approach to Empowerment.

In light of these investigations, what possibilities exist for marginalized and disenfranchised groups? How can we approach their empowerment so that they may acquire a voice and escape the muting of subalternity? Spivak herself recognizes a charted path away from subalternity and towards involvement in the public sphere, through teaching:

...gradually I stepped into scenes where subalternity, oppression itself, was accepted as normality in the underside of the Bengali rural poor. I do not quite know how, but I became involved in hanging out in that subaltern space, attempting while I was there, to think it a normal teaching scene. In this effort I learned something about teaching. All teaching attempts change, yet all teaching also assumes a shared scene (229).<sup>57</sup>

Spivak avows the role of education as an intervention in the “subaltern’s sense of normality” which may “bring subalternity to crisis.”<sup>58</sup> Lacking education, and with it, the ability to see the externality of the situation (i.e. be aware of one’s position in relation to others, the context that informs the situation and how it came to be this way), results in believing in the myth of natural subjugation and that things have been and always will be this way. What we’ve learned from Derrida is that to be aware of anything is in fact to be aware of *difference*. So perhaps what it means to lack consciousness is in fact to not know difference—to not see yourself in relation to others who are perhaps better off and more powerful, and realize that things could in fact be different, because there are lines, forces, and connections between everything. Seeing this, one would no longer believe in a fixed, inherent ontological status, where some people are naturally inferior or superior to others. One might instead be allowed to hope and plot a course for change. The cultivation of these instincts is something I saw during my internship with Prayasam.

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<sup>57</sup> Spivak, “In Response: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 229.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

*Prayasam, Or “Their Own Endeavors”*

The vision of a couple of committed individuals germinated in the slums of Kolkata in 1996 and led to the creation of Prayasam, an organization which today reaches out to a million children. With 19 years of experience working with children from both mainstream and marginalized communities, Prayasam has established itself as a regional expert in child rights, particularly the right to participation. Our work stems from the conviction that children possess the potential to transform their local communities by assuming the role of change agents. Through interactive workshops and trainings we are mobilizing group formation with children in diverse, neglected pockets of West Bengal, ranging from slums in the heart of Kolkata to peripheral brick kilns in the city’s outskirts.<sup>59</sup>

I have chosen to discuss Prayasam, an Indian non-profit organization in West Bengal, because I believe its methods exemplify a deconstructive approach to representation and empowerment which is not only unprecedented, but highly successful. At Prayasam, self-representation is harnessed as a means of empowering youth to “transform their local communities by assuming the role of change agents.” Positive change first begins with each individual young person in how they view themselves and their capabilities, and this is enacted through mentoring, peer learning, and training in communication and technology, so that youth are able to create their own platforms for representation of themselves and their communities. These platforms include filmmaking, dance, storytelling, news reporting, and community mapping. Their aim is to combat the overwhelmingly negative ways in which slum communities are portrayed, and to restore a sense of pride and efficacy to their communities, at the same time that they work to address common issues of health & hygiene, public sanitation, school attendance rates, child labor, and childhood marriage. The youth’s refusal to believe in an inexorable fate or a fixedness of one’s place in the world, regardless of where they come from (unlike many of their adult counterparts), is a deconstructive way of imagining the world.

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<sup>59</sup> From Prayasam’s website at <http://www.prayasam.org/about-us/>

Typically, NGOs and journalists will use a picture of abject poverty to provoke a response on the part of the viewer, whether it's pity, outrage, or guilt. This may be an effective way to do so, but it comes at a cost to the subjects of the photo. Alternatively, Prayasam strictly prohibits photographs depicting poverty, for they realize that such signifiers can be internalized by the subjects of the photo and lead to what they call 'mental poverty.' At Prayasam, everyday language is also consciously used to cultivate a positive outlook, as shown through the corrective replacement of the word 'problem' with 'challenge,' 'slum' with 'community,' and 'disappointing' with 'different.' Films, plays, and 'tablet talks' are created by youth in order to sensitize their communities to social issues such as bullying, gender inequality, domestic violence, and sex trafficking. Prayasam's youth even create a calendar each year which features artistic portraits of other youth members of their communities. To me, this seemed to be as much about restructuring signifiers as it was to give them a taste of modelhood.

By representing themselves, the youth build themselves in the image they wish to be seen, drawing inspiration from the context around them, which includes Western culture as well as Indian culture. By showing the world that slum children are capable of much more than expected, they show themselves as well. The confidence they have gained from their many endeavors is infectious for other members of the community. For me, based on their awareness of the actualizing power that comes of signifiers, Prayasam offers tangible proof that a Derridean and Spivakian view of subjectivity as incumbent upon signifiers can wield powerful effects on the agency and positionality of subjects who are historically marginalized and disenfranchised. Much can be learned from Prayasam (as well as Spivak and Derrida) about what an ethical approach to representation and empowerment should look like in its highest degree.

*Signifiers, Signifiers, Signifiers*

Now that we've engaged thoroughly with Spivak and Derrida, we can now return to the question of what it means to represent and be represented. It is commonly assumed by many (including intellectuals) that when a dominant group prevents marginalized groups from speaking, or speaks for them, it is wrong because it prevents an existing fact of identity from being expressed. It stifles the truth of their identity and hides it from view. However, we learn from a deconstructivist view that there is no stable, fully present truth about identity which transcends context—that is the wrong way to think about it. If we lose an accountability of representation based on truth, however, a fearful implication might be that certain kinds of oppression *aren't* distorting anything.

This fear is certainly valid. However, Derridean deconstruction can still give us reason to believe that oppression is wrong—not because it suppresses a pre-existing fact, but rather, because it prevents a fact from coming to be. Oppression *shapes* people in the wrong way by limiting them, silencing them, denying them agency, and cultivating a sense of inferiority. By cultivating inferiority, it can silence, and by silencing, it also can cultivate inferiority. Why the circularity? Because in the Derridean framework, the ontic expression and the ontological identity are tantamount to each other. Speaking is becoming, and being is the expression. To represent is in fact to *re-present*: to constitute the identity of the object of representation.

In light of this, signifiers become absolutely critical to our attempts to understand the particular contexts which condition subjectivity and how it is produced and understood. Only by acknowledging the actualizing power of representation in all forms as Prayasam does, can we be prepared to take on the aim of promoting equity and enabling agency in a responsible and successful manner. Instead of cultivating (even inadvertently) the emblem of poverty, shame,

victimhood, stagnancy, passivity, laziness, violence, and misery, we must actively work to cultivate an emblem of growth, strength, possibility, beauty, power, agency, and confidence. The 2018 film *Black Panther* does this very well, and occupies a rightful place in history as one of the most significant moves to restructure the signifying context that has marginalized Black people for centuries. Its powerful impact and storyline point to the crux of Derridean deconstructive theory: self-representation is less about truth than it is about self-creation. When we represent ourselves, we get to determine our own subjectivity. If at the same time, we can turn that into a subjectivity that isn't limiting, confining, reducing, or objectifying, that will become the empowering aspect of representation.

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