

'WHO IS THE OTHER WOMAN?'
REPRESENTATION, ALTERITY AND ETHICS IN THE
WORK OF GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

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For Marge

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis, unless indicated otherwise, is my own work and has not been submitted at any other time for another degree

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses a number of key themes in the work of postcolonial theorist and literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and uses her ideas to argue for the usefulness of both deconstructive and postmodern thought in a postcolonial context generally, and in South Africa in particular.

The early part of the thesis presents a brief overview of Spivak's work (Chapter 1) and discusses its relationship with Derridean deconstruction and what I have called "progressive postmodern thought". Chapter 2 explores in detail Spivak's use of theoretical concepts adapted from, or closely related to, deconstruction. Perhaps the most important of these is *catachresis* – the idea that all naming is in a sense false, and the words we use to conceptualise the world must be seen as "inadequate, yet necessary". The thesis looks at how Spivak foregrounds the methodological consequences of this insight in her own practice of constantly revisiting and rethinking her own conclusions, and also at the political consequences of recognising specific terms like "nation", "identity" or "woman" as catachrestic. Closely related to this area of Spivak's work are her idea of "strategic essentialism" and her adaptation of Derrida's concept of the *pharmakon* -- that which is simultaneously poison and medicine. Chapter 3 relates Spivak's work to three key areas of postmodern thought: alterity, and the ethics of the relationship between self and other; Lyotard's notions of the differend and the "unpresentable"; and aporia, or the ethical and political consequences of undecidability. I argue here that all of these emphases are potentially very useful in postcolonial studies, particularly in relation to the predicament

of the gendered subaltern, and that they help to define a progressive postmodern politics.

The remainder of the dissertation discusses individual essays at greater length. Chapter 4 focuses in the main on “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) and Spivak’s arguments concerning the nature of subalternity and the politics of representation. Chapter 5 examines Spivak’s engagement with French Feminism and her feminist critiques of mainstream deconstruction, arguing that Spivak’s use of deconstruction undermines the opposition between linguistic and material forms of oppression and hence between theory and practice. Chapter 6 focuses on Spivak’s reading of literary texts and raises issues concerning, *inter alia*, the production of the first world self at the expense of the third world other; the limits of both metropolitan theories and narratives of national liberation, democracy and development in relation to the experience of the gendered subaltern; reading the text of the subaltern body; the (impossible but necessary) ethical relationship between first world feminist and the subaltern in neocolonial space; rights and responsibility; the need to respect subaltern selfhood; and the possibility of what Spivak calls “learning from below”.

Finally, I look at the relevance of Spivak’s thought to three areas of South African political and academic life: conflicts over representation within the local Women’s movement; notions of national origin and national identity; and debates over deconstruction and the relationship between the academy and society.

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

1. Abbreviations used in the bibliography:

- IOW* – *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988)
- PC* – *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (1990)
- OTM* – *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993)
- Reader* – *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (1996).

2. Use of dates:

Whenever an essay by Spivak appears for the first time in my text, I give the date of its first publication. This is to give the reader a sense of the chronology of Spivak's work. I also give first-publication dates where I am making a point about the developments that have taken place between one essay and another. However, quotations are not always taken from the earliest published version of an essay; where an essay is available in *In Other Worlds*, *The Postcolonial Critic*, or *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, that is the version I have used. This explains any apparent discrepancy between the date assigned to an essay and that given after a quotation from the same essay.

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PREFACE

“THE FASCINATION OF WHAT’S DIFFICULT”

The comment most frequently made about the essays and other writings of Gayatri Spivak is that they are difficult. Landry and Maclean, in the headnote to their edition of Spivak’s essay “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value” comment that “the experience of the Spivakian page often seems one of insurmountable difficulty, and its effect is to exaggerate one’s sense of one’s own ignorance or dimness” (107), a comment which, incidentally, I found extremely reassuring. This perception is shared by most people with whom I have discussed Spivak’s work: a colleague memorably described her experience of reading “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as “like chewing bran”. My most dramatic experience of the problem, however, came during the teaching of an Honours (4th Year) course on feminist theory, when I set three Spivak essays as readings for one of the seminars. Four intelligent and motivated Honours students, who had dealt uncomplainingly with texts by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, and even a short piece by Lacan -- for me the most bewilderingly cryptic of writers -- simply drew the line at Spivak and arrived at the seminar claiming that they had done no preparation as the texts were completely incomprehensible. Since then, I have had far more success in discussing essays by Spivak in graduate seminars, but that episode remains a potent reminder of her potential effect on an unprepared reader.

I have no intention of trying to defend Spivak against this charge of difficulty -- I battle

with the texts as much as anyone, but am in complete agreement with Colin McCabe, when, in his introduction to *In Other Worlds* he argues that:

No matter how great the commitment to clarity, no matter how intense the desire to communicate, when we are trying ourselves to delineate and differentiate the practices and objects which are crucial to understanding our own functioning and for which we as yet lack an adequate vocabulary, there will be difficulty. Only those supremely confident of their own understanding -- those who would deny all reality to history or the unconscious, or matter -- can bask in the self-satisfied certainty of an adequate language for an adequate world (x).

Spivak's difficulty, then, is at least in part a result of her determination to forge a language adequate to new and difficult insights, rather than to presume to find one ready-made. Equally important is McCabe's reminder that accusations of difficulty can be shaped by an unarticulated ideological agenda: that a desire to dismiss Spivak's work as difficult (and thus avoid engaging with it) may be related to a perception that she herself is the one who is "difficult", who is making uncomfortable demands and exceeding the bounds implicitly set for women and non-Western subjects. Certainly she is "difficult" in her refusal to allow comfortable resting places for her readers, refusing both the self-affirming certainties of identity politics and the pieties of multicultural pluralism. I would agree, too, with Spivak herself when she warns, in the face of insistent demands that she couch her ideas in "plain words", that "sometimes plain prose cheats" (1992c, 40; 1993e, 33): that the appearance of a lucid simplicity may conceal elision, evasion and dishonest simplification. One of the most troubling aspects of any attempt to make Spivak's texts

more accessible is an awareness of the violence one is doing to the density, complexity and scrupulous precision of those texts.

But if I am not interested in launching a defence of Spivak's difficulty, that difficulty does have a considerable bearing on the question of what I hope to achieve in this dissertation and on its necessary limitations. In the course of the dissertation I will be describing, commenting on, and evaluating selected aspects of Spivak's enormous body of writing. In doing this, my purpose is two-fold: firstly, to draw out what I feel to some of the most useful -- and usable -- aspects of Spivak's work and, secondly, to use her work to illustrate the political relevance of deconstructive thought in a postcolonial context (and in particular in South Africa). Thus my concern will be primarily with her deployment of certain enabling theoretical terms and concepts, largely adapted from Derridean deconstruction, her contribution to discussions of the political consequences of representation, and the issues she raises concerning the relationship between theory and practice, self and other, first world feminist academic and the "gendered subaltern" in postcoloniality. This is necessarily a severely limited approach to a thinker whose body of work contains, among other things, extended readings of the texts of Marx and speculations on the relationship between Marxism and deconstruction, numerous detailed commentaries on works by Derrida, examinations of the practice and politics of translation, reflections on Cultural Studies and pedagogy in the American academy. But limitation is not necessarily a bad thing. In her commentary on Spivak's "Once Again a Leap into the Postcolonial Banal" (1991) Joan Scott points out that "there are many references to limits in the paper" and that "[l]imits are evoked in several ways: as boundaries, restrictions, and borders -- places we cannot get beyond or get to...But

recognizing a limit is also a strategy" (Spivak, 1991a, 172/3). The scope of Spivak's work, and the difficulties presented by her encyclopaedic knowledge of Western philosophy and contemporary theory, have imposed on me what are in the end enabling limits, forcing me to make choices and shaping what could otherwise have been an impossibly overextended project. It is worth making some of those limits explicit.

Firstly, the dissertation makes no claim to be comprehensive. Spivak is an extraordinarily prolific scholar and writer: the "checklist of publications" in the Landry and Maclean *Reader* contains one hundred and seventeen entries, up to the end of 1995; my own bibliography contains several articles published since then. Any attempt to produce commentary on each of these essays would result in a dissertation as monumentally long as it was irredeemably superficial. Selections had to be made, and since my field is literature it was logical to select, though not exclusively, from the essays which offer readings of literary texts or theorise reading and representation -- this includes essays which read the "texts" of sexuality or of the *socius*. My main interest is in Spivak's use of deconstruction and in what she has to say about the relationship between deconstruction and feminism and between textual theory and ethical action.

I have tried, however, to read as much of Spivak's opus as possible¹, since it is through the juxtaposition of texts, often, that apparently difficult passages can be clarified. I cannot claim, of course, to have provided a complete explanation of even those texts which I have selected for extended comment, or to have understood every aspect of them. There are passages which, after multiple re-readings, remain as obstinately baffling as on first acquaintance. I have simply had to accept this, and not allow it to

prevent me from finding much of value and interest in an essay of which I would be unable to explicate every line. This has been a useful lesson in the enabling aspect of the acceptance of limits, and one which is of enormous value when teaching. So my method has, frequently, been that described by Joan Scott in the commentary referred to above, which she relates (as does Spivak) to the Derridean notion of *découpage*:

Découpage is a way of cutting fabric and resewing pieces onto a cloth to make a design; there are overlays of fabric and there are holes where fabric has been cut away; some of the pieces have been taken from somewhere else. This, Spivak indicates, is how arguments are made. Citations are necessarily lifted out of their contexts. A text consists of a repeated process of citation, cut out of one place and sewn on to the fabric of another text. The cuts are necessary for the production of knowledge (173).

My intention then, much of the time, is not to offer wholly new ways of reading Spivak's work, but rather, through that process of selection and juxtaposition, to draw out her major themes and clarify key terms and ideas for would-be readers who do not have the time to read all of her work and discover for themselves the ways in which a passage in an essay or interview can illuminate an essay previously read, or make clear a previously puzzling term by using it in a different context.

The second limit which needs to be made explicit is that imposed by the limits of my own knowledge of philosophy and of Marxist theory. It is no part of my project to comment authoritatively on Spivak's interpretations of Marx, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and, by way

of these writers, on Freud, Heidegger, Hegel, even Ovid. What I have attempted to do is to understand, as far as possible, the *use* that Spivak makes of these philosophers and theorists in the development of her own ideas and their application. I am aware that this is not a distinction that can hold absolutely, but it needs to be made, nevertheless.

The third limit is that which I have imposed on my own sense of the putative readership of my work. I began the project with an inchoate feeling that the “ideal reader” (in one sense) would be Professor Spivak herself; that a comment or interpretation would be acceptable only if it was guaranteed to meet with her approval or agreement. This, however, proved to be such a paralysing thought that writing became impossible. Spivak herself comments, when describing her work as a translator: “If I stop to think about an audience, if I take the intending subject as more than a springboard, I cannot jump in, I cannot surrender” (1993a, 189). Accepting that I could never adequately access Spivak as “intending subject” and could offer only an interpretive reading of her texts as *texts*, I had to reconceptualise my imagined reader. The dissertation then, is intended not for its subject, nor for readers who necessarily share Spivak’s unusually wide knowledge of Western philosophy, metaphysics and Marxist economic theory, but for readers like myself who approach Spivak’s work from perspectives within academic feminism, textual theory and a concern with the relationship between these things and struggles for agency and social justice in the postcolonial arena. Since I find it difficult to write without *some* sense of a potential audience, I imagine a group of postgraduate students who could use my text as a starting point for their own reading of any Spivak essay.

One final comment on limits, this time relating to the “limited” understanding of the term “postcolonial” in my dissertation. In order to pre-empt the often sterile debates around terminology in which postcolonial studies is all too prone to get caught, I need to make it plain that “postcolonial”, as I use it, does not imply that colonialism and its effects are a thing of the past. I use the term, as I believe Spivak does, to distinguish the colonial era from the period following formal independence for most previously colonised nations, a period in which, in most instances, colonialism has given way to some form of neocolonialism. Thus “post” does not mean “after the end of”. Spivak defines her own use of the term thus: “Neocolonialism is not simply the continuation of colonialism; it is a different thing. That is what I call ‘postcoloniality’ and I find the word postcolonialism just totally bogus” (1991c, 224). I understand that last comment to signal her awareness that colonialism can never be said to have ended, both because there are still countries suffering under foreign rule (Tibet or East Timor, for example) and because the effects of colonialism continue to structure relations of power and production in formerly colonised countries. It remains, however, crucial to have a term which distinguishes the situation of the colonial subject² from that of the subject produced by the social order which emerges after formal independence and in the context of international postmodernity. Spivak emphasises that the process of subject constitution and the role of what she calls “epistemic violence” is quite different in these different contexts:

Thus a new code of law, a new system of education, and a new perception of needs operated the epistemic violence -- violently changing the shape of the mind and the person -- which produced the old colonial subject who had a chance to enter the struggle for individualism. This elaborate constitution of the subject is not necessary under international

subcontracting in post-modern or electronic capitalism. No legal structure need be laid down for the army of “permanent casuals”, only the circumventing of rudimentary labor and safety regulations is on the agenda. No consistent training into consumerism is any longer needed (1989a, 224).

These terms, furthermore, need to be very carefully deployed in relation to South Africa, which has been until so recently under a form of internal colonisation and where some of the effects of postmodernity can be felt even while modernity itself is still either desired or resisted by sections of the population. Consumerism, international theories of development, the influence of the World Bank and the IMF affect the production of the subject in South African “postcolonial” space, but so do the effects of the profound and institutionalised epistemic violence of the apartheid order, with its recoding of indigenous law and practice, its legalised exclusions from education, its attempt to produce through social engineering a people who would internalise and accept their own “inferiority”. The interpretive context is further complicated if one accepts the idea that, as David Attwell has suggested to me, apartheid was in some respects an acute form of *neocolonialism*, its structures operated by an indigenised Afrikaner elite which emerged after the phase of external colonisation. Spivak’s work on the constitution of the *colonial* subject can, therefore, be highly illuminating in our context, but so can her analyses of class-formation, gendering and subalternity in postcoloniality. Reading Spivak in South Africa brings home the fact that any attempt to examine relations between Western thought and its objects of inquiry in the third world or to understand international relations of power should not be undertaken without a carefully defined and nuanced use of the concept of

the postcolonial.

Given this sense of the potential relevance of Spivak's ideas to a nation recently emerged from a rather specialised form of colonial domination and struggling with issues of national identity, multiculturalism and our position in a postmodern world order, I have attempted from time to time to link my discussion of Spivak's work to discussions that are current within the local academic community, sometimes using not published articles but relatively informal debates or public lectures which have taken place within my own institution during the past two years. This is not to suggest that the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg can function unproblematically as a metonym for South African academia but, firstly, to ground my work in the immediate and the local and, secondly, perhaps to take advantage of the relatively unguarded immediacy with which people are prone to express their beliefs in lectures and discussions as opposed to carefully edited published work. (It is for this reason that Spivak chooses, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", to examine an informal exchange between Foucault and Deleuze, rather than more weighty examples of their published theoretical work; cf. Spivak 1988c, 272). It will, however, be evident that I am not concerned with Spivak *only* to the extent that her ideas can illuminate local debates and practices: I believe that she has much to teach academics, and academic feminists everywhere about the nature of deconstructive thinking, the importance of theories of subject-constitution, the possibilities of ethics in a postmodern and postcolonial situation, the uses and misuses of power, the politics of identity, nationalism and individual rights, the construction of gender, the "writing" of the sexed body within discourse and the gendered coding of affect. If these issues are not all on the agenda of a local feminism understandably principally concerned with access

to rights and resources³, Spivak's work provides powerful arguments for supplementing that agenda with a set of theoretical insights which, as I shall argue later, will not provide a blueprint or foundation for action, but, rather, a safeguard against any form of fundamentalism or untheorised identity politics.

NOTES TO THE PREFACE

1. In the interests of giving my project a more manageable scope, and because my central interest is in her use of deconstruction, I have chosen to focus on Spivak's work produced in the twenty years between 1976, when her Introduction to *Of Grammatology* was published, and 1996, when the greater part of this dissertation was written. This means excluding Spivak's early work on Yeats, but also any very recent work which I feel I would need time to think about and assimilate before attempting to write about it. A list of Spivak's early publications, which do not appear in my bibliography, can be found in Landry and Maclean's *The Spivak Reader*.

2. I am aware that the term "colonial subject" is also one which is used in different ways. Jenny Sharpe glosses her use of the term as follows: "I use 'colonial subject' specifically for the Western-educated native in order to emphasize 1) the subject status that a class of native acquires by acceding to the authority of Western knowledge, 2) the restriction of sovereignty to the colonizers alone, and 3) the denial of subject status to natives belonging to the subordinate or subaltern classes" (139/140). Although I appreciate the usefulness of Sharpe's distinction, I use the term here in a very general sense, to distinguish between the ways in which subjectivity is shaped on the one hand by the colonial dispensation, and on the other by the circumstances of formal decolonisation.

3. I make this assertion not only on the grounds of my own observation but also on the evidence of volumes like the 1995 collection *The Challenge of Local Feminisms*, edited by Amrita Basu. The section on South Africa, entitled "The Dawn of a New Day: Redefining South African Feminism" emphasises issues like access to resources, especially for rural women; the status of women in relation to traditional law; crime and violence against women; representation in parliament and on local government structures, etc. I am not suggesting either that these are not the matters that should be foremost on South African feminists' minds, nor that there are no South African academics or grass-roots intellectuals theorising these issues. Rather, I want to foreground the extent to which Spivak's work illuminates the relationship between these practical concerns and what may be perceived as abstract theoretical debates.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I.

The publisher's description of Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean's recent *Spivak Reader* claims that the *Reader* -- "makes this monolith of a writer accessible even to those who have only touched the surface of her work" (Routledge, 1996). This is a curious description, not of the book, which does indeed provide an excellent introduction to Spivak's work, but of Spivak herself. If "monolithic" is intended to imply a certain monumental and even -- at first glance -- impenetrable quality, I would have no quarrel with that. But the term is more popularly used to imply uniformity or homogeneity, and this would be a far from just description of a writer and critic whose work is a process of constantly rethinking and reworking earlier conclusions, and who traffics in ambivalence, negotiation, strategic positions and the undecidable, rather than in immutable truths. In an interview which took place in 1986 Spivak comments: "I'm afraid of writing books, because I've found myself changing my mind so much" (1990a, 48), and in "French Feminism Revisited" (1992) she describes one of the trajectories of reconsideration that are so characteristic of her work:

Eleven years ago I wrote "Displacement and the Discourse of Women" believing that men on women could only be set right by women. Ten years ago I wrote "French Feminism in an International Frame", believing that no Europeanist should ignore the once and future global production of Europe. Three years ago I wrote "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again",

as a sort of second take on “Displacement”. I have come to think that in the production of feminist theoretical practice, negotiation based on acknowledgement of complicity with the male-dominated history of theory was also in order. . . . And here is “French Feminism Revisited”, which feels to me like a second take on “International Frame”. I have come to think that in the face of patriarchal reappropriation of decolonization, isolationist nationalisms, and internalized gendering, there can be exchange between metropolitan and decolonized feminisms (1993a, 144).

Spivak is, then, understandably wary of being pinned down to definitions and statements which are expected to be valid for all time. She has referred to the interview as “a genre that is generated to bring undecidability under control” (1990b, 13), and in an interview with Leon de Kock she responds to a mention of *The Postcolonial Critic* by exclaiming “Oh, my God, what does that say? I mean I don’t like that book” (1992c, 43). Since the book contains much of obvious value and interest, I can only take this, and especially the question “what does *that* say?” (as opposed to “what do I say in that”), as expressing her disquiet at her answer to any question being frozen in that text, given a spurious authority as *the* answer, forcing a commitment from her that is at odds with her constant rethinking of issues. It is not possible for any commentator on Spivak’s essays to avoid using *The Postcolonial Critic*, since it is often there that straightforward explanations of potentially difficult terms and concepts are to be found. I will therefore continue to use the text in the service of clarification but emphasise that quoting from it is not an attempt to fix meaning or exclude other interpretations.

Spivak also warns against conflating the meaning of a text with the intention of the author. In "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern" (1988) she offers a number of readings of Mahasweta Devi's story "Stanadayini", including the author's own. Despite Spivak's enormous respect for, and admiration of, Devi, the latter's interpretation of the text is given no special authority, and is in fact set aside as "too neat" and reductive a reading of the text (1988a, 245). As a reader of Derrida, Spivak is constantly aware that neither speech (as a form of *arche-writing*¹) nor the written word embody the fully self-present, self-aware intention of the author. Even if this insight is strategically set aside in order to enable the project of discussing "an author", it is never possible fully to recover even the more limited conscious intentions of the writer. Discussing her translation of Devi's writing Spivak says to the author: "I surrender to you in your writing, not to you as intending subject" (1993a, 190). Similarly, my engagement is, as stated in the Preface, not with Spivak herself as an intending agent but with the body of her texts and is informed by an awareness that that opus is marked by shifts and development. Although I range across these texts, and quote without always citing context, and may, by doing so, create the impression that every statement has an equal, timeless and decontextualized authority, this is not my intention. I take the force of Spivak's warning against an "average", institutionalized reader who "reads in the old way, is not 'responsible,' and treats everything written in [Jean-Luc] Nancy's name as 'Nancy', a body of work" (1994c). Thus all illustrative quotations (not just those from interviews) are offered not as authoritative and final, but in an attempt to further an understanding of Spivak's work which is always provisional and exploratory, attempting to remain aware of different contexts, changing emphases.

Another warning note that Spivak sounds is against cultural determinism, the assumption that not only one's "identity" but also one's trajectories of action are irreducibly programmed by one's national, cultural and familial origins. "We should not be cultural determinists" she writes. Instead

we should teach our students to find a toe-hold out of which they can become critical so that that so-called cultural production -- confessions to being a baby-boomer and therefore I'm a new historicist -- that stuff is seen as simply a desire to do bio-graphy where actually the historical narrative is catachretical So one must not think of one's cultural production as some kind of literal determinant of what one can or cannot do (1990a, 166).

For this reason, I do not want to imply that the facts of Spivak's biography can be used in any simple way to "explain" the direction her work has taken. But there is, clearly, what Spivak might call "something like a relationship" between the events of her life and the emphases of her work, and there are a number of instances where biographical information does shed light on the stands she takes and the insights that she offers. A certain amount of biography is thus a necessary part of any introduction to her central themes and concerns.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta in 1942. She describes herself as coming "from the bottom layer of the upper middle class or the top layer of the lower middle class, depending on which side of the family you are choosing" (1994c, 17), and she credits her "nationalist-on-the-rebound, plain-living, high-thinking proto-feminist family" (1990c, 85) with some of her earliest politicisation. "My parenting launched me into a sort of ecumenical childhood: no caste system, anti-British feelings, 'the rich are

bad; all religions are equal; unlike everyone else in our class we are going to bring up the girls and the boys in the same way' -- the best possible kind of thing I could have had" (85). Among the formative experiences of her youth was that of attending a missionary school, in which a number of the teachers belonged to the social category which would later become an ongoing concern in her academic and political work -- that of the subaltern:

. . . most of the teachers were tribal Christians, that is to say, Indian subalterns, lower than rural underclass by origin, neither Hindus nor Muslims, not even Hindu untouchables, but tribals -- so called aboriginals -- who had been converted by missionaries. ...So that again, another early experience which then I didn't know was going to influence me so strongly was learning -- as a child from a good caste Hindu family -- from women who were absolutely underprivileged but who had dehegemonized Christianity in order to occupy a space where they could teach social superiors (1994c, 17).

Her education continued at Presidency College, University of Calcutta, which she describes as "a college known for academic excellence but not class-fixed, so that there was a sprinkling of students from working class and rural small bourgeois origins, as well as students from the upper middle, etc. It was a politically active institution" (1994c, 17). As a third year graduate student, in 1961, she left for Cornell. Here she worked under Paul de Man, who was chair of the Comparative Literature department -- "I believe I was Paul de Man's first Ph.D." (1992c, 35). She claims, however, that because she was allowed to devise her own graduate programme her "entire education formation remains

Indian” (35).

Some of Spivak’s acute awareness of the multiplicity and complexity of the positions which make up the “subject effect” of an individual agent may stem from her own experience of the “doubleness” of her positioning as a postcolonial intellectual who “straddle[s] the home base and the metropolitan base and [is] not completely at home in either place” (1991b, 63). She fiercely resists construction either as marginal or as a “privileged native informant”:

I put aside your definition of me as a marginal because in the construction of the marginal, there are all kinds of political agendas. I put aside your construction of me as speaking for the third world . . . I want you to think of me as a university teacher because that is what I do for a living. I have put in a great deal of time precisely assimilating, and so listen to me not as some self-agonizing Caliban, but as one of you, you know. So that is the post-colonial. I am not the Other, capital O. I am part of the same, with a difference” (1991b, 65).

This is a recognition, rooted in deconstructive thought, that “every differentiation has an ethical political agenda” (65). Thus it is her experience, not of marginality nor of some “authentic” and representative “Indian” or “third world” cultural identity, but of being constructed in these ways in other people’s discourses and agendas, that may well fuel her unending concern with genuine marginality and with the politics of claims either to alterity or to representative status.

Where Spivak does use autobiography, it is not in an attempt to appeal to the authority of experience, but thoroughly to unsettle the whole notion of origins, as well as to remind her readers of the elusiveness of a culturally different “everyday”, the impossibility of ever grasping completely (either in our own lives, or in those of others) what she calls the ontic, and defines as “that which is lived so intimately that it is inaccessible to ontology” (1992b, 15). This is a notion to which I will return several times during the course of this dissertation. In “Asked to Talk About Myself” (1992), Spivak describes, in as far as she can, the texture of her childhood “everyday” as she grew up in “the frame of an active although low-key bourgeois polytheism...too normal to be noted”, a polytheism which “one did not contrast . . . to some monotheist dominant” (13). Her point is that at that stage in her life culture and religion were so much part of an unconsidered everyday that they were not even accessible to her as the materials for “staging” an origin: “Who was interested in origins? I was (un)felt as (un)staged. One was in place” (13). Later, however, it became necessary for her to attempt to recover this everyday, to bring the ontic into ontology, in order to deal with a specific personal crisis.

This crisis, precipitated by the ending of a longstanding relationship and a related sense of herself as “a violent person”, led Spivak to a European psychotherapist who, by helping her to retrieve the details of her childhood everyday, and in particular the role of the goddess Kali in the representations which scripted that everyday, helped her to understand both the accusations of violence and her own response to them:

R made me remember that Kali was a child-like woman, both mother and daughter. In the representation that I grew up with Kali was not within the organized familial icon of Goddess. She punished justly, but she punished

with a violence that she enjoyed. Kali has been misrepresented as the malevolent Goddess She is irresponsible in her punishing but she *is* a punisher, not unreasonably malevolent

Finally, the question that R asked before I left the country: how can a man brought up with the blessed virgin [her Catholic ex-partner] be able to understand that there can be this model of female violence that is loved and honoured (14).

Spivak acknowledges that the therapy was helpful to her, that there are times when one must attempt to work with what is by definition outside of cognition. But the lesson of the incident does not stop there for her. She goes on to talk about her later realisation that for all its value, this “staging of an origin [was] too neat and palliative.... It was the gift of a European from within a monotheistic culture. The gift of a Goddess” (14/15). The episode, then, teaches a double lesson: both the therapeutic value of “staging” an origin, and the persistent need to examine and if necessary “dismantle” the assumptions that ground or enable that staging. Spivak is urging her readers both to acknowledge the importance of the ontic as the raw material for the strategic production of identity, and to remember that there is no “real” access to that ontic, so that any attempt to recover a “lost” origin will be vulnerable to appropriation by dominant modes of understanding being. There is, as so often in Spivak’s work, an aporia here. Privileging the ontic provides some protection against the appropriation of culturally different experience into a dominant episteme: it reminds us that there is for every “other” a realm that is prior to thought, prior to comprehension and that cannot, therefore, be usurped by the

investigator. Yet it is precisely because the everyday is inaccessible to full consciousness that it is vulnerable to assimilation and interpretation in terms of dominant paradigms, as Spivak's polytheist childhood is rewritten in monotheist terms. This is not a question of "misinterpretation" of some "real" experience: she acknowledges that the therapist's narrative production of a past for her is inescapably shaped by her own limited access to that past: "what I had been given back by R was precisely what I was able to give to him. It was an echo of the Kali that belonged to the Aryanized middle-class Hindu culture" (16). Spivak thus uses autobiography to reveal that autobiography itself, in its attempt to ontologise the ontic, is the most slippery of terrains, and anything but a source of identity or authority.

II.

For the remainder of this introduction I will attempt to give a (necessarily simplified) overview of Spivak's trajectory as a thinker by providing brief accounts of what seem to me to be different "stages" of her career, though this process, too, must be hedged about with disclaimers and warnings against assuming a linear development in Spivak's work. Definite shifts in emphasis are discernable as one reads the essays chronologically -- for example, the move from the use of academic deconstruction to produce revisionist readings of canonical texts to the apparently more directly political concern with the production of the female subject within neocolonial politics and global capitalism. However, these are differences in emphasis rather than radical breaks: as I will be arguing, the early revisionist readings contain many of the fundamental theoretical concerns which will continue to be explored in the differently inflected later work.

Spivak's earliest work was concerned principally with the poetry of Yeats -- the subject of her doctoral dissertation -- and falls outside the purview of this dissertation.² Her translation of, and introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in 1976 is, for my purposes, a starting point for engaging with her interest in and application of deconstructive thought. ("Application" may seem an inappropriate word to use in this context: I argue later that deconstruction is not a blue-print which one applies to practice. It is, however, "applicable" in the sense that it is a habit of thought that affects one's sense of what can be done and how: Spivak states in a recent essay that deconstruction "has become a bit of *pouvoir-savoir* for me, thus defeating its own purpose, as it should" [1995g, 65]). For the remainder of the 1970s, and early 80s, Spivak focuses mainly on feminist reworkings of Derrida and the application of feminist linguistic and psychoanalytic theory to literary texts in English.

Two of the feminist commentaries on Derridean deconstruction -- "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981) and "Displacement and the Discourse of Women" (1983) are discussed in Chapter 4. Spivak herself asserts that these essays are politically limited in that they engage with the "male establishment of the most privileged Western tradition" (1990a, 42) rather than with the predicaments of women in neocolonial space, but in my discussion of the essays I argue that this is not entirely true, as both pieces begin with a focus on academic practice, but end by making visible the connections between a metaphysics of presence -- of the proper -- and the exploitation of women within the economy of property, ownership, international capital.

The seeds of these concerns can be seen even in an essay as apparently purely literary

and academic as her 1980 reading of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. Marianne de Jong says of this essay that "[d]econstructivists would probably delight in [it]" (366), the implication, in the context of her article, being that this would be an entirely cerebral delight in the essay's cleverness rather than an appreciation of its political usefulness. There is certainly an element of this in my own response to the essay, which is a witty, virtuoso reading of Woolf's novel as an allegory of deconstruction, but I would go further to argue that the essay also contains a number of issues which will be absolutely central to Spivak's later and more overtly political work.

Focussing on the form, as much as the content of the essay, Spivak reads its tri-partite structure as modelling the form of the central tenet of Western metaphysics: "the irreducible form of the logic of non-contradiction" (1990a, 31), that, in the terms of Mr Ramsay's logical propositions, "Q is Q", identity is essence, the proper, identity is self-identity. Taking the novel as "a project to catch the essence of Mrs Ramsay" (30), Spivak identifies the three sections of the book as equivalent to the subject, copula, predicate that comprise the proposition "Q is Q", with the first section constituting Mrs Ramsay as subject, the middle section as occupying the place of the copula and the third section as predicating Mrs Ramsay in the language of art. Her reading, then, is built on the fact that in this instance the section that models the function of the copula -- the place of the "is", of identity -- in fact "unhinges" the relationship between subject and predicate, the self which knows and the self which is known, subjectivity and identity as essence or the proper. This analysis is given an extra dimension by the fact that, although Spivak does not invoke Lacan directly, her reading is clearly informed by his discussion of the relation between the phallus and the copula, where the phallus "is the most tangible element in

the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula" (Lacan, 287). Spivak picks up this relationship between sexual and logical copulation when she says of Mr Ramsay that "As the custodian of the logical proposition . . . he traffics in the copula; and, as father and husband he is the custodian of copulation" (31). The calling into question of the "is", then, not only undermines the logic of non-contradiction, but also challenges the status of the phallus as the master-signifier, the guarantee of masculine self-presence upon which the whole phallogocentric symbolic order rests.

In her demonstration of the way in which the middle section occupies the place of the "is", of identity as self-identity, and yet works, through the language of madness, to undermine the logic of identity, Spivak teases out the relationship between identity, property, sexual power and the "right use of reason". These are all issues which will be of the utmost importance in her later work. For example, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) she looks at both the political and ethical consequences of positing a self-identical (and hence self-knowing) subject, a move which renders the processes of representation and self-representation invisible, and at how these ways of thinking selfhood are related to neocolonial political projects informed by enlightenment notions of instrumental reason. Similarly, almost any one of the essays discussed in this dissertation can be shown to be concerned at some level with the relation between a metaphysics of presence and the positioning of women within sexual, social and monetary economies underpinned by property and appropriation³, or with claims to subject status in the light of the awareness that Q is always not-Q, and the position of speaking subject is a political goal, not a given identity. An essay like "Unmaking and Making in *To The Lighthouse*",

then, is not an exercise in literary game-playing from which Spivak must move on in order to engage with the ethical and political issues of her later work: in fact, it contains the essential theoretical insights that will shape all that later work.

Two essays published in 1981 -- Spivak's translation of, and commentary on, Mahasweta Devi's story "Draupadi" and "French Feminism in an International Frame" -- signal a shift of emphasis to women in the third world and the relationship between first world theoretical discourses and material and ideological oppression in the third world -- a relationship that she revisits and reassesses over the course of a decade . Her key essays written from 1985 to 1988 are concerned with the "worlding" of the third world (its construction as a discursive object for theoretical enquiry), with representation and with the production of the third world woman as other. Two of the best-known essays from this cluster -- "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985) and "Can the Subaltern Speak?" -- are discussed at length.

In an interview from the early 1990s (given in 1991, first published in English in 1993) Spivak identifies some new emphases in her work, paramount amongst them a growing concern with ethics (always present in her work, but here framed in slightly different terms). She poses the question:

How is it possible to imagine as the subject of ethics -- that is to say, the human being who thinks of doing the right thing (and therefore is capable of doing the wrong thing) for the other person? How is it possible to think such a subject outside of the monotheist Judeo-Christian tradition and its critique (1993e, 25).

She adds that this concern with “imagining the other ethical subject” (27) is “perhaps also related to the coding of capitalism as democracy in all of the choices that have been made recently” (30) -- evoking a need to rethink the whole question of individual rights and the distinction between justice and law. These issues are raised in a number of the essays discussed in chapters 5 and 6: “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern” (1988), “Feminism and Deconstruction” (1989) “Woman in Difference” (1990), and “French Feminism Revisited” (1992). This examination of ethical relationships in the context of both state formation and global capitalism is an on-going theme in Spivak’s recent and current work, and several of the essays produced within the last four or five years – for example, “Responsibility” (1994), the Translator’s Preface to *Imaginary Maps*, (1995) and “Acting Bits/Identity Talk” (1995) -- concern themselves with the possibility of an ethical relationship with “that disenfranchized woman whom we strictly, historically, geopolitically *cannot imagine*” (1993a, 139). This attempt to “establish ethical singularity with the subaltern” (1995a, xxiv) involves an acknowledgement of radical otherness that is not mystical or abstract but a recognition of the fact that the subaltern subject is “at a distance” from the hegemonic discourses and projects of modernity: national identity, individualist feminist emancipation, “sustainable development”. As subject *for* ethics, then, the subaltern cannot be recuperated into these discourses, and ethical responsibility cannot be simply and comfortably understood in their terms. Ethics becomes a new kind of impossible but necessary one-on-one encounter, irreducible to the demands of what Spivak calls “rights talk”. In her terms:

the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides. It is not identical with the frank and open exchange between radicals and the oppressed in times of crisis, or the

intimacy that anthropologists often claim with their informant groups.... Most political movements fail in the long run because of the absence of this engagement. In fact, it is impossible for all leaders (subaltern or otherwise) to engage every subaltern in this way, especially across the gender divide. This is why ethics is the experience of the impossible. Please note that I am not saying that ethics are impossible, but rather that ethics is the experience of the impossible. This understanding only sharpens the sense of the crucial and continuing need for collective political struggle. For a collective struggle *supplemented* by the impossibility of full ethical engagement -- not in the rationalist sense of "doing the right thing", but in this more familiar sense of the impossibility of "love" in the one-on-one way for each human being -- the future is always around the corner, there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings (1995a, xxv).

This seems to me to define very clearly the terrain upon which Spivak's most recent work has taken place. These concerns lie at the heart both of her attempts to map the complexities of class-formation and gender-coding in postcolonial space and of her concern with the risks associated with Cultural Studies in the academy, where what appears to be a benevolent engagement with a generalised and homogenised otherness -- studying "India", for example, or "Indian literature" -- can become an alibi for avoiding that impossible relationship of ethical singularity and contribute to the erasure (both discursive and literal) of the subaltern. (Or -- since seeking such a relationship could not be further from most Western academics' agendas -- simply ignoring the way in which this relationship, this impossible "knowledge", marks, or should mark, the horizon of any

attempt to know another culture). Spivak's translations of and commentaries on Mahasweta Devi's fiction are an attempt to counter this tendency. Making Devi's work accessible to an English readership, and drawing out its concerns, she allies her exploration of an ethics of responsibility with a number of more conventional socialist issues, not only relating the plight of the indigenous subaltern to the flow of international development capital, but also making visible what liberal multiculturalism tends to obscure: the "complicity, however apparently remote, of the power lines of local developers with the forces of global capital" (1995a, 198), which she describes as "a secret to the benevolent study of other cultures in the North" , as is the complicity "between the bourgeoisie of the Third World and migrants in the First" (198). My commentary on "Woman in Difference" (1993) -- which contains Spivak's reading of Devi's story "Douloti the Bountiful" -- will attempt to flesh out these issues.

The feminism of Spivak's most recent essays, then, is one which is enormously broad in its scope in the sense that it is concerned with the connection between the internalised coding of gender as affect, the defining of woman as generalised and universalised subject of emancipation in terms of access to rights, and the workings of international capital in neocolonialism. This concern, or cluster of concerns, is visible in, *inter alia*, her 1995 essay "Ghostwriting", her introduction to Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff's *Bringing it All Back Home: Class, Gender and Power in the Modern Household*, (1994) and her brief commentary on the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development: "Empowering Women" (1995). In the latter, she expresses concern over the possible misuse of "development" as an alibi for the control of women's bodies:

The popular videographic image of a woman oppressed by tradition and ignorance waiting to be “rescued” by Northern body control has little reference to the existing situation. People suffering from centuries of neglect, bewildered by the obsessive focus on the reproductive systems of women even as general health declines, whose resistance to these programmes is foiled by governments mortgaged to the forces of so-called development (1995f).

In “Ghostwriting” a cryptic, because highly compressed, passage sets out what Spivak calls, with characteristically daunting phraseology, the “shorthand taxonomy of the coded discursive management of the new socialisation of the reproductive body”:

(1) reproductive rights (*metonymic* substitution of the abstract average subject of rights for women’s identity); (2) surrogacy (*metaphoric* substitution of abstract average reproductive labour power as fulfilled female subject of motherhood); (3) transplant (displacement of eroticism and generalized presupposed subject of immediate affect); (4) population control (objectification of the female subject of exploitation to produce alibis for hypersize through demographic rationalization); (5) post-Fordist homeworking (classical coding of the spectrality of reason as empiricist individualism, complicated by gender ideology). It is only after a discussion of a possible taxonomy of the recoding of this socialization that I would describe the theatre of global resistance where these issues are now paramount (1995g, 67).

This passage stands as a difficult but useful summary of almost all of the issues with which Spivak is concerned in her recent, and it seems, in her forthcoming work.⁴ Many of the components in her “taxonomy” signal her awareness that access to rights within a modern capitalist democracy (the main goal of liberal feminism) involves the rational coding of woman as the “abstract average” subject of those rights, and hence obscures differential interests, and the differential production of cognition and affect which mark the plurality and heterogeneity of women in the global arena. This in turn relates to her critique of development as alibi for both the marginalising of indigenous subaltern groups and the control of women’s sexuality, revealing a worrying complicity between enlightenment rationality, the interests of elite nationalism, benevolent liberal eco-feminism and the workings of international capital through debt-bondage in neocolonialism. And yet, as will become plain, these concerns do not, for Spivak, mean the necessary rejection of productive exchange between first and third world women, or of the benefits of access to rights and subjecthood at the level of the state. Instead, they provide the context for her plea for the honouring of that impossible ethical singularity which is ultimately the only way to resist the homogenisation and reduction to abstraction of the individual subaltern subject.

If there is one word which echoes more insistently than any other in Spivak’s recent work, it is “responsibility”. In “Academic Freedom” -- her 1995 rewriting of her 1992 lecture/article “Thinking Academic Freedom in Gendered Postcoloniality” -- she states in a footnote that “much of my current work tries to confront the relationship between rights and responsibilities” (1995h, 148, n. 3) and it is in these terms that she interrogates notions of academic freedom, suggesting that “[i]t is possible to think that responsibility

and the ability to be held responsible in a significant way is much more important than merely being free" (122/123). For her, "a postcolonial view of academic freedom takes its place within the freedom to *acknowledge* insertion into responsibility rather than freedom to *choose* responsibility" since, she argues, notions of being free to choose responsibility work in the interests of international capitalism, which, since it depends for its survival on non-responsible relations of exploitation, is "obliged to reject the model of the acknowledgement of being inserted into responsibility ...demanding rights or choosing responsibility is more useful for its purposes" (123).

This aspect of Spivak's work is linked to her emphasis on the need to seek a relationship of ethical singularity with the subaltern by her suggestion that this understanding of responsibility can be learned "from below", from subaltern cultures not yet inserted into the culture of "demanding rights or choosing responsibility" where both rights and responsibilities are conceived of as rational abstractions within the framework of a nation state. She insists that this project does not involve any desire to separate the subaltern from his/her rights, nor does it imply a nativist nostalgia for some pure pre-colonial social formation to be reverently museumized. Neither should it suggest tacit endorsement of fundamentalist and reactionary notions of obedience or collectivity. Spivak acknowledges that

In the freedom-centered rights-based formal radical tradition, this [a valorising of "obedience, responsibility, collective survival"] may look like Fascism or Fundamentalism because, without the "historically appropriate" supplementing of Enlightenment/Revolution, it is precisely these residual discursive possibilities that are mobilised by Fascism and fundamentalism

alike. It is appropriate that, in today's new nation, the *individual*-rights position should also raise the question -- "obedience to whom?" and secularist wisdom ask: "who or what defines the collectivity" (123).

These disclaimers in place, Spivak can use her notion of insertion into responsibility not only to critique unexamined notions of freedom -- "if freedom, then enlightenment" (121) -- but also as a conceptual tool for figuring the impossible but necessary relationship of "love" between first world feminist or academic and subaltern subject. In "French Feminism Revisited" ideas of motherhood as supra-individual insertion into responsibility, beyond any idea of individual fulfilment or the dynamics of the nuclear family, become a way into thinking the ethical relationship for the postcolonial feminist. At the same time she remains constantly alert to the ease with which, in gender terms, insertion into responsibility can be warped into exploitation and self-abnegation for women "perceived as ethical choice" (1995a, xxviii), giving rise to one of the aporias or ethical dilemmas which, for her, structure feminist work in postcoloniality -- an idea explored in Chapters 3 and 6.

Spivak's examination of the politics of representation is of particular interest to South Africans at a time of transition to full parliamentary democracy. This brief account of her recent and current work should indicate that her discussion of the relationship between a politics of rights and a politics of responsibility could also be of the most urgent importance as questions of access to constitutional rights, development, foreign debt, population control, and the relationship between the needs of rural communities and ecological imperatives begin to dominate South African ethical and political agendas.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Cf Derrida, 1976, 109. This term is discussed in chapter 1.
2. See note 1 to Preface.
3. "Propriation" is a term taken from Derrida and glossed by Spivak as "making a being proper to itself" (1993a, 126). I take it to refer to the positioning of any individual within a specific symbolic order through insisting on that person's "proper" identity, and on identity itself as given, presence, self-proximity. Spivak notes that the term as she uses it is more general than, but not unconnected to, its more "restricted" meanings in the work of Nietzsche: "appropriation, expropriation, taking possession, gift and barter, mastering, servitude" (ibid, 127).
4. In a footnote on p 67 of "Ghostwriting", Spivak indicates that the "taxonomy" just quoted is "a slightly modified version of a passage in the first chapter of my forthcoming *Return of the Native Informant*".

CHAPTER 2

THE USES OF CATACHRESIS: NAMING, POWER AND AGENCY

I should like first to indicate the most important “political” lesson that I have learned, the habit I have acquired, from my own (mis)interpretation of Derrida: the awareness that theory is a practice. Saying such a thing, I think immediately, thanks again to Derrida, that even the provisional establishment of such a binary opposition is the condition and/or effect of certain norms by way of strategic exclusions. . . . Derrida has repeatedly warned us . . . that we cannot allow our practice, even of deconstructive critique, to become a continuation of business as usual after the appropriate apologies (Spivak, 1993a, 99).

A colleague from the Asian Pacific was reported as complaining... “this sort of theory can’t lead to practice.” If he should ever read these pages, and he might well, I would gently respond that even if the relationship between theory and practice were vectored -- which I cannot for a moment credit -- the vector is the other way here -- theory desperately attempting to digest practice (Spivak, 1995c, 152).

To begin a discussion of the work of Gayatri Spivak with a chapter on “theory” is in a sense anomalous, reinscribing as it does the hierarchised binary theory/practice which

Spivak is, throughout her work, concerned to challenge. Indeed, Spivak's use of deconstructive theory is best illustrated in action, through readings of specific essays, and my purpose in this chapter is not to attempt a comprehensive overview of deconstruction or of its application in Spivak's work, but rather to discuss a few of the terms and concepts which Spivak most frequently uses and to indicate their relation to deconstructive thought. In particular, I will be looking at Spivak's use of the notions of "catachresis", "strategic essentialism", and "homeopathy" (or the *pharmakon*).

In her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, the first important Derridean concept that Spivak deals with, after a brief section of meditation on the relationship between preface and text, is that of writing *sous rature*, or "under erasure". This is a practice which acknowledges and foregrounds the fact that language is never adequate to its object, that the language we must use is, in Spivak's phrase, "inaccurate yet necessary" (xiv). Writing a word *sous rature* involves crossing out the word, while leaving it visible, signalling that the term is inaccurate, inadequate, but must, nonetheless, be used since there is no other. Derrida roots the practice in his reading of Heidegger, for whom the word Being must always be placed under erasure, since the concept of Being is always necessarily precomprehended: "in order for the nature of anything in particular to be defined as an entity, the question of Being [in] general must always already be broached and answered in the affirmative. That something *is*, presupposes that *anything* can be" (Spivak, 1976, xiv). Being, then, cannot be named since it precedes all definitions and the word "Being" is an example of language straining after something which it cannot contain since it is always precomprehended and hence prelinguistic. But Heidegger also comments that this crossing out must "necessarily become a transformation of language,

and demand a transformed relationship to the essence of language” (Spivak, 1976, xv). It is this more general point about the nature of all language, as well as the need to place particular master-words under erasure, that Spivak emphasises again and again in her work, as she insists that language is, of its very nature “catachrestic” and that all the words which “name” the concepts through which we understand the world could, potentially, and must, on occasion, be placed under erasure. “Catachresis” is defined as the “improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor” (OED, 1971). However, it is a commonplace of post-Saussurian linguistics that there is in fact no “proper” relation between words and their objects, and Spivak extends the definition to cover the very nature of language and its relation to the things it ostensibly “denotes”. At the same time, she devotes a considerable amount of work to examining the consequences of understanding key political concepts, such as “nation”, “woman” or “identity”, as catachrestic: this aspect of her work will be dealt with at some length in later chapters.

It may be useful, before examining further Spivak’s use of the notion of catachresis, to look briefly at the text which would certainly have been among the sources of her awareness of the misfit between name and concept. The idea that naming is an originary violence is explored in the chapter of *Of Grammatology* entitled “The Violence of the Letter”. Here Derrida is concerned to deconstruct the culturally accepted opposition between speech and writing, in terms of which speech is seen as the expression of the full presence of the speaker, while writing is a kind of violence in the sense that it stands in for, and thus effaces, the presence of the thing or person represented. Derrida argues that the opposition cannot be sustained since this unavoidable violence is the effect of

all naming, thus all naming, even in speech, is a form of what he calls arche-writing. Commenting on the prohibition placed, in certain societies, on the use of proper names, Derrida concludes that it is only possible to think such a prohibition

because the proper names are already no longer proper names, because their production is their obliteration, because the erasure and the imposition of the letter are originary, because they do not supervene upon a proper inscription; it is because the proper name has never been, as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of a unique being, anything but the original myth of a transparent legibility present under the obliteration; it is because the proper name was never possible except through its functioning within a classification and therefore within the system of differences . . . (1976, 109).

The paradox which Derrida captures here is that naming is a violence because it imposes on something a name which cannot be its proper name and in doing so violates an ostensible self-presence which does not really exist, which cannot be thought or named since naming it is what divides it from itself. He puts it clearly in a later passage:

To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance (112).

Spivak on occasion takes it for granted that her readers are familiar with these ideas, if

not with these specific passages, and sometimes makes rather elliptical references to them, as when, at the very end of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, she defends the political usefulness of Derrida’s thought by stating: “Derrida marks radical critique with the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation. He reads catachresis at the origin” (308) -- a statement which may seem impossibly cryptic to a reader unfamiliar with “The Violence of the Letter”.

To return to Spivak’s own use of the term catachresis: a clear instance of its application can be found in the essay “More on Power/Knowledge” (1992) which provides a powerful argument for the need to remain constantly aware of the catachrestic nature of language, especially when dealing with the “names” and their supposed referents which are used to found or justify political action. One such name is “power”:

“Power” in the general sense is therefore not a name, but a catachresis. Like all names it is a misfit. To use *this* name to describe a generality inaccessible to intended description, is necessarily to work with the risk that the word “is wrested from its *proper* meaning” that it is being applied “to a thing which it does not *properly* denote” (OED). We cannot find a proper place -- it must be effaced as it is disclosed (1993a, 29).

“More on Power/Knowledge” begins by distinguishing between “critical and dogmatic philosophies of action”, which Spivak defines as follows: “By ‘critical’ I mean a philosophy that is aware of the limits of knowing. By ‘dogmatic’ I mean a philosophy that advances coherent general principles without sufficient interest in empirical details” (1993a, 25). Her argument is that in order to use a critical philosophy ethically, to remain aware of the limits of knowing, attention must be paid to the catachresis that is the name “power”. In

order to do this she proposes to read Foucault through Derrida, without implying that such a reading can conflate or reconcile two thinkers in many ways resolutely at odds with each other. Her argument opens with the quotation of a key sentence from Foucault, one in which he acknowledges his use of the word “power” as a necessary catachresis:

One needs to be a nominalist, no doubt: power, it is not an institution, and it is not a structure; it is not a certain strength [*puissance*] that some are endowed with; it is the name that one lends [*prêter*] to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (26)¹

To forget this is to run the risk of allowing “power” to be thought either as a “coherent general principle” which can be used in the application of a dogmatic philosophy, or of monumentalising it into a totalising network of powerful institutions which makes agency impossible. Yet, as Spivak points out, it remains extraordinarily difficult for even those critics most alert to Foucault’s nominalism to avoid talking about power as if it had a literal, ontological referent -- as if there were a *thing* whose “proper” name was power. This is not a fault in them since it is in a sense impossible to use words without implying referents -- and, as Spivak acknowledges, the use of the word in the history of the language has tended to point to the empirical. Spivak, then, is not attempting to empty the word “power” of content, but rather to remind her reader that that content is not “proper” and that it is crucial to distinguish between power “in the general sense” (28) and the concrete instances of the *operation* of power which are all that we can actually grasp as objects for empirical investigation.

This relationship between “the general and the narrow” is a difficult one to define, but understanding it is essential to understanding Spivak’s argument in the remainder of the essay. She states specifically that it is not the relationship between the potential and the actual -- between a set of circumstances which are the condition for the operation of power and a “thing” called power itself. Rather, she relates this difference to what, following Heidegger, she names the ontico-ontological difference. I have already mentioned, in Chapter 1, Spivak’s emphasis on the importance of the ontic, defined as “that which is lived so intimately that it is inaccessible to ontology” (1992b, 15). In that context, she was drawing attention to the importance of acknowledging the ontic in the process of attempting to know either the self or the other: here she seems to be using the term in a slightly broader and more generally philosophical sense, as “that ‘space of prior interrogation, a vague average understanding of being...[which] up close, we cannot grasp at all” (1994c, 33).² I understand the ontico-ontological difference as the difference between, on the one hand, what can be grasped as knowledge, is within the scope of language, can be coded as experience (the ontological) and, on the other hand, the whole pre-existing, ungraspable, subindividual field which is the *a priori* condition for knowledge and consciousness but cannot be grasped as knowledge or consciousness; “Being” as condition of possibility for “being” or “Dasein”. This seems to me to have what Spivak might call “something like a relationship” to what will be discussed in the next chapter as Lyotard’s notion of “the unrepresentable”.³

To think “power” in relation to this ontico-ontological divide, then, is to ensure that the instances of power which, because they are within ontology, are the only form in which power can be grasped as something to be empirically investigated, do not become

“power itself” in the thinking of the investigator. It is in this sense that Spivak can be said to be reading Foucault against the grain, but productively, by reading him in relation to Derrida, and, in particular, Derrida's capacity to honour the ontic. Spivak sums up the difference between the two thinkers in the following terms: “To quote Marx where one shouldn't, Foucault always remains within the realm of necessity (even in the clinamen to his last phase) whereas Derrida makes for the realm of freedom, only to fall on his face” (33). This reference is illuminated by the following passage in “Response to Jean-Luc Nancy” (1994):

Indeed, it is possible to trace the itinerary of the discontinuous yet concurrent memory-event of bodiedness as a limit/condition to rational political practice in Marx. The crisis in international capitalism has something like a relationship with a forgetfulness of the ungrounded body. I am not for a moment suggesting that Marx trafficked in ontico-ontological difference. But, if this is the early difference between species life and species being, where the limit to practice is conceived of as the place where knowledge is impossible, where nature is “the great body without organs of the human being”, where human life and death are but nature relating to itself, then the later Marx restaged this intuition as the Realm of Freedom, also a beyond for which political practice can only prepare discontinuous facilitation (36)

In this passage, the Realm of Freedom is related both to “the place where knowledge is impossible” -- the ontic -- and to “the limit to practice”. If Derrida “falls on his face” in his attempt to reach for that realm, it is because the task of thinking the ontic is by definition

impossible, but absolutely necessary. Necessary because neglecting to honour the ontic is neglecting to mark the limits to practice, and that is the moment at which a potentially critical philosophy or theory becomes a dogmatic one, and thought forgets its responsibility to the unrepresentable.

Having invoked the ontic and thus reminded us of the ungraspable nature of the intricate subindividual web of “power in general” (a reminder which undermines any tendency to “freeze” power into an ontologically fixed entity), Spivak extrapolates that in any investigation of the operation of power “we must start, then, from the local foci of power/knowledge -- *pouvoir /savoir*” (34). But she brings the preceding section of the essay to bear on this formula by questioning the accepted translation: rather than translating *pouvoir/savoir* as power/knowledge, a formulation that implies “things” with some stable ontological status, she suggests the more “homely verbiness” of “being able to do something -- only as you are able to make sense of it” (34), or, later in the essay, “know-it-as-this/can-do-it-as-this” (49). This way of conceiving of *pouvoir/savoir* is enormously enabling. It occupies a middle ground between, on the one hand, the ungraspable subindividual “force-field” which operates power -- “that moving field of shredded *énoncés* or differential forces that cannot be constructed as objects of investigation” (37) -- and on the other hand the monumental and intimidating supra-individual and institutional power-and knowledge-structures, *puissance* and *connaissance*. If the former cannot be grasped as object of investigation, though it must constantly be acknowledged as the limit of thought, the latter, if taken as *the* foci for the investigation of power, may make it difficult or impossible to think resistance -- the charge often levelled against Althusserian analyses of power as institutional structure. Using

pouvoir/savoir it is possible to think resistance in terms of the way changes in knowing can lead to changes in doing, without making power a “thing” with a fixed ontologically status, but also without being paralysed either by the unknowability of the field of power or the vastness and intransigence of the institutions of power (or knowledge). *Pouvoir/savoir*, in Spivak’s sense thus points in both directions: to the ontic -- the ungraspable everyday -- and to the institutional, and allows one to attempt the task of understanding not “power itself” but how ordinary people, negotiating between what they cannot grasp because it is too close to them and what they cannot grasp because it is too enormous, can still resist, create and act because of their “ability to know”. “Power”, then, is a word which does not name any “thing”, a word which could always be placed under erasure. But it is also among the most useful of “names” -- one that no attempt to understand or change society could conceivably do without, a key catachresis.

In a similar vein, Spivak explains her deconstructive approach to the politics of postcoloniality through the argument that *all* the key political terms and concepts which characterise the postcolonial are catachrestic, making postcoloniality the perfect deconstructive instance. This view is expressed in a passage which Spivak herself must consider to be of central importance since it appears at least three times in her recent work:

...The political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, socialism, even culturalism. Within the historical frame of exploration, colonization, and decolonization, 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 Eastern Europe. Thus they are being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept metaphors for which no *historically* adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space. That does not make the claims less urgent. A concept metaphor without an adequate referent may be called a catachresis by the definitions of classical rhetoric. These claims to catachreses as foundations make postcoloniality a deconstructive case (1993a, 281: see also 1993a, 48; 1993d, 158)

Spivak is careful to distinguish between what she calls the narrow and the general sense of catachresis (cf 1993a, 298, note 30). In this passage, she is concerned with specific concepts for which no *historically* adequate references can be found, rather than with “the general philosophical position that all language is catachrestic”. I would argue, however, that that more general sense does pervade her work, as when she argues that Derrida can never “name” the other in a way which assimilates, precisely because he “reads catachresis at the origin”. But the idea that words are always catachrestic, always wrenched away from a perfect relation of naming which was never more than a state of desire, is only one side of the practice of writing *sous rature*. The phrase Spivak uses is “inaccurate *yet necessary*” (1976, xiv): the other side is the recognition that those names must be used, or that recognising certain political claims as catachrestic does not in any way diminish their urgency.

This brings me to one of the more contentious ideas which informs much of Spivak’s

work: the notion of “strategic essentialism”. The paradoxical fact that any concept can be simultaneously false and indispensable is closely related to one of the points that Spivak has made many times in the course of her writing -- perhaps the single most important understanding necessary for a fair and accurate assessment of her strategies and projects. This is the point that deconstruction is not a political programme, nor does it provide a blueprint for political practice:

It is not just that deconstruction cannot found a politics, while other ways of thinking can. It is that deconstruction can make founded political programmes more useful by making their in-built problems more visible (Spivak 1993a, 121).

Once this is understood, it follows that subscribing to the insights of deconstruction need not be politically disabling, since the relationship between theory and practice, for Spivak, is one in which theory must be “normed” by practice, rather than practice paralysed by a self-righteous and absolute theoretical purity. Spivak sums this up in the most accessible terms in a 1991 interview with *Critical Studies*:

Deconstruction does not say anything against the usefulness of mobilising unities. All it says is that because something is useful it ought not to be monumentalized as the way things really are. The idea that one must speak up in the name of something against something else is not alien to deconstruction. But then to justify it as something more than what the situation needed, that is the place where deconstruction would say, because we need to center ourselves in order to act, we should not monumentalise that need as the way things really are. So that when, in

fact, what is a strategic agenda is theorised as a description of truth, that is when deconstruction becomes useful. If indeed there is someone or some group who would say, look, you can't fight on the issue of this or that, because we must be deconstructive, then, in fact, a deconstructive gaze would say, why is this person, in what interest is this person making a differentiation at this point? One of the things about deconstruction is that it can never be its own example. Deconstruction is, strictly speaking, impossible in its own terms. It is what allows us to say that anything that we can do must contravene . . . what I suppose can be called the deconstructive theory. There is no such thing as acting deconstructively. So, to an extent the deconstructive gaze is the gaze that looks at how we tend to confuse strategy with theory, according to a model which is absolutist. In fact, one of the things that deconstruction says is that logocentrism -- all centism to an extent -- is not a pathology; it is the thing that enables us to act. But then, to take the next step and say that is where truth stops -- to say that it is on that basis that we declare the way things really are -- that is the step that you need to be very cautious about in terms of deconstruction (1991b).

The consequence of this crucial set of insights is that "since one cannot not be an essentialist, why not look at the ways in which one is essentialist, carve out a representative essentialist position and then do politics according to the old rules whilst remembering the dangers in this" (1990a, 45).

It is important, however, to note that Spivak's use of the concept of "strategic essentialism" is not static: in the Preface to *Outside in the Teaching Machine* she states that there has been "a shift in my work from a 'strategic use of essentialism' to considerations of institutional agency" (ix). She is also acutely aware that strategic essentialism is potentially a double-edged sword: in a 1990 interview she comments angrily that "just as 'The personal is political' became, finally, in our personalist ideology, 'Only the personal is political', in the same way the strategic use of essentialism became a kind of carte blanche for being an essentialist when one wanted to be. Strategy went out of the window" (1990c, 93). The difference between strategy, driven by identifiable imperatives, and a merely convenient and self-serving relativism must be preserved here.

However, despite her concern with the misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept, Spivak has not abandoned the use of strategic essentialism. In "French Feminism Revisited" she writes that "the tone of recantation [in "In a Word" (1989)] is a result of the failure of catachrestic strategy in the face of essentialism in the highly personalist middle-class culture of the United States" (1993a, 162) and argues for the usefulness of strategic essentialism in attempts to understand, for example, claims to national identity in the third world. In any case, it is necessary to understand the influence of this concept in her earlier work, since ignoring that influence may lead to a misreading of her position. One of the earliest explicit references to strategic essentialism can be found in the 1985 essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography". The context for the discussion is Spivak's argument that while the work of the Subaltern Studies collective may seem at times to be informed by an essentialist conception of consciousness, and particularly of subaltern consciousness, the group's

own historiographic practice effectively (though to some degree unconsciously) undermines that essentialism, revealing it to be a strategically useful construct. She argues that “our own transactional reading of [the Subaltern Studies Group] is enhanced if we see them as *strategically* adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness, that would fall prey to an anti-humanist critique, within a historiographic practice that draws many of its strengths from that very critique”, and goes on to claim that:

The strategy becomes most useful when “consciousness” is being used in the narrow sense, as self-consciousness. When “consciousness” is being used in that way, Marx’s notion of un-alienated practice or Gramsci’s notion of an “ideologically coherent” “spontaneous philosophy of the multitude” are plausible and powerful (1988a, 205).

However, the need to remain aware of the strategic choices made, to make visible the deliberate and conscious disjuncture between theory and practice, remains crucial:

If it were embraced as a strategy, then the emphasis upon the “sovereignty, . . . consistency and . . . logic” of “rebel consciousness”⁴ can be seen as “affirmative deconstruction”: knowing that such an emphasis is theoretically non-viable, the historian then breaks his theory in a scrupulously delineated “political interest”. If, on the other hand, the restoration of the subaltern’s subject position in history is seen by the historian as the establishment of an inalienable and final truth of things, then any emphasis on sovereignty, consistency, and logic will . . . inevitably objectify the subaltern and be caught in the game of knowledge as power (207).

Although here it is “consciousness” that is to be strategically activated in a specific political interest, the concept around which discussions of essentialism most often centre is, of course, that of identity, and it is necessary to look in some detail at how Spivak deploys this trope in her work. She works, unsurprisingly, with a model of identity which emphasises the constructed, multiple and non-self-identical nature of the human subject, which means that, for her, any attempt to retrieve or talk about consciousness or identity involves

the charting of what in post-structuralist language would be called the . . . subject-effect. A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network (“text” in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. (Each of these strands, if they are isolated, can also be seen as woven of many strands.) Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject (1988a, 204).⁵

The complexity of this multiply determined and overdetermined subject is increased by the fact that much of that process of determination is not accessible to consciousness. In an early essay -- “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model: Derrida’s ‘Limited Inc.’” (1980) -- Spivak stresses the importance of acknowledging what she calls “the structural unconscious”, which is not “an implicit or potential reserve of consciousness” (Landry and Maclean, 83) but the place of radical alterity, absolutely outside of any possible

knowledge or expression of self. This in turn affects one's understanding of intentionality:

Psychoanalysis has suggested that we might not be fully at home to ourselves, that the presupposition of an intending subject might be constituted by the presupposition of a radically irreducible other, that the sense of a unified self might be made up of temporally (in terms of "psychic time") unreliable (from the point of view of our picture of self, intention and experience) animations and connections produced by the work of a psychic machine that has, in its different parts, different "objectives" that themselves change discontinuously. It is therefore necessary, beyond the outlines of psychoanalysis as a discipline, to entertain the structural possibility that intention is irreducibly heterogeneous (1984a, 236).

A crucial point needs to be made at this juncture: positing a subject that is multiple and contradictory and without the potential for full self-knowledge does not mean abandoning the possibility of examining the workings either of agency or of intentionality. Spivak makes the point that self-division is precisely what makes any degree of self-awareness, and hence intentionality, possible: a wholly self-identical subject would have no distance from itself, no *self*-consciousness at all. In her much more sophisticated formulation: "that intentionality is irreducibly graphematic, that it is always already plural, an effect, heterogeneous, divided...is precisely what allows it to work" (Landry and Maclean, 83). In another essay she makes the related but more politically directed point that, in the interests of "imagin[ing] the varieties of colonial agency" it is both possible and permissible to write or speak "only in terms of the human being as agent, and not of contingency or subject formation". The fact that "the human agent -- who acts, and, as

patient suffers, and as both has rights -- is different from and smaller than the human subject" does not mean that that agent is not a legitimate focus of investigation (1991a, 140).

Similarly, accepting the idea that identities are socio-culturally and psycho-sexually produced and that the effect of a coherent and sovereign subjectivity is just that, an *effect*, is by no means to despair of agency. Quite the contrary: Judith Butler, countering the feminist anxiety that thinking identity as constructed and discontinuous will undermine political agency⁶, argues very persuasively that:

the reconceptualisation of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the *constituted* status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free-will and determinism. Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible (1990, 147).

For her, then, political agency is a question of "locat[ing] strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions" and "affirm[ing] the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them" (147).

These ideas -- that the subject is culturally and discursively produced, that it is heterogeneous and self-divided, and that the conscious and intending agent is only a small part of a network of discontinuous positions and determinations -- are central to an understanding of Spivak's arguments in essays like "Deconstructing Historiography" and "Can the Subaltern Speak?", but they are not otherwise remarkable in themselves: the idea of the constituted subject rather than the sovereign self has become a commonplace in both post-Freudian and post-structuralist discourse. Two points, however, need to be made in this regard. The first is that the universal, sovereign subject has by no means disappeared from academic and philosophical discourse -- as the frequent misunderstandings of the essays mentioned above make abundantly clear. However, for many who still traffic in the concept, sovereign subjectivity is by no means everybody's prerogative. In another context Spivak quotes the following comments by Richard Rorty:

One would never guess, to read Foucault's analysis of the transformations operated in the last three centuries within European social institutions that that period has seen a considerable diminution in suffering and an equally considerable augmentation of the chances offered to *the individual* to choose his life-style himself (1993a, 48, emphasis mine)⁷

What is important here is that "the" individual is manifestly the normative Western subject, unaffected by epistemic violence, privileged rather than victimized by "development", autonomous, and free to choose his -- heaven help us -- "life-style". That the conception of the universal subject in these terms has consequences for the construction of an other that will consolidate that "self" can be obliquely illustrated by an equally astonishing statement by Rorty cited by Homi Bhabha. Having argued that "Liberal society already

contains the institutions for its own improvement”, and that further conceptual revolutions may not be necessary, Rorty bethinks himself of those subjects whom even he recognises as unable to move and choose “freely” and “knowingly” within those institutions. “This is not to say” he allows, “that the world has had the last political revolution it needs But in such countries (as South Africa, Albania, Paraguay) raw courage (like that of the leader of COSATU) is the relevant virtue, not the sort of reflective acumen which makes contributions to social theory” (Bhabha, 1992, 62). For these not-so-universal subjects the public use of reason and the rational choices born of self-knowledge and self-identity are apparently not necessary; lucky they have that brute courage to compensate! This construction of the physical and instinctual other of the autonomous, rational self-knowing Western individual is an ironic “other-side-of-the-coin” to the risk which Spivak identifies as attendant upon a benevolent “information retrieval” approach to the study of third world literature, where it is the third world writer, or native informant, who is seen as innocently self-knowing, unlike the complex, fractured and overdetermined Western investigator. Both assumptions are equally dehumanising, equally patronising.

The second point that needs to be made in relation to the comment that theories of subject constitution and the multiplicity of identity are no longer new or remarkable, is that it is, rather, what Spivak is able to do with this more flexible and strategically useable concept of identity that bears examination: the *pouvoir* (in the sense of agency) that her *savoir* enables. In a *tour-de-force* essay entitled “Acting Bits/ Identity Talk” (1992) Spivak offers a series of meditations on the uses and misuses of identity talk and, through this, on “the politics of translation, the politics of culture, the politics of identity” (1985c, 175).

This involves an intricate play of the need to claim identity and the simultaneous need to call identity into question.

Spivak begins the essay by invoking the Algerian novelist Assia Djébar as someone for whom identity must be constantly negotiated and “staged” as she represents both herself and other Algerian women in French (the language of the conqueror) and in the process “[tries] my self out” (148) -- attempts to find a self which can narrate to, and be heard by, the women who are her subject and her audience. This is “the divided field of identity . . . as the sign of a(n) (l)earned perspective, not an autobiographical identity” (148), and it is Djébar’s struggle for that perspective that implicitly frames all the descriptions of “myself [Spivak] engaged in identity talk” which follow. This is because, for Spivak, all attempts to think identity, to “achieve autobiography”, take place within the broader framework of her concern with the interests of the gendered subaltern in decolonisation: the “others” with whom Djébar’s “self” is in a constant state of negotiation.

The first encounter to be described is one between Spivak, the expatriate academic of Bengali origin, and a group of Bengali scholars, creating a situation where it is necessary for the author publicly to acknowledge “the responsibility of Bengali identity” (149), an identity she has no desire wholly to repudiate -- “I *am* Indian” (151)⁸. Yet she uses the occasion not to reinforce but to complicate notions of a coherent and unitary cultural identity. Her rather elegant argument centres on what she reveals as a clandestine move in an English dictionary definition of identity⁹, which gives as the roots of the word the Latin *idem*, and the Sanskrit *idam*, both glossed as “same”. Spivak points out that in Latin *idem* means “same” in the sense of repetition rather than uniqueness or self-

identity; this would then support a deconstructive understanding of identity as constructed through repetition, through the “signature” of the self which is, like all signatures, both infinitely repeatable and always different. (This is a key deconstructive argument which Spivak explores at length in “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model: Derrida’s ‘Limited Inc.’” [1980]). A similar meaning can be argued for in the case of the Sanskrit word *idam*. Here the context in which Spivak learned her Sanskrit comes into play in an interesting way: she makes only a brief reference to the Diocesan school in Calcutta, along with a rather cryptic exhortation to the U S reader not to “lose sight of the social textile here” (151). The significance of this is clear if one knows that Spivak’s teachers at that school were, as discussed in Chapter 1, tribal Christians, subaltern, women for whom identity was not constructed within the hegemonic discourses. It is in part through the language she learnt from these marginalized women that Spivak is able to expose “the fraud at the heart of identity politics” (151). For it turns out that *idam*, too, “is not only not the undiminishing selfsame, as a pronoun it does not even have the dignity of a noun, and it is always enclitic, or inclined towards the noun, always dependent on the proximity of a particular self” (151). Thus, *for this occasion only*, Spivak offers a neologistic translation: “not *ahamvāda* [ego-ism as ipse-ism] but *idemvāda*” (151, brackets in original). For this occasion only -- an occasion marked both by the need to acknowledge the responsibility of “Bengali identity” and, because of what Spivak sees as the political and ethical dangers of religious separatism in the Indian context, by the need to undermine notions of a unified identity recuperable by the separatist project.

But Spivak is adamant that she is not “a situational relativist” and that her deployment of “identity talk” in a particular situation is governed by imperatives which frame and go

beyond those individual situations (151, n. 6). True relativism can, presumably, recognise no imperatives, since the criteria for determining them can never be agreed upon. A just assessment of Spivak's work relies to a large extent on the reader's acceptance that there is a crucial difference between relativism and the strategic use of concepts which are always acknowledged to be catachrestic, inaccurate but necessary -- concepts which must in some circumstances be strategically affirmed, in others placed (visibly) under erasure and in still others ruthlessly revealed as constructs vulnerable to reactionary political manipulation. Given the possibility of competing, or mutually exclusive, imperatives, the strategic use of any catachresis may involve the making of apparently impossible choices: Spivak's response to this dilemma and her exploration of its consequences will be discussed in the next chapter.

Once this distinction between relativism and strategy is established, it follows that the strategic undermining of the grounds for identity politics does not mean that attention to "identity" as a lived sense of selfhood cannot be part of an ethical project. In the second section of "Acting Bits/ Identity Talk" Spivak asks the Derridean question: "What is it to Learn?" and links it to the need to respect and learn from kinds of selfhood very different from one's own. This involves, among other things, going a step back from the usual starting point of cultural studies or the examination of institutions in culture. As Spivak points out:

institutions *in* culture must precomprehend an institution or instituting *of* culture, not simply as a chronologically prior event but at a philosophically subtending layer. In fact at this level, continuous with the possibility of being in the world, "culture" is one of the many names that one bestows

upon the trace of being othered from nature, and by so naming, effaces the trace (152).

Spivak's project in this essay, then, is to acknowledge that trace, to examine what she calls "cases of subject-ing, cases of agent-ing, thus cases of identifying, cases of the originary synthesis with the absolutely other; everything we leap over when we *start* with the object of cultural studies or the politics of culture" (153).

Her first "case" concerns a Bangladeshi peasant community whom she visited in 1991 after they had been hit by a devastating cyclone and tidal wave. Asked, back in the capital, what she has "seen", she describes not the suffering of the community, or the effectiveness or otherwise of the rescue efforts, but, rather, her sense of the lived selfhoods, the "identity" of these people, which she stresses is not "an identikit for all Bangladeshis" (154). She says of the inhabitants of these coastal islands that:

They build in the expectation of obliteration, planned obsolescence at the other end. *Everyone*, including the health and relief workers from other parts of Bangladesh, half a notch above the lowest of them in class, remarks on the fact that loss of land and kin seems to leave a remarkably impermanent mark on the inhabitants of this area. Yet they are not "fatalists", they grieve and want relief, to rebuild in the face of certain loss, yet again. This is an eco-logical sense of being-in-the-world (154).

This very different kind of selfhood Spivak relates to Marx's distinction between species-life and species-being, associating the island inhabitants with the former, "where human

life and death is no more than Nature breathing in and out" (154/5). It is in such a community, then, that that process of othering from nature which is the production of the subject in culture can be seen in the act of "effacing the trace", as these communities are produced as subjects of Western benevolence (Spivak is scathing about the unappreciated efforts of the US task-force), or slotted into a narrative of development "as an earlier pre-scientific stage where the proper help was to control nature so that these people could be re-defined as passive and graduate to a more or less remote commitment to, *or critique of capitalism*" (155). Alternatively, they may be appropriated into a national or global identity: Spivak, in a long footnote, quotes a letter from the Sub-Zonal Relief Coordinator to the Commander of the Joint Task Force, a letter which offers effusive thanks and a tribute to America as bringer of democracy, and does so in the name of "our people" (153, n. 8). Spivak remarks on the fracture between these claims to an all-embracing national identity with global associations, and the being-in-the-world of the island people whose forms of agency and understanding of self have no traffic whatsoever with a "national" culture or character.

If I understand her correctly, Spivak's point here is that the politically crucial, though "impossible", task facing the investigator wishing genuinely to "learn" from these people is to touch the ontic, the "everyday" of the radically other, to unlearn what we think we know in order to avoid imposing on people both an identity conceived in relation to our own ontologies and the kind of "help" that is congruent with that imagined identity. Does this mean that Spivak is being an essentialist here? That she is assuming some essence, some presence, some "real" identity that these people possess and that is violated by attempts to understand them in terms of existing narratives of subjecthood?

I would argue not: as she makes clear, it is not identity itself that is effaced by the institution of culture, but the trace, the provisional starting point for *thinking* about all presence; or, to put it another way, it is not identity that is effaced but the awareness that we must think identity precisely because it is not there; think it in an attempt to touch the “everyday”, the texture of being, of the other, and in doing so avoid prescriptive and imperialist responses to that other’s needs. A vivid example of one of the ways in which deconstructive thinking “cannot found a politics” -- has no prescription to offer -- but “can make founded political programmes more useful by making their in-built problems more visible”.

Throughout the rest of the essay Spivak moves between the two poles of deconstructive thinking about identity -- the need for a sense of origin and the need to reveal all origins as imagined and provisional. A useful, and not at all difficult, passage summarises her approach thus:

A most tenacious name, as well as the strongest account of the agency or mechanics of the staging of experience-in-identity is “origin”: “I perform my life so because my origin stages me so.” National origin, ethnic origin. And, more pernicious: “You cannot help acting this way because your origin stages you so.” . . . Yet to feel one is from an origin is not a pathology. It belongs to that group of grounding mistakes that enable us to make sense of our lives. But the only way to argue for origins is to look for institutions, inscriptions and then to surmise the mechanics by which such institutions can stage such a particular style of performance. This preserves and secures the minority voice in Anglo cultures and also

reveals the manipulation of the very same minorities into superpower identification in the violent management of global cultural politics (158).

This seems to me as lucid an example as I can imagine of the central tenet of Spivak's version of deconstruction -- the formula that emerges again and again in her writing -- that deconstruction involves "the persistent critique of what we cannot not want". To desire identity, an origin, presence, is not pathological, yet these things must be known as "grounding mistakes". Having "remembered" them as constructed and provisional, we must then partially and strategically "forget" that remembering in order to use, productively, the false, violent, indispensable, dangerous concepts that we cannot do without (cf Spivak 1976, xxxviii).

The recognition that ideas or beliefs can be simultaneously violent and enabling, dangerous and indispensable is closely related to Spivak's adaptation of Derrida's concept of the *pharmakon* -- that which is both poison and medicine. (Cf Derrida 1981, 70). It is an adaptation: Derrida's exploration of the double meaning of the Greek word *pharmakon* takes place in the context of his ongoing critique of phonocentrism. It is in relation to the association of writing with the *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus* that Derrida emphasises the double meaning of the term: he notes that the privileging of phonocentrism, speech as presence, means that "one and the same suspicion envelops in a single embrace the book and the drug, writing and whatever works in an occult, ambiguous manner open to empiricism and the laws of chance, governed by the ways of magic and not the laws of necessity" (73). Derrida plays up the ambiguity of the term, which can be rendered variously as "'remedy', 'recipe', 'poison', 'drug', 'philter', etc." (72),

in the interests of his project of undermining the speech/writing opposition. Spivak borrows the concept, rather than the particular use that Derrida makes of it, and adapts it to signify an approach to cultural analysis analogous to the practice of homeopathic medicine: the putting into practice of the insight that what can kill can also cure (and, of course, *vice-versa*).

In "The Burden of English" (1992), for example, she gives this notion a pedagogic charge, arguing that the alienation experienced by Indian students reading English texts is both poison and medicine. Poison because these texts can work a kind of epistemic violence on non-English readers, interpolating them as subjects of an alien cultural self-representation, situating them as "implied readers" in a way that encourages the internalisation of "a historically-distanced cultural fiction" (276) as an image of selfhood. Medicine because it is precisely that alienation which can, potentially, provide the distance necessary for critique. In "Reading the *Satanic Verses*" (1989) she points out that the great rational abstractions which constitute the discourse of democracy all have the potential to be both poison and medicine. They are the regulators (in the positive sense) of rights and freedoms, but as Spivak points out, while they "can be staunch allies . . . *they can always also be used as alibis*" (1993a, 229, emphasis in the original). That Rushdie's novel could be banned in the name of the "'rights of a religious minority in a secular democratic-socialist state'" (229) does not discredit the concepts of minority rights, secularism, democracy or socialism, but reveals these things as *pharmakons*, values which must be used to cure the ills of the world, yet must be constantly critiqued for their contribution to those ills. This constant critique is a function of the recognition that such double-edged abstractions are not just temporary and imperfect approximations

of the “pure”, timeless and universal values that we have not yet achieved; they are all we have. We must want them and say no to them all the time as their effects move constantly between cure and infection:

The answer is not the “preservation” of the positive and perennial and the “elimination” of the negative and contextual. It is not even to attempt to sublimate -- preserve and destroy. My peculiar theme is always *persistent* critique -- and, I must emphasise, an *asymmetrical* persistent critique, focusing on different elements in the incessant process of recoding that shifts the balance of the *pharmakon*'s effect from medicine to poison... (1993a, 235).

To sum up, then: Spivak's use of deconstructive principles is one which potentially provides an answer to those critics of deconstruction who feel that it is a mode of thought which leads away from the political, and paralyses both the investigating and the revolutionary agent by “decentering the subject”. In relation to the second of these accusations, Spivak is adamant that deconstruction does not decenter the subject:

Deconstruction also insistently claims that there cannot be a fully practising deconstructor. For, the subject is always centered as a subject. You cannot *decide* to *be* decentered and inaugurate a politically correct deconstructive politics. What deconstruction looks at is the limits of this centering, and points at the fact that these boundaries of the centering of the subject are indeterminate and that the subject (being always centered) is obliged to describe them as determinate (1990a, 104).

In response to the charge that deconstruction undermines the political, she would argue that such a view is based on a misapprehension concerning the relationship between theory and practice. She acknowledges that deconstruction “cannot be foundational. If one wants to *found* a political project on deconstruction, it would be something like a wishy-washy pluralism on the one hand, or an irresponsible hedonism on the other” (104). But Spivak understands deconstruction not as a blueprint for political action but as a habit of constant critique, an unremitting awareness that all our grounding and founding concepts are constructed and provisional, all our definitions catachrestic, all our most cherished values capable of being used for ill as well as good. Ignoring or denying these things (as opposed to suspending our awareness of them in the interests of agency) has concrete and measurable political results: fundamentalism, totalitarianism, ethnic separatism, prescriptive and proscriptive identity politics. It is against these dangers, and not against the human agent as subject of history that Spivak mobilises her deconstructive insights.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage, 1980, p 93. [I have decided to provide, in footnote form, bibliographic details of quotations within quotations, where the secondary text quoted is not in my own bibliography, because it is not one I have used in the production of my dissertation. This will enable a reader to access one of these secondary quotations without having to go via Spivak's text].
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper, 1962, p 25.
3. I like this phrase "something like a relationship" (a formulation which Spivak uses frequently) since it suggests not a homology but a more elusive yet potentially illuminating connection.
4. Quotations from Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1983.
5. A common objection to this sort of definition is that it does not explain what compels or enables the self to bring these discontinuous strands into a relationship that enables action. I am not sure that there is any easy answer to this question, but perhaps an analogy can be made with the way in which a biological organism functions by bringing into play and hierarchising its essentially separate and discontinuous systems. Similarly, the human psyche is presumably characterised by a profound and fundamental drive towards the degree of coherence that will enable survival and action and in order to achieve this it must, at any given moment, bring its potentially conflicting and contradictory aspects into a contingent functional (though not necessarily logical) coherence. It is also important to note that the metaphor Spivak uses is not the more common one of fragmentation, but one of weaving – a multitude of separate strands making up a complex web of "self". In this sense, discontinuity does not necessarily imply dysfunction.
6. Kirstie McClure refers to "the critical claim advanced by many feminist political theorists that the contemporary assertion of the status of "subject" by historically subjugated or silenced identities of race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality renders suspect any interrogation of either the status of "subject" or the language of rights" (108) and cites Jane Flax's suspicion of "the motives of those who counsel such a move at the moment when women have just begun to remember themselves and claim an argentic subjectivity" (108, quotation from Flax "Remembering Selves: Is the Repressed Gendered?", *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 26, 1 (1987), pp 187-206).
7. Richard Rorty, "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy" in George Canguilhem, ed. *Michel Foucault: philosophe*. Paris; Seuil, p 390.
8. This statement "I am Indian", with its strategic claiming of national identity, also resonates in interesting ways with Spivak's repudiation of such national identity in a

feminist context. In "The Politics of Translation" (1992) she writes: "I am often approached by women who would like to put Devi in with just Indian women writers. I am troubled by this, because "Indian women" is not a feminist category. . . . Sometimes Indian women writing means American women or British women writing, except for national *origin*." (1993a, 188/189). Her point here is that claiming national identity can work to disguise crucial differences between women in postcolonial space and migrant women in metropolitan space, concealing class-operated differences of interest.

9. Spivak does not indicate which dictionary gave her this definition -- she says merely: "The other day in the United States I saw in a students' English dictionary that the source of the word was given as Latin *idem* or Sanscrit *idam* and both were cited as meaning 'same'" (151).

CHAPTER 3

ALTERITY, UNDECIDABILITY AND ETHICS: POSTMODERN THOUGHT IN POSTCOLONIALITY

The more passionately thought denies its own conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible" (Adorno, 1974, 247)

In Chapter 2 I examined Spivak's deployment of theoretical concepts associated with deconstruction. In this chapter, I want to look at a potentially more contentious relationship: that between Spivak's work and that broad and often carelessly-defined mode of cultural production and social analysis which is related to, but not to be conflated with, deconstruction and post-structuralism: "postmodernism". Among the ongoing debates within the South African academy is one concerning the usefulness of postmodern thought in a postcolonial context. In a recent informal forum at my own institution¹ several participants expressed the view that postmodern thinking is politically disabling, elitist and irrelevant to postcolonial and third world socio-political reality. Among the characteristic remarks made was the following:

It seems to me that postmodernism has a certain kind of appeal for people in marginalised positions and I want to suggest that it's a superficial appeal because one gets the impression as an African Nationalist or as a woman or any other similar category that feel themselves to be marginalised . . .

that postmodernity will take you more seriously than the so-called monolithic rational, western male tradition. My suggestion is that it is merely because the postmodern tradition finds it difficult to explain why anything should be taken more seriously than anything else If there are no shared standards which you can appeal to, then you are put in a very difficult position. If you can't convince people that you have been treated unjustly, because there are no standards to which both men and women, or blacks and whites adhere, then it's not clear where claims of justice fall (transcript from Critical Studies Group, 1996).

A second speaker remarked with heavy irony: "I imagine postmodern ANC organisers trying to fight against apartheid, I wonder what they would do". In contrast to the views expressed by these speakers, I will argue in this chapter that the best of postmodern thought is not reducible to the mindless moral and political relativism they describe, and that it is in the work of engaged postcolonial critics like Spivak that key concepts of postmodern thought can be seen to be applied in illuminating and productive ways to postcolonial concerns. In making this argument it is, of course, necessary to distinguish postmodernity as a set of material and cultural conditions from postmodernism as a theoretical response to those conditions as well as to distinguish between conservative and progressive forms of postmodernism.

Spivak would certainly not see herself as an apologist for postmodernity: like Frederic Jameson she sees the postmodern condition as inextricably bound up with the violence and gross social inequities of late capitalism, as when, in "The Political Economy of

Women as Seen by a Literary Critic" (1988), she refers to "the Third World female subproletarian" as "the paradigmatic subject of postmodern neocolonialism" (226). If she were to reject the association with postmodernism² it might be simply because of a different understanding of what that term connotes. In "Reading the *Satanic Verses*" she describes Rushdie's "staging" of the fragmented, unauthoritative author as "modernist" (1993a, 219), where -- though taking Spivak's point that the representation of decentring is not decentring (225) -- I would argue very strongly that it is postmodernist, with the modernist author figure more aptly represented by someone like DH Lawrence, alienated from bourgeois society but still claiming the "authority" of privileged artistic insight for his critique of its values.

Certainly there are moments in Spivak's writing when she seems sceptical of some of the theoretical axioms commonly associated with postmodernism, as when, in "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies" (1990) she fears that her comments may be misread as "'postmodern modesties replac[ing] Marxist certitudes', as antilibertarian antifeminist irresponsible dream talk" (1993a, 283). Earlier, though, in a 1984 interview, she speaks in positive terms of a "post-structuralist" scepticism towards metanarratives, a position explicitly defined in the interview as postmodern:

The grands recits are great narratives and the narrative has an end in view. It is a programme which tells how social justice is to be achieved. And I think the post-structuralists, if I understand them right, imagine again and again that when a narrative is constructed, something is left out. When an end is defined, other ends are rejected, and one might not know what those ends are . . . We must know the limits of the narratives as solutions

for the future, for the arrival of social justice. . . (1990a,19).

Yet, in the essay quoted above, she argues that not all "general narratives" are "necessarily totalising or centralising" and that our distrust of them may prevent a holistic understanding of certain social and political phenomena. The example she gives is that of rural ecological problems which are misrecognised as falling outside of the logic of international capitalism rather than as being among its products:

Thus rural ecological problems, when noticed, are perceived as peripheral and precapitalist, and concern for their solution considered nonprogressive in other quarters; as sentimental or subjective. And, as Shiva points out, we see each cluster of issues, if we see them at all, as individual "sets", "antisystemic movements", rather than operative moments in the functioning system of transnational capitalism determining itself through development, as in a prior dispensation through imperialism (*OTM* 256).

Rather than dismissing "general systemic critical perception" she argues for the usefulness of the sort of "careful cognitive mapping" championed by Jameson, one of the most astute analysts and dogged opponents of a conservative postmodernism, while reminding the reader that such cognitive mapping must be informed by "the deconstructive awareness of complicity" (1993a, 257). The apparent disjuncture between these two positions may signal a simple change of mind, but is more likely strategic, weighing the advantages of a framing awareness of the effects of global capital against the benefits of emphasising the limits and absences in all narratives, including that one. My own scepticism towards anything resembling a potentially totalising

metanarrative means that I am occasionally uncomfortable with the way in which the story of international capital seems to function, for Spivak, as an “overall syncretic frame” (Young, 1990, 173), but I cannot deny the power of some of the insights enabled by the choice of such a frame.

However, my concern is not with whether Spivak would accept or resist being labelled a “postmodernist” (however she might define the term); rather, I want to argue that her work both draws on, and gives political substance to, some of the theoretical insights at the heart of what I would define as a progressive postmodernism. By “progressive postmodernism” I mean those postmodern discourses which do not, *pace* Jameson, simply reproduce the cultural logic of late capitalism and commodity fetishism, but which can help us to understand, and potentially to resist the negative effects of, postmodern social and political reality.

A number of critics have argued that it is necessary to distinguish between conservative and progressive strands of postmodernism, among them Simon During, who argues, in “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today”, for the difference between the postmodern culture that can be defined in Jameson’s terms and what he (During) calls “postmodern thought” -- that thought which “refuses to turn the Other into the Same” but which also “recognises...that the Other can never speak for itself as Other” (33). Stuart Hall is also concerned to emphasise those aspects of postmodern thinking that lend themselves to transformative social analysis and practice, and he usefully defines postmodernism in terms neither of philosophical relativism nor of the commodification of culture, but of “the shifting of the terrain of culture toward the popular -- toward popular practices, toward

everyday practices, toward local narratives, toward the decentring of old hierarchies and the grand narratives (22/23). However, the essay that I have found most helpful in clarifying the distinction and in defining the salient features of a progressive postmodern thought is Lyotard's "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?".

The kind of postmodern thought which both informs and is clarified in this essay resonates so profoundly with many of Spivak's central concerns that I find it necessary briefly to rehearse its main argument. The essay is Lyotard's reply to a number of critics -- Habermas in particular -- who accuse postmodern thinkers and artists of "neoconservatism", charging them with undermining the liberatory projects of the Enlightenment and generating a debilitating sense of *ennui*, alienation and loss of meaning. Lyotard counters that it is the call for a return to realism which is genuinely neoconservative in that it is grounded in "a call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity (in the sense of *Offentlichkeit*, of 'finding a public')" (1993, 40) -- in other words for those "shared standards" desired by the speaker quoted at the start of this chapter. The function of realism, he argues, is to "stabilize the referent" and, in so doing, "to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt" (40). The realist mindset, then, takes for granted that it knows what "reality" is, and in doing so elides the process of representation and represses questions about the ideological manipulation of what Lyotard calls "reality effects". This is not, I am sure, intended to suggest that all writers who deploy the resources of realist discourse are epistemologically naive: in the context of the very specific debate within the European academy in which Lyotard is participating, "realism" is shorthand for the anti-avant-garde movement, with its desire to retrieve an authentic subjectivity and a knowable referent by way of repressing or evading the

question of representation. That “realism” understood as the drive towards a consensual and absolutist view of the real has potentially appalling consequences is implied by Sara Suleri’s phrasing when she states that “Pakistani laws, in fact, pertain . . . to the discourse of a petrifying realism” (278). She makes this comment in the context of an examination of the *Hadd* category of Islamic law, which “stabilises the referent” with a vengeance in its implacable definition of crimes for which it “delineates immutable sentences” (279).³ It is in terms of a counter to such a mindset that Lyotard defines the project of a progressive postmodernism.

Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism both situates it as part of, rather than “beyond”, the modern (44), and distinguishes it from what he calls “cynical eclecticism” (40) -- the culture which mimics the fetishising, consumerist character of late capitalism, and which is incorrectly identified with postmodernism by those who wish to discredit the latter.⁴ He argues that the true function of postmodernism as a genuine avant-garde is perpetually to “[flush] out artifices of presentation which make it possible to subordinate thought to the gaze⁵ and to turn it away from the unrepresentable”(44).

For Lyotard, *the* distinguishing concern of modern art (within which category he includes both modernism and postmodernism) is the sentiment of the sublime. This he defines as arising “when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept” (43). The subtle but crucial difference between modernist and postmodernist forms of art or thought lies, however, in their respective responses to the experience of the “unrepresentable”. Lyotard puts it like this:

If it is true that modernity takes place in the withdrawal of the real and

according to the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable, it is possible, within this relation, to distinguish two modes (to use the musician's language). The emphasis can be placed on the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything. The emphasis can be placed, rather, on the power of the faculty to conceive, on its "inhumanity" so to speak . . . , since it is not the business of our understanding whether or not human sensibility or imagination can match what it conceives. The emphasis can also be placed on the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic or any other (45).

It is this final "emphasis" that is most characteristically postmodern: rather than yearning nostalgically for a "lost" or inaccessible presence or fullness of representability, postmodern thought acknowledges that it is in the encounter with the unrepresentable that the limits of existing discourses and modes of thought will be tested, and "new rules" perforce invented, not just in the realm of the pictorial or artistic but in those of the ethical and political as well. Lyotard ends his brief, but extremely cogent essay by reminding his readers that

the price to pay [for the illusion of the unity and representability of "reality"] is terror We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable . . . (46).

Strictly speaking, of course, all of reality is “unpresentable”, since signifiers do not ever signal the presence of the signified but substitute for it in its absence: all signification is a play of absences. But just as Spivak teases out and then keeps rigorously distinct the general and the narrow senses of catachresis, so I think it is worth distinguishing between the general sense of unpresentability as the ineluctable condition of all attempts at representation and the narrow sense defined above, where the encounter with the unpresentable is the encounter not so much with the impossibility of representation as such, but with the limits of existing discourses and epistemes. Conceived in this way, Lyotard’s “unpresentable”, which challenges the economy of “the whole and the one”, is clearly not unrelated to the trope that has emerged as central to many debates around postmodern thought and its political consequences: the idea of “the other”.⁶ A concern for otherness, alterity, for the politics of otherness and of othering, is one of the dominant strands of contemporary thought and is clearly related in various complex ways to the emergence of a postmodern world order and the phenomenon of decolonisation. Jameson argues persuasively in his essay “Modernism and Imperialism” that for English writers and thinkers in the period of high Modernism the other was the other Imperial powers: the far more radical other -- the colonised people themselves -- remained inaccessible to the metropolitan imagination -- repressed, invisible. While one might be sceptical of the notion that the other was ever *quite* that successfully repressed within the collective imagination of the West, Jameson’s point is that with decolonisation came the unavoidable encounter, direct or mediated, with that radical other: the confrontation with the fact that there were unimaginably different ways of thinking and being-in-the-world. Robert Young identifies this as a key factor in the development of postmodern thought, claiming that postmodernism “can best be defined as European culture’s awareness that

it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world” (1990, 19). Whether the problem of cultural dominance is quite so easily dealt with is questionable, but the association of postmodern thought with a new awareness of radical cultural alterity is clear, and articulates in interesting ways with deconstructive theory, with its concern with difference, *différance* and its critique of the metaphysics of presence, of “the same” that relies on the denial or appropriation of the other.

I believe that some of the misunderstanding of Spivak’s work is produced by a lack of familiarity, on the part of some of her critics, with the philosophical tradition within which she is working. It therefore seems necessary, at this point, to make a brief excursus into two of the most famous of the early texts to explore otherness: Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* and Derrida’s essay on Levinas: “Violence and Metaphysics: an Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas”. Derrida’s essay, over seventy pages long and extraordinarily densely argued, is not amenable to summary, but it is possible to draw out some of the emphases which are relevant to an understanding of Spivak’s treatment of the Other. In the early pages of the essay, where his concern is primarily to explicate rather than interrogate Levinas’s thought, Derrida probes some of the ethical and political implications of Levinas’s invocation of a radical otherness which disrupts the foundational opposition of self and other because it cannot, must not, be thought in relation to self, and yet exerts an absolute ethical demand. Throughout this opening section, what Derrida foregrounds over and over again is the essential and absolute unknowability of the other. The other is not even a concept, since

[c]oncepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be

foreseen. The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognised (95).

What we loosely conceive of as a "concept", then is actually "the very disorder of our conceptuality" (105), and this is why Levinas's thought "calls upon the ethical relationship -- a non-violent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the other -- as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and liberating metaphysics" (83).

The key statement in this section of the essay is Levinas's own formulation: "[i]f the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other" (91). Consequently, the encounter with the other "does not take the form of an intuitive contact (in ethics, in the sense given to it by Levinas, the principal, central prohibition is that of contact) but the form of a separation" (95). This is why it is the only non-violent relationship imaginable: any "contact" would necessarily involve doing violence to otherness by appropriating it to the economy of the same, of the self. Even "renouncing" the other is a form of appropriation:

to renounce the other (not by being weaned from it, but by detaching oneself from it, which is actually to be in relation to it, to respect it while nevertheless overlooking it, that is, while knowing it, identifying it, assimilating it), to renounce the other is to enclose oneself within solitude (the bad solitude of solidity and self-identity) and to repress ethical

transcendence (91).

In practical, political terms the absolutely non-violent, non-appropriative relationship remains, of course, an impossible ideal, and in Levinas the other remains an austere abstract category, its human content signalled only by his evocation of the absolute ethical responsibility called into being by the encounter with the “face” of otherness: “[r]esponsibility for the other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along” (Hand, 27). Clearly, no necessary political position, no allegiance to any one human being rather than another is signalled here, but political implications can be teased out from this utopian vision. This (impossible) encounter in separation, this absolutely non-violent relationship which explodes the founding assumptions of any belief in self-identity, can provide an ideal against which to measure any real encounter with otherness in the postmodern, postcolonial world, by reminding us of the (unavoidable) violence, violation, appropriation and self-consolidation that all such encounters involve.

Spivak is in many respects critical of Levinas⁷, but shares with him and with Derrida a sense of the profound importance of the relationship between otherness and ethics. Spivak’s musings on the relationship between other and self are, unlike those of Levinas, crucially related to the critique of imperialism and of the violent relationship between imperial self and colonised other. This gives her an acute awareness of the complex double-bind involved in any attempt to think the self-other relationship critically in the context of colonial or postcolonial politics and ethics. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” she identifies this double-bind: the essay is a powerful critique of the process of “othering” that allows the first world individualist feminist heroine to

triumph at the expense of the third world female subject,⁸ and yet she emphasises that “[n]o perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (253). The essay thus works at the paradox inherent in the self-other relationship: that thinking the other as “absolutely other” (in so far as this is possible) can be both the non-violent gesture of respect for otherness sought by Levinas, or the violent “othering” which allows for the infinite abuse of the colonial subject who is constructed as “not-self” (“not-like-me”) and consequently as “not-fully-human”. Conversely, the attempt to “turn the other into the self”, which could ideally be the acknowledgement of the full subjecthood and humanity of the colonised other, is inevitably compromised in the colonial context by the achieved project of domesticating otherness, denying alterity precisely by constructing it not as other, but as “other-to-the-western-self”.

The negotiation of this double-bind remains a constant theme in Spivak’s work, and can, again, be related to Derrida’s reading of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics”. If Levinas’s vision of the other remains in one sense too abstract a “concept” (or non-concept) to be politically useful, it is also, paradoxically, not wholly free of the metaphysics of presence which it attempts to undermine. Derrida states categorically that the “face”, for Levinas, is “not a metaphor, not a figure. The discourse on the face is neither allegory nor, as one might be tempted to believe, prosopopoeia [personification]” (101). The face is not a sign, but “*expresses itself* . . . ‘the thing in itself expresses itself’” (101). Derrida then goes on to point out, indirectly, the implications of this: any such notion of “self-expression” must be informed by a phonocentric

understanding of “expression” as expression of presence, of essence, of plenitude and specificity. The “face” of the other, then, is not only potentially too abstract, but also potentially too concrete, open to misconstruction as what Spivak calls a “featured face”. In “Reading the *Satanic Verses*” she warns against the ease with which the idea of otherness can be projected onto a specific other, a “featured face” such as that of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who then not only comes to stand for all that is “other” to Reason, democracy and freedom of speech, but also is taken to represent all of Islam, all of Iran. The complexity and heterogeneity of Iranian society, differential class and gender positions are all subsumed in what can be seen as a grim parody of the ethical response to the “face” of radical alterity. Spivak remarks with some acerbity that “[t]he radically other is a warning to the power of reason, not a featured face blocking out accessible heterogeneity” (1993a, 234). Responsiveness to otherness is a *pharmakon*: potentially ethical medicine, potentially racist poison.

Spivak accepts, then, that the absolutely other is, strictly speaking, unimaginable (if one is to avoid the risk of projecting otherness onto a featured face) -- and that, “paradoxically, it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity maximally” (193a, 183). But in keeping with her commitment to strategy, rather than a paralysing theoretical purity, Spivak concludes that, in full awareness of this, and despite the attendant dangers, “[we] have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical” (183). In a complex passage that can perhaps be read as a corrective to both the utopianism and the potential particularity of the Levinasian definition of the other, she argues as follows:

The Call to the Ethical is, almost, the call of the ethical. If the Call to the

Ethical is the definitive being-called-ness of Being, then it might just as well be called the call to the *non*-ethical, it would not make a difference. Only with the call *of* do we begin to get even the most general sense of the first part of our title: the call to the Ethical, an originary relatedness that might just as well be called the ethical relationship. There is something like a relationship between this being-called-ness and the fact that being human might be to be in excess, to be *inadequate* even as the being is *superadequate*. But these general senses are constantly being bled into by all kinds of narrow senses. It is not possible to get a grip on the call to the ethical as the ethical relationship in the general sense. The necessary violence, it may be called a “mistake”, of thinking the ethical subject cannot be avoided (1993, 175).

This passage becomes less abstract once it is understood that for Spivak one way to approach a relationship with the ethical subject while preserving the ultimate unknowability of that subject is to identify that subject with the category of person whose interests are at the greatest distance from those of the normative Western individual subject, and whose subjectivity is most difficult to represent within standard Western discourses of self, rights, emancipation, desire: what Spivak terms “the gendered subaltern . . . in decolonized space” (1993a, 140).

It is crucial here, if the full implications of this move are to become apparent, to look closely at Spivak’s own detailed definition of the subaltern and to avoid using the term as a loose synonym for “the oppressed” or “the colonial subject”. In her recent work,

Spivak's extended definitions of subalternity as a specific socio-political space have been closely related to discussions of (the failure of) decolonisation. Here is one such contextualised definition:

Especially in a critique of metropolitan culture, the event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand between colony and decolonization as an unexamined good that operates a reversal. But the political goals of the new nation are supposedly determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony, with its interest reversed: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity, and capitalist development. Whatever the fate of this supposition, it must be admitted that there is always a space in the new nation that cannot share in the energy of this reversal. This space has no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organised labour, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the *subproletariat* or the *subaltern* (1993, 77/78).

In the light of this it becomes apparent that positing the subaltern -- and in particular the subaltern woman -- as the subject for ethics must necessarily alert us to the limits of our most cherished normative notions of democracy, national identity, and "development", forcing us, in Spivak's terms, into the persistent critique of what we cannot not want. This is surely a project of the most critical importance at a moment in South African history when we are undergoing a process analogous to decolonisation.

This insight is given even greater political edge when it is thought in conjunction with another of the key issues in postmodern thought: the idea of undecidability. This usually finds its way into discussions of postmodernism by way of rather dead-end arguments about cultural relativism, and the curious notion that lacking a single, timeless, universal and immutable standard of truth or justice makes it impossible to make any ethical or political decisions whatsoever.⁹ For example, the first of the two speakers quoted at the beginning of this chapter goes on to argue that the struggle for democracy in South Africa was not a “postmodern” one, because “the ANC believed they were fighting for justice, and they believed that the National Party was wrong and they did not respect the ‘other’ of the National Party which they should have done as good postmodernists” (1996b). Most peoples who ally themselves with the progressive aspect of postmodern thought would certainly fiercely dispute the notion that “respect for the other” means condoning atrocities or meekly accepting acts of oppression, simply because these things are perpetrated by someone “other” than yourself. Nor does the critique of a unitary and universal theory of justice entail the jettisoning of any normative concept of justice: once again practice must “norm” theory in the sense that while there may be no absolute Justice, it is necessary strategically to centre one’s practice on a notion of justice which must be constantly critiqued and re-evaluated -- in other words, to be a *bricoleur*.¹⁰ One might also point out that despite massive and morally crucial political differences between the two parties, the National Party was never “other” in any profound sense in relation to a modern liberation movement¹¹ working towards Western-style state-formation and the establishment of an alternative national identity. To use the term “other” in this sense is to trivialise it utterly. Against this misconceived and unproductive conflation of postmodern thought with radical relativism I want to suggest that in the

context of an attempt to work out the politics of imagining the subaltern woman as subject of ethics, it is more fruitful to concentrate on a very different way of looking at questions of undecidability – that contributed by another aspect of the work of Lyotard, in which a concern with alterity and an explicit interest in questions of social justice combine in his writing on what he calls “the differand”.

In the preface to his book *The Differand: Phrases in Dispute* Lyotard defines a “differand” in the following terms:

As distinguished from a litigation, a differand [*différand*] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse (1988, xi).

Later he goes on to put it this way: “the plaintiff becomes a victim when no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she says he or she has suffered” (8).

The potential applicability of these formulations to the plight of the subaltern as defined above should be obvious; here the subaltern is the “victim” who “has no access to . . . [the] narratives of internationalism, nationalism, secularism” (Spivak, 1990, 142). She is outside the hegemonic discourse(s) and so entirely without a stake in the regulative projects of modernity, democracy, development that her wrongs are unrepresentable in the discourses of those projects¹². This can give rise to a very different kind of “undecidability” from that engendered by a morally levelling liberal relativism. Again, it

marks the limits of the discourses we must use, and must just as persistently critique.

In "Woman in Difference" Spivak uses the idea of the differand to signal the complexity of differential interests in the postcolonial field¹³ as well as to make visible the potential unrepresentability of the subaltern interest within the genuinely valuable discourses which give voice to normative notions of social aspiration or resistance. She gives more than one example: the most straightforward will suffice to make the point here. Spivak begins the essay by drawing a careful distinction between the metropolitan postcolonial subject and the subaltern in decolonized space. The former is a vast category spanning "the migrant sub-proletariat at one end and the postcolonial artist, intellectual, academic...at the other" while the latter, in the Indian context, is comprised of the tribals, bonded labourers, so-called "untouchables" -- again a vastly heterogeneous category. She then begins her analysis of Mahasweta Devi's story "Douloti the Bountiful" by noting Devi's strategy of countering the homogenising thrust of the discourse of nationalism (or of "unity in diversity") by naming -- listing the multiple and varied "outcast" communities. This deceptively simple gambit works against the would-be benevolent metropolitan perception of "Indians" as a homogenous cultural minority to be included in a benignly multicultural dispensation, but also challenges the apparent inclusiveness of a nationalist discourse of "one people, many languages, many religions". We are reminded that this kind of tolerant pluralism can still exclude the subaltern and make that exclusion a lot harder to notice -- Spivak points out that "tribal animism does not even qualify as a religion"(1993a, 80). The differand, or moment of undecidability, becomes visible, however, when she points out that while invoking heterogeneity may be in the interest of the subaltern, in the metropolitan context it may work "against the formation of a

resistant collectivity amongst all the disenfranchised" (79), and thus against the interest of the migrant postcolonial subject, for whom group identity might be the condition of possibility of political empowerment. The legitimacy of the one set of interests does not imply the illegitimacy of the other -- what we have is a genuine differand: something that the discourse of an easy national pluralism cannot take cognisance of.

However, more important even than the identification of such a moment of undecidability or aporia, or its implications for the discourse of multicultural pluralism, is Spivak's response to it. Far from experiencing it as a politically disabling moment, she goes on to define aporia as "the undecidable in the face of which decisions must be risked" (93). This, for me, is one of the great gifts of deconstructive thought to political and ethical discourse: the lesson that the moment of undecidability is not one of paralysis and ethical despair, but rather the moment at which real choice *must* take place¹⁴. The corollary to this is the realisation that much of what is presented and even experienced as choice is really a kind of paralysis in the sense that it merely involves reinscription within an already existing text. As such, it can never have the effect that Lyotard describes when he claims that "to give the differand its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations and new referents, in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to stop being a victim" (1988, 13).

Ethics, then, is about risk and innovation, and when Spivak talks about "ethics as the experience of the impossible" (1993a, 136) she does not mean that ethical action is impossible, but that the ethical moment is the moment when apparently impossible decisions are made. The aporia can be neither denied nor made the excuse for avoiding

choice. In "Acting Bits/ Identity Talk" Spivak describes the aporia which arises out of the fact that the relief work going on amongst the communities devastated by the cyclone is simultaneously essential and a product of a refusal to acknowledge the peculiar selfhood, the non-hegemonic "eco-logic", of these people. She respects, she says, the "relief workers' bemused on-the-spot decision" to continue with the work, but "saw through with distaste the long-distance theorist's dismissal of the aporia as anachrony or his embracing of it as the saving grace of a-chrony" (156). If I have correctly understood the use of "a-chrony", this can be read as a warning that this aporia can neither be explained away by an appeal to a narrative of development -- not really an aporia, just a question of these people needing to evolve until "*their* problems are accessible to *our* solutions" (Spivak 1993a, 90) -- nor embraced as a moment out of time, impasse as alibi for inaction.

Once one is alerted to them, it becomes apparent that the thematics of undecidability are everywhere in Spivak's work, underlying her very specific reading and use of Marx and Freud, as well as of thinkers like Derrida whom one would more readily associate with such a trope. In her 1993 essay "Echo", she explains that despite her misgivings about "the use of psychoanalysis in cultural critique since it is so culture-specific in its provenance" (177), she finds in Freud a moral philosopher useful to her precisely because of his "vulnerability", his non-foundationalist and strategic use of hypothesis. She cites as an example the opening of Freud's essay "On Narcissism" in which "Freud quietly asserts that at the origin 'of the hypothesis of separate ego- and sexual-drives' (N,79) there is no grounding unity but only a riddle, the grounding riddle or *Grundrättsel* of biology [and that] 'it is as idle to dispute' this absence of ground 'as it is to affirm it'"

(179). It is this, for Spivak, that makes Freud an ethical philosopher: "This acknowledgement of risk, the revelation of the ground of the cure as a necessary methodological presupposition, is the Freud of the dilemma, the one who resonates with all my predilections for the dilemma as the type case of the ethical situation" (179).

Similarly, the quotation in which she denies that her comments should be read as "postmodern modesties replac[ing] Marxist certitudes" has an ironic cast, since it is not for "certitudes" that Spivak most admires Marx, but for the ways in which his most foundational oppositions undo themselves, and in doing so, point to possibilities beyond the obvious scope of the texts. In "Theory in the Margin" (1990) Spivak identifies the not-yet theorised ethical moment in Marx as contained in the "undoing of the use-value/exchange-value binary [which] repeatedly shows that for Marx, the private is defined by and contains within it the possibility of the social" (6).

I am not suggesting, however, that Spivak's concern with undecidability necessarily allies her with any or all of the political theorists most commonly associated with what has come to be thought of as a "postmodern politics". Foremost amongst these are Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Spivak's attitude to their work is marked by, at the least, a certain ambivalence. She states in a 1991 interview with Robert Young that "I admire greatly the delicacy, subtlety of Mouffe and Laclau's position. But . . . I do think that that's a kind of recuperation of the deconstructive project" (1991c, 242). In an earlier interview, she expresses more fully these reservations about what she describes elsewhere as their "provocative and influential" book *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1993a, 288). To Ellen Rooney she suggests

that “the politics of overdetermination”¹⁵ as theorised and defined in this text, *can* be simply a matter of “looking for some way out of being marxist and still not losing credit. This idea of alliance politics . . . to an extent, is supporting the kind of very reactionary pluralism that most humanities students are into anyway” (1989e, 151).

In “Theory in the Margin”, Spivak uses a reading of J M Coetzee’s novel *Foe* to demonstrate what she believes to be “the impossibility of a political program founded on overdetermination” (1990b, 11). The reading of the novel contained in the essay is, structurally, contained within a series of frames. The outermost frame, as so often in Spivak’s work, is the institutionalised teaching of third world texts and the politics of contemplating otherness in an institutional context; the double bind of wishing both to “establish the institutional study of marginality” (1) and at the same time to guard against the appropriation and commodification of marginality that may be a side-effect of that institutionalising. The ground-clearing gestures that she makes in the opening pages of the essay are ones that will become increasingly familiar to her readers. First she rejects both the assumption that it is possible for European humanism to know even the most radical other “if one has sufficient information” (2) and the contrary, nativist argument that “only the marginal can speak for the margin” (2). The way in which these positions paradoxically legitimise one another is the matter of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. The second preliminary move is a demand that the distinction between the general and the narrow senses of “marginal” be attended to. This recalls the insistence, in “More on Power/Knowledge”, on distinguishing between the general sense of power -- the subindividual network of power situated in the realm of the ontic -- and the narrow sense: power as specific instances of *pouvoir /savoir*. It is an awareness of this distinction that

makes it possible to study power in the narrow sense without ontologising “power” in the general sense, monumentalising it into the tenets of a dogmatic philosophy. Similarly, it is necessary to keep in mind both the general sense of the marginal as the absolute other against which all our attempts to know otherness must be measured and fall short -- “the strange guardians in the margins who keep us from vanguardism” (5) -- and the narrow sense: the specific instances of marginalisation that are all those who are not “the straight white christian man of property” (5). Keeping this distinction alive is the only way of guarding against the danger of assuming that to study, or encounter, the marginalised (in the narrow sense) is to know the marginal, to know the other.

The second frame is Spivak’s interest in the relationship between the struggle of the first-world feminist for fully realised individualist subject-status and the intervention by first world feminists in third world struggles -- the desire to “give the native a voice”. In Spivak’s reading of *Foe*, this relationship is dramatised in the presentation of and relationship between Susan Barton, the female other of the male bourgeois individualist subject, and Friday, the absolutely other, the margin or outer limit of discourse, knowledge, subjectivity, and hence necessarily the “withholding” limit of benevolent anti-imperialist intervention on behalf of the “native”. Spivak contextualises the debate by citing Cixous’ famous remark that “as subject *for* history, woman occurs simultaneously in several places” (5)¹⁶, and commenting that this can be taken to mean that “the feminist woman becomes part of every struggle, *in a certain way*” (5). The reading of *Foe* which follows is intended to emphasise the force of that “in a certain way” -- to warn against an easy notion of alliance politics based on a “shared” marginality. It is a reading as much of the rhetoric and structure of Coetzee’s novel as of its content (though these are

not, of course, absolute distinctions), one which reveals that the narratives of Susan as feminist “trying to rescue mothering from the European patriarchal coding” and Susan as anti-colonial interventionist, seeking to “rescue the ‘native’ from the colonial account” (10) are discontinuous to the point where they cannot share the same narrative space. This discontinuity is expressed in Coetzee’s novel through the structural relation of the mother-daughter subplot to the main story: the subplot is staged at a number of ontological removes. The main story, Susan’s memoir, exists, one might say, at one ontological remove from the text it is a reply to: it is an imaginary rewriting, filtered through a fictional author, Foe, of a (fictional) text which exists in “real life”: *Robinson Crusoe*. As such it comments on iterability and the myth of textual authority. The mother-daughter subplot, however, exists on a different narrative plane even though it, too, is a fictional rewriting of an already fictional text,¹⁷ and as such could be expected to occupy the same ontological plane. However, even within the ontological realm of Susan’s own text, the status as “truth” of this sub-plot is dubious: the daughter may not exist; Susan herself posits the notion that the daughter is a “fiction”, an invention on the part of Foe. Spivak suggests that in its staging of the subplot on territory which is ontologically removed from that of the main plot, which even in relation to the main text itself is that of dream and fictionalising, “the book may be gesturing towards the impossibility of recovering the history of empire and recovering the lost text of mothering, *in the same register of language*” (10, emphasis in the original). The fact that, ultimately, Susan’s attempts to teach Friday to write -- to “give the native voice” -- are a failure emphasises the fact that her marginalisation as woman does not give her access to the absolute margin: her overdetermined position as mother, author, feminist individualist cannot found a *politics* of alliance with Friday, though it can point to an “other-directed

ethics” (9) which marks its own limits with absolute rigour.

It is no part of my purpose here to launch into a defence of Laclau and Mouffe, whose work I find interesting and useful: to take Spivak’s point that overdetermination cannot found a politics does not necessarily commit one to a complete rejection of that work any more than the reminder that deconstruction is not a political program implies a rejection of Derrida. What Spivak is warning against is the potential misappropriation of theories of overdetermination in the service of a facile alliance politics that ignores the fact that the multiple narratives of overdetermination may be discontinuous and incommensurable; that they must be used to bring one another to crisis rather than to make political choice appear easier. This is not a position with which Laclau and Mouffe would be likely to disagree. Thus, I would argue, Spivak is strengthening, rather than rejecting, the idea of a politics informed by postmodern thought: she is (homeopathically) countering the potential misuse of postmodern notions of multiplicity by emphasising undecidability, another of the tenets at the heart of postmodern thought.

The third theoretical and methodological emphasis which I see Spivak as sharing with progressive postmodernism is what I would like to call “critique from within” and what Spivak calls “negotiating the structures of violence” (1991a, 138) This is another way of formulating the fundamental deconstructive insight that even deconstruction itself cannot get wholly outside of the discourses it critiques or do without the founding violences that it reveals. This awareness has informed Derrida’s thought from very early in his career, as can be seen in this often-quoted passage from “Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences”:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language -- no syntax and no lexicon -- which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest (110/111).

A little later, having demonstrated that the concept of the sign both depends upon and underpins the (deconstructable) opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, he goes on to say: "But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity . . ." (111).

This recognition of an unavoidable complicity with what one seeks to critique has profoundly shaped postmodern thought, less in the explicit theorising of postmodernity than in the production of critical and oppositional forms of postmodern art. So a brief discussion of a paradigmatic example of such art may help to illustrate my point here, and the most vivid example that I can think of from metropolitan postmodern culture is Ridley Scott's thoroughly misunderstood film *Thelma and Louise*¹⁸. The film has been attacked from both left and right: by conservative critics for being rabidly anti-male, by some feminists because it is perceived as a capitulation to male values, as telling women to "act like men". Understood as a postmodern "critique from within" the film can be recognised as a complex *negotiation*, at two levels, with what it sets out to challenge.

Thelma and Louise should not be understood as a would-be realist film which sets out to tell women "how to act": rather, it is a highly self-conscious meditation on the gendered

nature of the narratives -- especially the narratives of power, freedom, autonomy and justice constructed by the Hollywood film industry -- which give us the "scripts" upon which we frequently draw when we do act. As such, it has a profoundly ambivalent awareness of its own investment in the very thing it is criticising: the values of machismo embodied by the male narratives of heroism, outlawry and "rough justice" of which its protagonists are forced to avail themselves, and which simultaneously empower and oppress them. At the meta-level, Scott and scriptwriter Callie Khouri are clearly critical of the masculinism of the popular film industry, yet their paradoxical love of popular film is clearly visible in the use of images reminiscent of other films. For example, the stunning shots of Monument Valley (the mythic landscape of several of John Ford's classic [masculinist] Westerns) carry much of the film's emotional investment in ideas of freedom and moral autonomy, as do the oblique visual references to the road-movies of the 1960s, with their different investment in the same desires.

At the level of action, the film constantly foregrounds the paradox that in order to counter the male violence they encounter -- the attempted rape of Thelma, their harrassment by the state trooper and the obscenely sexist trucker, their pursuit by the FBI -- they must draw on, and adapt to their purposes, the very narratives which both produce and sustain machismo and gendered relations of power. Confronting her friend's would-be rapist, Louise finds the words she needs for the situation in the composite script of innumerable male-centered action-thrillers: "You let her go" she snarls, "or I'm going to splatter your ugly face all over this nice car". Her struggle with Harlan is a struggle over discourse, over who has access to, and control over, the narrative of power. That it is a narrative she strategically gives assent to, rather than one she uncritically inhabits, is evident from

her reaction after the shooting -- dropping abruptly out of character she vomits, a woman sickened by the violence she has had to resort to. Throughout the film, this ambivalence is visible as the audience is invited both to celebrate the women's temporary and transgressive appropriation of a narrative of power and freedom traditionally associated with men and to recognise the violent and destructive nature of the values associated with that narrative. The women must literally "get into" the narrative of machismo, give assent to it, in order to critique it. On the one hand we are never allowed to forget that it is the tenets of machismo, largely accessible through popular film, that have helped to shape Harlan the rapist, the gross truck driver, Thelma's ineffectual bully of a husband, even the benevolent paternalism of Slocum, the "good cop". On the other, the use of music to emphasise moments of elation as the women wrest the narrative away from its "rightful" owners is just one signal that this is a critique of "what one cannot not want". The seductiveness of these roles -- hero, outlaw, renegade fighter for justice -- the desire they evoke, the positive values they can embody, are in constant tension with the destructively masculinist form that they take within popular culture.

Thelma and Louise is far from being an isolated instance of this critical strategy in postmodern literature and film. The simultaneous critique and affirmation of popular culture in Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the critique from within of both Western and Islamic culture in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, are only two of a multitude of possible further examples of this postmodern awareness of the artist/critic as ambiguously enmeshed in what s/he is challenging. I would argue, then, that Spivak is quintessentially postmodernist in her insistence, in essays like "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations"¹⁹ that we must acknowledge and foreground

our ineluctable complicity with that which we must nevertheless critique. Thus feminists must (recognise that they) work in and with patriarchy, just as the critique of normative discourses of democracy, nation, development must be couched in the vocabulary of, and recognise the values of, those discourses.

"Feminism and Deconstruction" is in part a rethinking of her own stance in an earlier essay, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" (1983): a rethinking which involves a more explicit acknowledgement of the deconstructive awareness that engaging with a text, even in the most critical way, requires "giving assent" to that text. This does not mean agreeing with its assumptions or conclusions, colluding with it -- rather, it means both understanding the text in its own terms and being conscious of your own investment in it. In both these respects it is "critique from within".²⁰

In "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" Spivak discusses Derrida's account of Nietzsche in *Spurs*, and concludes that Derrida's use of the name of "woman" to signify indeterminacy and undecidability "misfires for feminism" (1993a, 136). (The argument of both essays will be given in more detail in Chapter 5). In her rethinking, she does not retreat from that conclusion, but instead tries to think about a different way of using Derrida's text, one which is modelled on the strategic negotiations with other, more broadly defined, "texts" which she recognises as shaping her everyday practice. She calls this "negotiating with structures of violence" and explains:

It is in this spirit of negotiation that I propose to give assent to Derrida's text about woman as a name for the nontruth of truth, upon the broader terrain of negotiation with other established structures, daily practised but often

disavowed, like the Law, institutional education, and, ultimately, capitalism.

Negotiation, not collaboration; producing a new politics through critical intimacy (1993a, 127/128).

This politics is extremely close in spirit to the postmodern politics of critique from within informing the film and novels I mention above -- one of the ways in which Spivak's work helps to illustrate a positive relationship between deconstructive political thinking and progressive postmodern cultural production.

Part of Spivak's point is that disavowing one's implication in what one is critiquing leads not to politically clean hands, but to unacknowledged complicity, not negotiation but unconscious collaboration. Thus feminists cannot wash their hands of masculinist theory, but must, in Spivak's terms, simultaneously "accuse" and "ab-use" it (134) -- just as the women in Scott's film simultaneously accuse and ab-use the masculinist narrative in which they have become embroiled. As Spivak argues: "In the persistent struggle against gendering ... it is better to ab-use the enemy's enemies than to be a purist while sitting in the enemy's lap -- a lap so colossal and shape-changing that you can forget you are sitting in it" (134).

If one side of negotiation is this awareness of the necessity of giving assent to what one is critiquing, the other side is the acknowledgement that what one "cannot not want" *must* be constantly called into question. Affirmative critique is not collaboration: it is both a refusal to abandon what is potentially useful in the name of theoretical or ideological purity and, at the same time, an awareness of the need to "realize the responsibility of playing with or working with fire ... [rather than] pretend that what gives light and warmth

does not also destroy” (1993a, 283)-- another deployment of the notion of the *pharmakon*.

This last comment is made in the context of a discussion of the relationship of US women to the Constitution, which is a good example of the way in which Spivak uses affirmative critique to illuminate issues of immediate importance to the subjects of struggle both in the West and in the postcolonial world. Here Spivak argues that the Constitution both secures individual rights for women and, in doing so, codes women into legal abstractions that cannot do justice to “the affective-cognitive-political-social-historical plurality” of the female (or any other) subject (283). The achievement of the status of constitutional agent, then, is simultaneously enabling and violating; struggles for constitutional rights are “not an unquestioned teleological good but a negotiation with an enabling violence” (283), and the relationship of feminists to the constitution must be that of critique from within.

If one accepts the crucial distinction between progressive postmodern thought and what Lyotard calls the “cynical eclecticism” which is the dark side of metropolitan postmodern culture, a genuinely postmodern politics would not be one characterised by relativism, nor even (only) by an awareness of fragmentation and overdetermination. It would be a politics which respects but does not fetishise the other, which accepts the moment of aporia as marking the necessity of choice rather than the paralysis of impasse and, finally, a politics in which critique must always acknowledge its complicity with, and stake in, that which is opposed. In terms of this definition, Spivak's work provides many accessible and useable examples of postmodern politics in postcolonial space.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Critical Studies Group discussion on "Disciplining Postmodernism". University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. 11 March, 1996. Unpublished transcript.
2. She does say, in an interview with Maria Koundoura in 1989: "To an extent, I am someone too old to have been trained in the postmodernist scene" (84). This is not, however, a repudiation of any affinity with certain strands of postmodern thinking.
3. The novelist EL Doctorow is making a similar point when, in a 1997 interview, he links realism to power and socio-political consensus. He says: "So what I suppose I mean by *the power of the regime* is first of all the modern consensus of sensibility that could be called *realism*, which, since there is more than epistemology to this question of knowing the world, may be defined as the business of getting on and producing for ourselves what we construe as the satisfaction of our needs... . But I shall go further: if we are to recognize and name any broad consensus of sensibility we are acknowledging its rule. ...There is a regime language that derives its strength from what we are supposed to be and a language of freedom whose power consists in what we threaten to become" (17).
4. Lyotard's famous description of eclecticism is that it is "the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games" (1993, 42). Ironically, Terry Eagleton quotes this passage in support of his own attack on postmodernism as the cultural wing of multinational capitalism, apparently unaware that Lyotard's argument is precisely that this is *not* postmodernism proper. (Eagleton, 145/6). Lyotard argues that this commodified and fetishised form of postmodern cultural production is incorrectly represented as the logical culmination of earlier avant-garde experimentation in order to discredit both those avant-gardes and the genuinely radical postmodern experimental modes which *are* a continuation of their projects (40).
5. I understand the phrase "subordinate thought to the gaze" to refer to the demand that thought be in the service of defining and clarifying the presentable, the empirically verifiable. There is a whole history, within the French academy, and French Feminism in particular, of analysis and critique of "the gaze". For example, both Cixous and Irigaray connect the workings of phallogentrism to the way in which female sexuality is defined as lack in terms of the logic of the gaze. Cixous, for example, notes that the assumed relationship between sexual difference and anatomy is "based, to a great extent, on the point of *view*, therefore upon a strange importance accorded [by Freud and Lacan] to exteriority and to the specular in the elaboration of sexuality. A voyeur's theory, of course" (1981, 95). To refuse to "subordinate thought to the gaze" would be, among other things, to attempt to think female sexuality outside of dominant phallic paradigms, to think what is, within those paradigms, unrepresentable. For a very full account of the history of "antiocularcentric" discourse in twentieth-century French thought, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.

6. In some essays Spivak capitalises the word 'other' when used in this theoretical way, but not in all. Levinas does use the capital, and states: "[t]he absolutely other is the Other" (1969,39). This may, however, just be the translator's way of dealing with the untranslatable distinction made in the original French phrase "*L'absolument Autre, c'est Autrui*" (footnote, 39). Derrida, at least in the passages I have quoted, does not use the capital. I have chosen to follow Derrida, since the word is not always used to connote the radical otherness named by Levinas, and it becomes very difficult to judge when otherness becomes radical enough to merit a capital.
7. Spivak makes it clear, in "French Feminism Revisited" that she is in sympathy with Irigaray's reading of Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros" in the former's essay "The Fecundity of the Caress" (Irigaray, 1993, 185-217). This is a reading which, in Spivak's terms, reveals Levinas as a "passive-masculinist philosopher" (Spivak, 1993a, 165) and challenges Levinas on the grounds that "[h]owever subtle [his] thought of the impossible 'subject'ship of ethics in general, upon the heterosexist erotic scene, the subjectship of ethics is certainly male" (ibid, 166).
8. This argument will be more fully discussed in the next chapter.
9. One of the most interesting and provocative dismissals of the notion that a critique of essences or timeless truth values entails a retreat from morality and ethical action can be found in an essay by Paul Veyne on the final work of Foucault. Veyne recalls Foucault being described to him as "a warrior in the trenches", and adds: "a warrior is a man who can get along without truth, who only knows the sides taken, his and that of his adversary, and who has enough energy to fight without having to justify himself in order to reassure himself". Drawing on this metaphor later in his essay, Veyne argues as follows: "For the interpretation that is history has as its second agenda the project of a complete inventory, whereas Foucault played the part of historian only with respect to points where the past masks the genealogy of our present. This last word remains the crucial one. There is no more relativism as soon as one has stopped opposing truth to time or even associating Being with time: what is opposed to time as well as eternity is our own valorization of the present. What does it matter that time passes and its frontier wipes out our valorizations? No warrior has been shaken in his patriotism by the idea that, had he been born on the other side of the border, his heart would have beaten for the other side" (2/3).
10. Although this term is by now common currency amongst academics and students with any interest in deconstruction, I have discovered, during discussions with colleagues, that not everyone is familiar with it, so a brief account of the concept may be in order. In "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences" Derrida picks up Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the *bricoleur* and the engineer. The *bricoleur* is "a kind of professional do-it-yourself man" (Spivak, 1976, xix): in relation to philosophy or metaphysics he is "someone who uses 'the means at hand', that is, the instruments he finds at his disposal around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them wherever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once . . ." (Derrida, (1966) 1988, 114/115). The engineer is "the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, lexicon" (Derrida, 115), in other words, the one who has the perfect tools for thought, the

blueprint for truth. But of course the engineer is a myth: all thought is a form of *bricolage*. "If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (Derrida, 115). The term thus becomes one of Spivak's examples of a useful catachresis: "Like all 'useful' words, 'bricolage' must also be placed 'under erasure'. For it can only be defined by its difference from its opposite -- 'engineering'. Yet that opposite, a metaphysical norm, can in fact never be present and thus, strictly speaking, there is no concept of 'bricolage' (that which is not engineering). Yet the concept must be used -- untenable but necessary" (Spivak, 1976, xx).

11. I am assuming that the "the ANC" in the context of a discussion of theoretical underpinnings for action, must refer to the party leadership and its political theorists, rather than to the grassroots activists and MK soldiers involved in day-to-day struggle. Not because the actions of grassroots activists are unmotivated, nor that they are necessarily unable to theorise those actions, but because such theorising is unlikely to be framed as a rejection or acceptance of postmodernism.

12. It is important to note at this point that theorising the subaltern, and especially the subaltern woman, in this way is not to deny her subjectivity or her concrete historical being, but to point to the impossibility of "knowing" that subjectivity, or of defining it in relation to the enfranchised Western self without appropriation and the disguising of the subaltern's exclusion from the dominant discourses of modern democracy. In "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations" Spivak speaks of the need to "give the name of woman to that *disenfranchised* woman who is *historically* different from ourselves, the subjects of feminist theory, *and yet acknowledge that she has the right to the construction of a subject effect of sovereignty in the narrow sense*" (135, emphasis in last part of sentence mine). Invoking the idea of the differend, therefore, or of the unrepresentable, is intended to highlight the limits of discourse, and the aporia arising from irreconcilable interests, rather than to "other" the subaltern to the point where her subjectivity, because it cannot be adequately represented within Western discourse, is denied altogether. Throughout her work, Spivak wrestles with the ethical dilemma which arises from the simultaneous need to mark and respect the subaltern's absolute otherness -- the fact that her "selfhood or, better, mental theatre...[are] unimaginable" (Spivak, 1993a, 142) -- and yet to enter into a relationship of responsibility towards her which is a real relationship -- not benign one-way patronage but a real engagement with her "sovereignty in the narrow sense", her humanity and agency. This issue will be more fully explored in the chapters dealing with "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and "French Feminism Revisited".

13. Spivak insists again and again on the heterogeneity of postcolonial "identities" and interests. For this reason I am absolutely bewildered by Georg M Gugelberger's extraordinary taxonomy of postcolonial studies in which he defines Spivak, along with Said, Barbara Harlow and Abdul JanMohamed as belonging to "those who homogenize and see postcolonial writing as resistance" as opposed to those (including Bhabha and Parry) who "point out that there is no unitary quality to postcolonial writing" (583)

14. I am not, of course, suggesting that either Spivak or Derrida have originated this way of understanding the ethical. It certainly seems to me to be present in Nietzsche, in for example, the famous opening passage of *Beyond Good and Evil* in which Nietzsche

questions the automatic assumption that what we should seek is "truth" and asks why we should not instead concern ourselves with "untruth" (glossed as "uncertainty"). He recognises that there is "no greater hazard" than that involved in confronting "the problem of the value of truth" (15), which seems to me to suggest both an awareness of the dangers of relativism and a positive recognition of the moment of uncertainty as the moment of both the risk and the responsibility of ethical *choice*.

15. For a definition of overdetermination, Spivak refers her readers to Freud, *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey, et.al. Vol.4, pp 279-304 and Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Vintage Books, 1970, pp 89-128 (Spivak, 1988a, 280, note 26). Both provide lengthy discussions of the concept, but do not yield any single, quotable definition. Spivak's own definition of the overdetermination of action, rather than the psycho-social overdetermination of subjectivity, is "the many telescoped lines -- sometimes noncoherent, often contradictory, perhaps discontinuous -- that allow us to determine the reference point of a single "event" or cluster of "events" (1988a, 90). However, the idea of a *politics* of overdetermination is more clearly illustrated by comments such as the following: "Pluralism can only be formulated adequately within a problematic that conceives of the social agent not as a unitary subject but as the articulation of an ensemble of subject positions, constructed within specific discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions" (Mouffe, 10).

16. Hélène Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. Amherst; University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p 252.

17. The subplot is a reworking of another Defoe novel, *Roxanna*.

18. I am indebted to Anton van der Hoven for enabling me to develop this reading in a shared course on postmodern culture.

19. The original title of the essay -- "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism" -- foregrounds this emphasis even more clearly.

20. Spivak does not, as far as I am aware, use the term most commonly associated with this critical position: Adorno's "immanent critique". Instead, she calls it "affirmative deconstruction" or "giving assent" to the texts one is critiquing (1993a, 129) and explains that "[a]ffirmative deconstruction says 'yes' to a text twice, sees complicity when it could rather easily be oppositional" (129). She also asserts that a deconstructive relationship with texts means "[i]nhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, *and all the more when one does not suspect it*" (130). This definition clearly has much in common with the way in which "immanent critique" is generally understood. I want to argue, however, that the term "immanent critique", as it is explored in Adorno's work, is not, on its own, sufficient to describe the complex movement of what I am calling "critique from within". Spivak emphasises that although one must negotiate with, and acknowledge one's own investment in, what one is critiquing, one must simultaneously hold to the necessity of "accusing" from the outside as well as "ab-using" from within, even if it is finally impossible ever to be completely "outside" (134). Critique from within, in the examples I have given, involves a constant dialectical movement between

assenting and accusing. As well as the "saying yes" described above, this critical practice involves "saying an "impossible 'no' to a structure that one critiques yet inhabits intimately" (Spivak, 1990b,16). This recalls Adorno's own insistence on the need for a dialectical relationship between immanent and transcendent critique. He sees the opposition transcendent critique/immanent critique as presenting an unacceptable set of alternatives: "either calling culture as a whole into question from outside under the general notion of ideology, or confronting it with the norms which it itself has crystallized" (Adorno, 31). Instead, he implicitly offers "dialogical critique", which Andrew Arato defines as "the extremely uneasy, antinomic synthesis of immanent and transcendent critiques" (203). This process seems to me to resemble critique from within as it is embodied in progressive postmodern cultural production, and to be very similar to Spivak's desire to maintain a dialectical relationship between "inhabiting" the text she is analysing and sustaining the critical distance from that text enabled by a position "outside" of its defining norms.

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: “CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?”

It is in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, originally published in 1985, that Spivak raises some of the issues which have become the most familiar and the most controversial in her work: the relationship between first world feminism and the third world female subject (although this had already been an important concern in “French Feminism in an International Frame”, [1981]); the complex processes of selving and othering in the imperial context; the politics of representation; the dangers of conflating the elite colonial subject or “privileged native informant” and the subaltern; the need to reverse and displace the binary oppositions which underpin colonial relations of power.

Spivak begins the essay with a reminder of the politics of reading, and the need to remain alert to the role of even progressive European literature in the production of a cultural representation of “The Third World” -- what she calls the “worlding” or inscribing of what was considered to be “uninscribed territory”. In an interview the previous year she had glossed the term as follows: “Now this worlding is actually a texting, textualising, a making into art, a making into an object to be understood” (1990a, 1). “The literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of imperialism”, then, can and should be read in such a way as to reveal this process of worlding. Closely related to this point is a second warning, against reading “Third World” literatures in a way that takes no account of the epistemic violence -- violence done both to knowledge and self-

knowledge -- that has shaped the production (and the producers) of that literature. A number of crucial concerns, to be explored at great length in future essays, are contained in this deceptively simple injunction. By treating the reading of third world¹ literature as a simple process of "information retrieval" the elite reader may seem to be respecting the "otherness" of the third world writer, paying tribute to his/her "authentic" experience, humbly acknowledging her own exclusion from this experience and hence inability to interpret it with any authority. But this apparently benign and self-effacing position has potentially dire political and epistemological consequences. The assumption that third world writers have an unmediated access to their own experience, and can perfectly represent the truth of that experience, so that reading their texts is a simple process of the retrieval of empirical data, is itself based on another far from benign assumption. Firstly, it assigns to the third world subject a far less complex subjectivity than that inhabited by the first world subject. So where a first world text must be read with an awareness, for example, of the contradictory and multiple nature of consciousness and subject construction, the workings of desire and the unconscious, or the endless deferral of meaning that is textuality itself, the third world writer is assumed to have a pure, child-like simplicity which makes her self-present and self-knowing, not a complex human subject but an innocent conduit for truth. As Spivak puts it in a 1988 interview, "[t]he person who *knows* has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known*, somehow seems not to have a problematic self" (1990a, 66). This outrageously patronising and dehumanising presumption has the effect both of disguising the role of the reader as interpreter (since apparently no interpretation is going on) and of rendering invisible the effects of that process of worlding on the writers/subjects who are themselves inscribed and produced as objects of knowledge and self-knowledge -- the

effects of epistemic violence. At issue here, also, is the question of the relationship between third world writing and first world theory. It is sometimes argued that in order to talk about South African literary production we need an “indigenous” theory, one which does not impose “foreign” assumptions onto local cultural practices.² Spivak is sceptical of this notion. In an interview with academics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, she is asked about “the ideological contamination of theory by the specific historical origins which produce it” and whether she would “defend the post-colonial intellectual dependence upon Western models as historical necessity”, she replies as follows:

I cannot understand what indigenous theory there might be that can ignore the reality of nineteenth-century history. As for syntheses, syntheses have more problems than answers to offer. To construct indigenous theories one must ignore the last few centuries of historical involvement. I would rather use what history has written for me. I am not interested in defending the post-colonial intellectual's dependence on Western models: my work lies in making clear my disciplinary predicament (1990a, 69).

Elsewhere, she makes the same argument in a different way, pointing out that “resisting ‘elite’ methodology for ‘subaltern’ material involves an epistemological/ontological confusion. The confusion is held in an unacknowledged analogy: just as the subaltern is not elite (ontology), so must the historian not *know* through elite method (epistemology)” (1988a, 253).

In the course of her analysis of *Jane Eyre* Spivak also points out the need to foreground

a distinction which will be of ever-increasing importance in her work of this period: the Caliban/Ariel distinction; the difference between the subaltern in colonial space and the colonial or postcolonial intellectual. Her point is both that she does not speak as Caliban, as representative of an authentic and fully recoverable “native” voice, but as an Ariel who seeks to “unlearn [her] privilege” (245), and also that this distinction must be attended to as we trace the production of the “third world female subject” as a signifier within the texts with which this essay is concerned.³

All these issues find their apotheosis in the best known, most commented upon, and most frequently misunderstood of Spivak’s essays: “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. According to Landry and Maclean, Spivak refused permission for this essay to be reproduced in their *Reader* because she is currently engaged in revising it so thoroughly that “the first version, although unchanged in its conclusions, will, in its details, become obsolete” (8). Until the appearance of this revised version, however, (and perhaps even after) people will continue to read and argue over the original “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and will continue to encounter and be influenced by readings of it offered by critics like, for example, Benita Parry. It therefore seems necessary to discuss the essay in its existing form.

Before giving a necessarily simplified account of the essay’s content, and then going on to deal with some of the criticisms that have been levelled against it, it is crucial to be absolutely clear about the way in which Spivak uses the term “subaltern” which, as argued in chapter 3, is not simply a synonym for “the native”, “the oppressed”, “the colonial (or postcolonial) subject”. It is the conflation of these terms with the specifically

coined neologism "subaltern" which underpins accusations like that levelled by Parry -- that, in concluding that "the subaltern cannot speak", Spivak is ignoring the entirely audible voices of colonised and formerly colonised people speaking or writing back to the West: "writing out the evidence of native agency recorded in India's 200 year struggle against British conquest and the Raj" (Parry, 35) -- and "deny[ing] to the native the ground from which to utter a reply to imperialism's ideological aggression or to enunciate a different self" (36).

In an interview with Leon de Kock, Spivak allows her irritation with this misunderstanding to become apparent:

...everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for the oppressed, for the Other, for somebody who is not getting a piece of the pie...everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern -- a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. It's in capital logic, you know what I mean. ...many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just being a discriminated against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word subaltern, and they don't need Spivak as a whipping girl because she said out of that position that the subaltern cannot speak. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are and since they can speak, as they tell me -- yes they can speak -- I quite agree, they're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They shouldn't call themselves subaltern (1992c, 45/46).

“The subaltern” is, in fact, defined in section two of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and some of Spivak’s annoyance in the passage above probably stems from her resentment that people should use her own term to attack her without even having paid a proper scholarly attention to her definition of that term. Discussing the use made of the category “subaltern” by the Subaltern Studies group, Spivak defines it as “the demographic difference between the total population and all those whom we have described as the elite” (284). This is a useful definition, but it is undeniable that later and more extended definitions give the term both more substance and more subtlety. For example, the definition of subalternity quoted in chapter 3 also appears in almost identical form in “More on Power/Knowledge”, and bears repetition here, since it provides a historical and socio-political context for the term. Spivak is here discussing the way in which, even after independence, postcolonial nations continue to be “run by a regulative logic derived from a reversal of the old colony from within the cited episteme of the postcolonial subject: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity, capitalist development” (1993a, 48). It is to these “regulative political concepts...written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe” (48) that the postcolonial subject aspires. However, she goes on to argue:

There is . . . a space that did not share in the energy of this reversal, a space that had no firmly established agency of traffic with the *culture* of imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organised labour, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the *subproletariat* or the *subaltern* (48).

It is crucial that subalternity is here defined as a space, rather than as a fixed identity. To the extent that it functions as an identity it does so in relational terms, as a relationship, or non-relationship, to capital development and to the discourses of political independence, democracy, justice and national identity within the modern state. Subalternity is a space of difference, of otherness, not a strict class position. In an interview with the journal *Polygraph*, Spivak comments:

I like the word “subaltern” for one reason. It is truly situational. “Subaltern” began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism “monism,” and was obliged to call the proletariat “subaltern”. That word, used under duress, has been transformed into a description of everything that doesn't fall under a strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor (1990a, 141).

The final sentence of this quotation may seem a little tongue-in-cheek, coming from someone who argues with such extraordinary rigour. However, it is entirely in keeping with Spivak's insistence that theory must not become a straitjacket which confines practice, but must be “normed” by the exigencies of practice even as it informs them. By choosing a term which is very precise in the way it differentiates between those inside and those outside the circuits of socialised capital, yet allows great flexibility in defining a situational and relational rather than essentialist identity, Spivak is able to go well beyond conventional class analysis, and to ensure that the categories associated with it do not function both to exclude and to render invisible those who are excluded.

Not only does the term “subaltern” extend the potential range of class analysis, it brings with it the awareness of gender which the latter sometimes lacks. It is clear that the meaning of the term shifts according to whether it is the subaltern as class subject or the subaltern as gendered subject that is under consideration. At the end of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak uses as an example of subaltern silence the suicide, intended as a message, but utterly unheard in these terms, of a young woman named Bhuaneswari Bhaduri. Bhuaneswari “was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself” (307). Crucially, however, she waited until she was menstruating so that the message of her death could not be misread as the result of “illegitimate passion” (307). Despite her precaution, her political message went unheard, and her suicide was, in fact, interpreted by her family as the outcome of “illicit love” (308). In the interview with de Kock cited above, it emerges that Bhuaneswari was Spivak’s own grandmother’s sister, a member of a middle class family. But as gendered subject Bhuaneswari was so completely excluded from the narrative of revolutionary action and political responsibility within which her attempt at speech was framed that she was effectively silenced: even using the most drastic methods available to her, she could not “speak” because she could not be heard.⁴

With this awareness of subalternity as a relation of difference, a position of exclusion from normative discourses of citizenship, progress, identity and even insurgency, it is possible to read Spivak’s essay in a way that foregrounds her concern with subaltern agency, rather than, as Parry would argue, her erasure of it. The essay begins with the

statement that its original title was "Power, Desire, Interest", a title which might have been perceived as rather Delphic, but which concisely sums up some of the essay's principal concerns. Spivak is concerned with the way in which power, operating as epistemic violence, fractures the relationship between desire and interest and causes the subject to misrecognise his or her own interests. But she is also concerned to show how the desire for a self-knowing, self-representing agent of resistance works to disguise the power and interest of the *investigating* subject -- a self-deception from which Parry is not entirely free.

The essay is divided into four sections: in the first of these, Spivak's project is to question some aspects of "current Western efforts to problematize the subject" (271). She does this through a critique of a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze which, she argues, is quite unconsciously informed by an undeconstructed notion of the subject.⁵ Because this is an informal conversation, rather than a published essay, the participants have allowed their theoretical guard to drop to the point where their desire to allow for revolutionary agency -- "the worker's struggle" (272) -- produces a self-knowing subject, a subject for whom "being" and "knowing" -- experience and the understanding of that experience -- are identical: the subject outside of ideology.

This happens in a number of ways. It happens through the very positing of something called "*the worker's struggle*", a formulation which assumes a coherent and homogenous class consciousness and a coherent and homogenous subject capable of representing and fully articulating that consciousness. In other words, Spivak feels that in the context of this conversation class consciousness is not being used as a strategically useful

catachresis, but in a way that forgets the key deconstructive insight that “masterwords like ‘the worker’ or ‘the woman’ have no literal referents” -- an insight which Spivak refers to as a “political safeguard” (1990a, 104). The production of the self-knowing subject is also enabled by a conflation of desire and interest, where desire is not seen as ideologically produced, but as “unitarily opposed to being deceived” (274). The oppressed, knowing what their true interests are, can act out their desires in pursuit of those interests, and the role of ideology, producing misrecognition of interests -- and thus an irreducible gap between desire and interest -- is obliterated. At least two politically undesirable effects follow from this surreptitious reinstatement of the sovereign subject. Firstly, the mediating role of the representing intellectual is obscured: if Foucault and Deleuze’s “self-knowing, politically canny subalterns” (275) are perceived as speaking for themselves, the fact that the two intellectuals are actually speaking for them, constituting them as subjects, is concealed and it is precisely the subject positions, and interests, of the intellectuals that can remain unexamined, because invisible. The political and pedagogic dangers inherent in such a situation are enormous. The second, and closely related, political effect, she claims, is that the “authority of experience” implied by this emphasis on undeceived selfhood functions to legitimate “positivist empiricism -- the justifying foundation of advanced neo-colonialism” (275). I take this to be a reference to the extent to which neo-colonial nationbuilding and development projects are founded on notions of instrumental reason and “objectivity” uncritically taken over from Western enlightenment thought⁶.

Spivak’s next move in the essay is to explore the way in which these errors can be avoided, which is through a scrupulous attention to the politics of representation. She

argues that there are two senses in which the word “representation” can be understood, and that these are conflated, to disastrous effect, in Deleuze’s statement that “there is no more representation; there’s nothing but action” (275). The two senses are “representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” (275). She then goes on to use a passage from Marx’s “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” to illustrate that Marx, in his careful disentanglement of these two senses of representation, is capable of a “more radical decentering of the subject” (271) than is achieved by the two post-structuralists she is critiquing. In this passage, the first sense of representation (connoting substitution) is indicated by the German word *vertretung*, the second, with its implications of portrayal or reportage, by *darstellung*.

The passage from Marx is one which indicates clearly that neither class consciousness *nor* individual consciousness is a coherent and homogeneous expression of an identity capable of full self-representation (in the sense of *darstellung*), and that this has implications for the process of political representation (*vertretung*). Marx defines class, as Spivak does subalternity, as a relation of difference, not of identity:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interest and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile contrast to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection amongst these small peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no unity, no national union and no political organisation, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own

name. They cannot represent [*vertreten*] themselves, they must be represented (Marx, 608, bracket not in original).

Implicit in Marx's definition are three important points. Firstly, it implies a critique of essentialist notions of collective agency, without denying that identity-in-difference may produce collective action. Such an insight is in keeping with Spivak's own comment that "the only way to work with collective agency is to teach a persistent critique of collective agency at the same time" (1990c, 93). Later in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak raises the point that any collectivity is in any case a gendered collectivity, with agency differentially coded for men and women, and she suggests that "the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency" (283). Secondly, Marx's analysis assumes an individual subject for whom desire and interest are not identical, since common interests amongst the members of this class do not give rise to identical desires. Moreover, desire and interest are so effectively split that the peasants act against their own real interests in electing as their representative Louis Napoleon. In Marx's words, the Bonaparte dynasty represents "not the enlightenment, but the superstition of the peasant; not his judgement, but his prejudice" (609). This is a long way from Foucault's statement that "the masses *know* perfectly well, clearly" (Spivak, 1988c, 274). Finally, the passage illustrates vividly what happens when *vertretung* and *darstellung* are conflated: Louis Napoleon's representation of (speaking for) the people is seen as the result of their self-knowledge, their capacity accurately to re-present or portray their own correctly recognised needs and interests. The extent to which the interests of the Bonaparte dynasty are in fact diametrically opposed to those of the peasantry is thus effectively disguised. It is only when the element of *vertretung*

in *self*-representation -- the gap between the speaking self and the only partly known self that is spoken for -- is fully recognised, that the politics of political representation become wholly visible, and the interests of the "chosen" representer, whether intellectual or politician, are not concealed by their conflation with the "real" interests of the represented. In South Africa, a country in which many constituencies are confronting the issues of parliamentary representation for the first time in forty years or more, it is of the utmost importance that the reality of differential interests is not obscured by a well-meaning discourse of sovereignty, agency, self-knowledge which implies the possibility of being fully represented or fully representative.

Spivak ends the first section of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" with a reminder that while a discontinuity between desire and interest is in the nature of subjectivity, since no subject, elite or subaltern, is wholly self-identical, that discontinuity can be deliberately intensified; it must not be forgotten that it was and is in the interests of colonial domination and global capital that "interests, motives (desires), and power (of knowledge) be ruthlessly dislocated" (280). In the second section of the essay she moves on to explore the various factors of which she clearly feels Foucault and Deleuze are insufficiently aware (in this conversation, at least): the effects of epistemic violence, of "the ideological construction of gender" (287), and of the international division of labour. Spivak acknowledges that Foucault is one of the principal theorists of epistemic violence, but argues that he locates this in a purely first world context, specifically in the "complete overhaul of the episteme [which was] the redefinition of sanity at the end of the European eighteenth century" (281). Her concern is far broader and encompasses the dislocation and subjugation of indigenous knowledge, and the planned exclusion from Western

knowledge, which operated the “far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (280/1). Using India as her example she shows how both colonial education and “the codification of Hindu law” (281) worked to produce a subject for whom power, desire and interest were indeed “ruthlessly dislocated” and reminds us that the legacy of that violence done to knowledge and self-knowledge remains a crucial consideration in any attempt to investigate subaltern agency or retrieve a subaltern “consciousness”.

This brings her to a formulation of the question from which the essay gets its title:

Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat. According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here) *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labour from socialized capital; inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?* (283).

Spivak has already answered her own question in part, provided that “speak” is

understood as “be heard within the epistemes of the elite”, rather than, literally, as “utter”. An interpretable “voice” for those excluded from the epistemes of Western knowledge is not retrievable within the limits of those epistemes, and a self-knowledge shattered by systematic epistemic violence cannot fully represent (in either sense) itself. But Spivak continues to build her argument by introducing the other two factors identified above: gender, and the international division of labour. Firstly, she argues that:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is “evidence.” It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (287).

Secondly, she points out very forcefully that the sort of alliance politics (often attractive to elite indigenous groups) which assumes a unified subject capable of accurately recognising common interests ignores the effects of the international division of labour, and especially the positioning within that of subproletarian women. “On the other side of the international division of labor, the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation, even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved. The woman is doubly in shadow” (288). It is divisions such as these that are obscured by references to “*the worker’s movement*”

The divided subjectivity and distorted self-knowledge common to all human agents; the planned epistemic violence of imperialism; the exclusion of the subaltern from hegemonic discourses and narratives of development; patriarchal relations of power and the international division of labour: once all these factors are given their proper weight, Spivak's contention that the voice of the subaltern can never be heard, accurately interpreted and adequately responded to within elite arenas of knowledge seems very persuasive indeed, and in no way denies the possibility either of subaltern agency within those limitations or of subaltern intelligence and political shrewdness.

Section three of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" takes what may seem at first to be a detour, as Spivak sets up as her target the misperception that "Foucault deals with real history, real politics and real social problems; Derrida is inaccessible, esoteric and textualistic" (291). To take first the notion that Derridean deconstruction "reduces everything to textuality". Spivak is extremely helpful in dispelling this error, as she provides both clear definitions of Derridean textuality and good examples of what it means to read the social as a series of "texts" without for a moment suggesting that human suffering and struggle are some sort of illusion. Spivak glosses the notorious Derridean remark that "there is no absolute extra-text" by explaining that "the so-called 'outside' of the verbal text is articulated with it in a web or network" and quotes Derrida's own disclaimer:

"it was never our wish to extend the reassuring notion of the text to a whole extra-textual realm and to transform the world into a library by doing away with all boundaries . . . but . . . we sought rather to work out the theoretical and practical system of these margins, these borders, once more, from the ground up." (Quoted in Spivak, 1984a, 227)⁷

In "French Feminism in an International Frame" Spivak provides another useful clarification when she explains that for Derrida

"writing" is not simply identical with the production of prose and verse. It is the name of "structure" which operates and fractures knowing (epistemology), being (ontology), doing (practice), history, politics, economics, institutions as such (1988a, 147).

Applying these definitions, Spivak herself is able to read, for example, the text of imperialism as "articulated in a web or network" with the literary texts of the period, as she does when she identifies the "axiomatrics of imperialism" operating *Jane Eyre*. This is very different from assuming that there is no reality outside of language (as opposed to no reality unmediated by language), and it enables rather than disables political analysis. Henry Louis Gates summarises Spivak's position very usefully when he argues that

what Derrida calls writing, Spivak, in a brilliant reversal, has renamed colonial discourse. So it is no accident that the two terms share precisely the same functionality. The Derridean *mot*, that there is nothing outside the text, is reprised as the argument that there is nothing outside (the discourse of) colonialism. And it leads, as well, to the argument that this discourse must be read as heterogeneous to itself, as laced with the aporias and disjunctions that any deconstructive reading must elicit and engage Indeed, I think that Spivak's argument, put in its strongest form, entails the corollary that all discourse is colonial discourse (1991, 466).

Gates's formulation makes it clear that Spivak's stance does not deny that there is space for revolutionary counter-discourses. It is simply that there is no pure space: what spaces there are are articulated with the text of colonialism, not magically discrete from it.

That Derrida is difficult to read Spivak acknowledges: that he is less politically engaged or less politically useful than Foucault she denies, and her denial is in the service of her own project of examining as rigorously as possible the politics of intellectual work and the dangers of unexamined notions of political engagement. Derrida, she claims, is "less dangerous when understood than the first world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (292). What is it in Derridean thought that can act as a safeguard against this "masquerade"? The key sentences in this regard come not in this section but at the very end of the essay: "Derrida marks radical critique with the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation. He reads catachresis at the origin" (308). Understanding all naming as an originary violence makes it impossible to slip into thinking about language as representational, and thus impossible to lose sight of representation as a process, an activity. Although Foucault has famously said that "we must conceive of discourse as a violence which we do to things" (67), Spivak has recently stated that she "cannot find anywhere in Foucault the thought of a *founding* violence" (1993a, 33, emphasis mine). Foucault's awareness of discourses disciplining utterance and experience, allowing or disallowing certain statements, and hence doing violence to the "things" they name is different from that recognition of "catachresis at the origin" and less of a safeguard against the surreptitious construction of the non-represented subject.

Derrida is also protected from the danger of “appropriating the other by assimilation” by his crucial awareness that reverse ethnocentrism is still ethnocentrism. To illustrate this Spivak gives a brief account of the Chapter in *Of Grammatology* in which Derrida traces the trajectory of the history of writing as it unfolded during the eighteenth century, in Europe. This may seem like a digression, but Spivak’s intention is to show in action some of the features of Derrida’s thought which support her contention that the latter is more rather than less politically useful than the work of thinkers more overtly concerned with questions of social justice. In his chapter, Derrida identifies what he calls three “prejudices” present in histories of writing and shows how each functions in its turn as a grounding or centering assumption which shapes and limits the possible ways of understanding writing. The first is what he calls the “theological prejudice”: the notion of “a primitive and natural writing given by God” (Derrida, 1976, 76) and embodied in Hebrew script; the second is the “Chinese prejudice”, where Chinese script functions for historians of language as an a-historical “model” for philosophical approaches to writing; a “universal script” (76). In relation to this second prejudice Derrida comments that the apparent move away from Europe as origin of truth is indeed only apparent:

In an original and non-“relativist” sense, logocentrism is an ethnocentric metaphysics, it is related to the history of the West. The Chinese model only apparently interrupts it when Leibniz refers to it to teach the Characteristic. Not only does this model remain a domestic representation, but also, it is praised only for the purpose of designating a lack and to define the necessary corrections (79).

Chinese writing, then, is not really other, but an other defined and conceptualised in

Western terms and in relation to the West; it is “a sort of European hallucination” which can only think otherness as one pole of the self/other dyad. Unsurprisingly, what Derrida calls the “hieroglyphist prejudice” -- the belief that hieroglyphics comprise a script too sublime to be deciphered -- functions in the same way. This is not recognition by assimilation, but, in Derrida’s words “non-recognition by assimilation” (80), yet once again reverse ethnocentrism, the extravagant admiration of otherness, works to “consolidate an inside and to draw from it some domestic benefit” (Derrida, 1976, 81, quoted in Spivak, 1988c, 293). Derrida’s point, and Spivak’s in drawing attention to it, is that this apparent recognition of otherness happens wholly within the history of the construction of the European self. This is not a criticism, but the reiteration of the point that we cannot get wholly outside of our discourses and our paradigms.⁸ It is only when this is forgotten that the dream of the self-representing subaltern can work to disguise the construction and presentation of that subject.

Spivak summarises her argument in this section in her statement that “Derrida does not invoke ‘letting the other(s) speak for himself’ but rather invokes an ‘appeal’ to or ‘call’ to the ‘quite-other’ (*tout-autre* as opposed to a self-consolidating other), of ‘rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us” (294).⁹ This may seem obscure, even mystical rather than political, but I understand it as referring back to the insights of “Violence and Metaphysics” and recalling Derrida’s argument that the wholly other cannot be thought in *relation* to the self, since this simply reinscribes the originary self-presence of logocentrism. Instead the other can only be “thought” (if that is the word) as difference within, as supplement rather than binary opposite to the self.

The final section of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" contains little that can be radically misunderstood once all the preceding steps in Spivak's argument have been accepted: it is thus not necessary to give more than a brief account of its key points (an account which cannot in any way be a substitute for a reading of the dense and careful argument of the original). It is in this section that Spivak provides her most famous example of the mechanics of an instance of the silencing of the subaltern: the debates and struggles around the abolition, by the British colonial powers, of the Hindu rite of *sati*, or widow burning. This has, according to Spivak, "been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men'" (297), and as such stands as an example of the problems attendant upon one extreme of the process of representation. The colonial authorities took it upon themselves to represent (in the sense of *vertreten*) these women, and in doing so usurped their voices and robbed them of volition. The impulse was a benevolent one, from the ideological perspective of the colonisers, but it is undeniable that the supposed interests of the women functioned as alibi for the furthering of the interests of the imperial project by projecting it as civilizing mission: "Imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind" (299). Ironically, though, resistance to the abolition of *sati* -- what Spivak calls the "Indian nativist argument" and sums up in the sentence "the women actually wanted to die" (297) -- merely exemplifies the opposite error: the denial of representation which constitutes the women as sovereign subjects and renders both the representers and the processes of subject-constitution within ideology invisible. Here the assumption is that the women who practised *sati* did so as knowing subjects; that they could make free choices in the full and undistorted understanding of the determinants and consequences of those choices.

In critiquing this position, Spivak is not necessarily denying that at the level of affect many of these women may indeed have “wanted” to go through with the ritual. She points out that “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’” (301). It is thus more than probable that the desire to die as “reward” for good-wifeness is genuine enough, but stands as an instance of the most extreme of rifts between desire and interest. The need to acknowledge the oppressive effects of quite genuine desires, produced by the affective coding of gender, is a recurring theme in Spivak’s more recent work; she insists that “internalized gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over” (1995a, xxviii). It is that process of the ideological *production* of desire that is effaced by the benevolent nativist, just as the *reality* of the desire is ignored by the benevolent colonial “protector”. Both positions work in the interests of unequal relations of power. In the case of “[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men” the constitution of the women as objects -- pure, voiceless victims of false consciousness -- works to naturalise the role of the imperialists in representing them and thus conceals the ideological role played by the colonial notion of the “good society” in furthering the economic and territorial interests of imperialism. But the apparently opposite response in “the women wanted to die”, by concealing the fact that the women are being *represented* as self-knowing subjects, works to disguise the extent to which this interpretation is in the interests of Hindu men. Illustrating this, Spivak points out that

as PV Kane, the great historian of the *Dharmāsāstra*, has correctly observed: “In Bengal, [the fact that] the widow of a sonless member even in a joint Hindu family is entitled to practically the same rights over joint

family property which her deceased husband would have had...must have frequently induced the surviving members to get rid of the widow by appealing in a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for her husband"¹⁰ (300).

There is no difficulty here in seeing in whose interests "internalized constraints perceived as ethical choice" are working.

This is a valuable insight, but it still leaves unanswered the question of the academic's ethical position when faced with the reality of having to "speak for" those whose voices have been effectively muted. One of the reasons why "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has been controversial is that Spivak's analysis seems to lead inevitably to impasse, the "stalled end" (Spivak 1990b, 5) of aporia once again. If to represent is to ignore the reality of desire and risk usurping the (limited) voice-consciousness of the other, and to abjure or disavow representation is to further the production of unequal relations of power, what is left for either academic or activist who genuinely wishes to understand more about the experience of either the subaltern *or* the elite colonial subject? Quite early in the essay Spivak makes it clear that her answer is not to retreat from the responsibilities of investigation and representation. She states: "For the true subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; *the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation*" (285, emphasis mine). If representation cannot be avoided it must be foregrounded; the workings of power and interest must be rendered visible, in as far as this is possible, within any discursive transaction between representer and subject of representation. I

shall return to this point later in the chapter.

In "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" -- in many ways a companion essay to this one -- Spivak makes it plain that the fact that the pure consciousness of the subaltern can never be recovered does not destroy the value of the project of attempting to read the texts of subaltern resistance, but in fact makes it more valuable, since it forces the practice of an historiography which problematises history as the search for retrievable consciousness and foregrounds history as a theory of change. Such an historiography must by definition accept its own cognitive failures as part of its methodology, and acknowledge the (knowledge producing) limits of historical knowledge. It is thus a practice unlikely to appropriate the other by assimilation.

Returning to "Can the Subaltern Speak?", what Spivak warns against is "the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering vocal the individual" (1988c, 285). The positing of subaltern silence is not the same as the denial of subaltern agency, but from the perspective of the investigator the consciousness of the subaltern is an "inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text" (294), and it is the identification and interpretation of that text that is the investigator's task. Spivak's formulation brings to mind, for me, the activity of a palaeontologist who must reconstruct the shape of irretrievable organisms from the shape of the spaces those vanished organisms leave in the surrounding rock. The gaps and spaces in the text of national transformation are the marks of (necessarily failed)¹¹ subaltern insurgencies, unheard subaltern messages. But the shaped space in the rock is not the fossil itself: interpreting the text must never be mistaken for "hearing the voice of the subaltern".

However, although the essay makes its central points by way of the limit instance of the subaltern, it also seems to me to be extremely useful in forcing an awareness of the processes of representation and self-representation involved in any interaction between first world investigator and third world (not necessarily subaltern) informant -- or, for that matter, in any investigative social transaction. In a key passage Spivak suggests ways in which the partial and compromised process of investigation may avoid as far as possible the twin errors of naturalising and of disavowing representation:

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. We should welcome all the information retrieval that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history and sociology. Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advance of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever.

In so fraught a field, it is not easy to ask the question of the consciousness of the subaltern woman; it is thus all the more necessary to remind pragmatic radicals that such a question is not an idealist red herring. Though all feminist or antisexist projects cannot be reduced to this one, to ignore it is an unacknowledged political gesture that has a long history and collaborates with a masculine radicalism that renders the place of the investigator transparent. In seeking to speak to (rather than listen to or

speaking for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* “unlearns” female privilege (295).

“Listening to” obviously presupposes the speaking voice of a wholly self-knowing subject and ignores “the gap between the ‘I’ of utterance and the uttering ‘I’”, to borrow Benveniste’s famous distinction¹², while “speaking for” denies the subject status of the subaltern woman altogether and hence colludes with the epistemic violence that silenced her. But what exactly is implied by the phrase “speaking to”? I would suggest that Spivak is not here simply making the obvious point that the feminist intellectual should, wherever possible, consult the women she is researching and invite their participation: rather, she is pointing to the need to occupy the dialectical space between two subject positions, without ever allowing either to become transparent. This would involve a constant awareness, within the limits imposed by the irreducibly split psyche, of the workings of ideology and the mediating processes of representation. If this is possible (and Spivak certainly does not imply that it is easy), then some form of dialogue can take place even if the subject position of one of the “participants” is only discernable as the “shape” of the silence, the gap in the text of resistance, the fossil-space where the voice of the subaltern would have been. Out of such a dialogue will emerge not the ideology-free voice-consciousness of the subaltern but at least the text of her silencing. In this sense I think that Spivak’s text already contains within itself the answer to Asha Varadharajan’s contention that Spivak seems not sufficiently to acknowledge that “sites of desire and representation, after all, do not have to reconstruct a *sovereign* self, the impossibility of which seems to be Spivak’s beef against revisionary impulses or the language of nativism” (102). The phrase “speaking to” seems to me precisely to contain such an

awareness.¹³

The “speaking to” formulation is useful also when dealing with the relationship between researcher and educated “native informant”, where the speaker is not the subaltern, for whom no enunciatory position exists, but may still have been the victim of considerable epistemic violence, as in South Africa where such violence was operated by legislated exclusion from education, law, and government. Here, too, attention to Spivak’s formulation guards against either an arrogant substitution of the voice of the researcher (perceived as “undeceived”) for that of the informant (perceived as ignorant or as the victim of false consciousness), or the romanticising of the informant as the authentic, authoritative and representative voice of an undivided group-consciousness. In current South African feminism, there is much interaction between academic women and the women they are investigating or interviewing -- women who are often not strictly classifiable as subaltern, though they may, like Bhuvaneshwari, on occasion be subalternised by exclusion from certain discourses: literate grassroots activists, urban women workers, and so on. It is in this arena that questions of representation and authority, of who can speak and who has the authority to speak for whom, are most frequently and bitterly debated. I will return to this issue in my concluding chapter.

If a reading of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” can yield some crucial insights concerning the complexity of the processes of representation, the most common way in which the essay is *misread* also, if inadvertently, raises some important political issues. In her indictment of Spivak’s stance in this essay, Benita Parry frequently substitutes the generalising term “native” for the specific term “subaltern” or implies through her grammatical constructions

that the two terms are synonymous. For example, she argues that, in Spivak's account of the imperial project of subject constitution,

Where military conquest, institutional compulsion and ideological interpellation was, epistemic violence and devious discursive negotiations requiring of *the native* that he rewrite his position as object of imperialism, is; and in place of recalcitrance and refusal enacted in movements of resistance and articulated in oppositional discourses, a tale is told of the self-consolidating other and the disarticulated *subaltern* (36, emphasis mine).

Anne Maxwell points out that formulations like this are informed by Parry's "perception of the colonized as being the holder of an authentic, sovereign voice" (1991, 72) -- in other words, take no cognisance at all of the process of representation -- and goes on to ask whether "Parry's desire to rescue the native woman subject from out of the quiescence imposed on her by recent criticism has more in common with the sort of epistemic violence which Spivak has just been describing than with the 'exceptional stance' of Fanon" (77). But shrewd as Maxwell's critique is, and effectively as she has understood Spivak's points concerning the transparency of the investigating intellectual, even she occasionally uses "native" in a way that blurs the distinction between native and subaltern: ". . . Spivak, in whose writings the *native* subject is historically muted as a result of . . . planned epistemic violence"; and "If this is true of the *native* in a general sense then it is doubly true of the *native* as woman. . . . There is no space from where the (sexed) *subaltern* subject can speak" (77, emphasis mine).¹⁴ It is in an essay by a former student of Spivak, Jenny Sharpe, that we get a comprehensive account of the political

consequences of this slippage; of what happens when the voice of the elite native is taken for that of the subaltern.

Sharpe's essay, "Figures of Colonial Resistance" is useful, especially for teaching, in that it provides simple and concrete historical examples to illustrate what may seem in Spivak to be abstruse theoretical points. In order to make explicit both the difference between subaltern and elite colonial subject and the results of ignoring that difference, Sharpe tells the story of the destruction of the cotton-weaving industry in India by the introduction of machine-produced, British manufactured cloth, and of the relationship between that destruction and the emergence of "an indigenous middle class cultivated in European tastes and values" (141). She points out the complicity between the civilising mission of colonialism and the creation of markets for European goods; the former both functioning as alibi for the destruction wrought by the latter as they overwhelmed local industries, and, simultaneously, providing them with consumers: educated natives trained to desire, and able to afford, western goods. Sharpe makes her point with great rhetorical force by juxtaposing a quotation from Macaulay which uses the wearing of English broadcloth as a metonym for all the assumed benefits of colonial commerce and education with a stark sentence from the Governor General's 1834-1835 report: "'The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India'" (143). Commenting on this brutal illustration of the differential interests of subaltern and middle class indigenous consumer, Sharpe summarises her argument as follows:

It is not simply the case that such accounts of colonial violence exceed the limits of the civilizing mission. Rather, the mythological proportions of the latter, the blinding brightness of its light, eclipse other stories of an East-

West encounter. To think of the relation between the discourse centering on the production of the colonial subject and what it occludes as an eclipse is to see that the subaltern classes are not situated outside the civilizing project but are caught in the path of its trajectory. As I now turn to a scene of the educated native's writing [the document allegedly by Rammohun Roy, discussed later in this chapter], I see upon its pages the faint imprint of the bleached out bones of the cotton weavers. For the colonial subject who can answer the colonizers back is the product of the same vast ideological machinery that silences the subaltern (143).

Her point, then, is not simply that substituting the elite native for the subaltern makes the latter more invisible than ever, but that the ability to "speak" of the elite colonial subject is used as alibi and justification for the violence which silences the subaltern: the production of the former within the colonial arena inevitably involves the suffering or further marginalisation of the latter.

This raises a number of very complicated issues, not directly dealt with by Sharpe, but touched on by Spivak in her later work. The entry of the subaltern into narratives of development and consumption, his/her access to hegemonic forms of education, mean the end of subaltern status and accession to "the same vast ideological machinery that silences the subaltern". Does this mean that it is unethical to work to move the subaltern into the circuits of capital, to enable the shift from oppressed to (indirect) oppressor? Spivak is adamant that it is not: that a concern with the limited retrieval of the text of subaltern insurgency, or respect for subaltern difference, do not imply a desire to

“museumize” the subaltern. Glossing her controversial phrase “cannot speak”, she makes the following comments:

When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern’s sphere. ... the only way that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony, which is what should happen, as subaltern. Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious, anthropologicist museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do a *thing*, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech (Spivak, 1992c, 46).

Though this may seem a common-sense position its implications are complex: it reprises the issues involved in the earlier discussion of the politics of representation. “Inserting” the subaltern into “the circuits of hegemony” (the language foregrounds the violence of such a procedure) means situating the subaltern within those catachrestic narratives of nationhood and development which are themselves inextricably bound up in the continuing production-by-exclusion of a subaltern space. Also, the process must involve a degree of coercion. In “Once Again a Leap into the Postcolonial Banal” Spivak confronts the phenomenon of what she calls the “ventriloquism” of the woman as subaltern, a term which I understand as defining “self”-expression which proceeds from a gender-coding so profound and so completely internalised that it cannot speak the woman’s “real” interests even to the most limited degree, but speaks instead the interests of the patriarchal social order.¹⁵ She goes on to argue that:

To transform the consciousness of the female gendered subaltern, to “cure” her ventriloquism, would entail “counter-coercion through the orthodoxy of reason. *This* is the genuine dilemma, the aporia, the double bind of the question of agency”¹⁶.

The tragic emotion of activism is that this dilemma can only be solved one way, epistemic coercion -- *successful* education (Western style). The ethical philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal has spoken of this as the anguish of “moral love,” different both from the arrogance or paternalism of the colonial educator and from the disciplinary unease of the anthropologist (1991a, 153).

Activism on behalf of the subaltern must, then, mean constant negotiation of the politics of aporia, and it is the staging of the necessity and (im)possibility of such a politics that Spivak admires in the work of Mahasweta Devi. She remarks that “the figures of [her] fiction are at odds with the project of national constitutional agency for the tribal and the outcaste upon which Mahasweta herself is actively bent” (1993a, 51); in other words, Devi confronts in her everyday practice the ethical dilemma that arises from the simultaneous need to respect subaltern experience and to eradicate subalternity.

To return, however, to Sharpe’s essay. If Sharpe recognises the consequences of metonymically substituting the elite colonial subject for the subaltern, she does not fall into the opposite error, that of supposing that while the voice testimony of the subaltern is irretrievable, that of the elite native (or the postcolonial migrant) is unmediated and

authoritative. She provides a witty illustration of this in an anecdote concerning Rammohun Roy, an upper-caste Hindu reformer and educator, perfect exemplar of the “educated native”, the assimilated and consequently privileged colonial subject. Sharpe describes Rammohun as epitomising Bhabha’s idea of the mimic man, a not-quite perfect imitation of the ideal of the English gentleman which subtly parodies and thus undermines the original. She describes her own discovery of a letter from a British officer, FJ Shore, which purports to be an account of his own discovery, in rooms recently vacated by Rammohun Roy, of a paper entitled “On the possibility, practicability, and expediency of substituting the Bengalee language for the English among those of the nation that are in India” (145). The document, an account of “an imaginary dialogue between two Bengalis [which] proleptically parodies Macaulay’s 1835 Minute on Indian education” (145) would, if genuine, seem to be an authentic example of native resistance. But Sharpe soon realises that “it is more than likely that Shore himself invented the dialogue as evidence of a native desire for vernacular education” (146) -- Shore masquerading as the “absent non-representor” in order that the native may speak. Sharpe’s point is not, of course, that all instances of colonial subject answering back the coloniser are necessarily mediated by a specific colonial voice, but that all such responses are of necessity mediated by the colonial text. The ambiguity in which the discovery of the document is enmeshed -- it is alleged to belong to a member of Rammohun’s household, implied to be by Rammohun himself but is probably written by Shore -- is an allegory of the impossibility of extracting a pure native voice from the hybrid textuality of colonial history. The impulse to romanticise this spectacular instance of native intellectual resistance is, for Sharpe, “quelled by the sobering reminder that the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized is not so easily reversed; the entire

power structure of colonialism itself stands in the way of such an improbable exchange” (146). Finally, Sharpe concludes that the fact that Shore’s document is probably a forgery makes it, ironically, a *more* appropriate example of “the native voice”: “his forgery serves as an exemplary text for the colonized who can answer back. Caught within the frame of colonialism, the native voice can only be inauthentic” (152). Lest this position be misread as the desire of the liberal European to dismiss the native voice in order to substitute her own superior wisdom, it needs to be noted that Sharpe draws attention to the fact that she is herself “an Anglo-Indian/Eurasian who was born in England and raised in India” (140); as such, she, like Spivak, might be thought to have a potential stake in the myth of the undecieved “native” informant -- the native who “knows the scene”. It is a stake which both critics, determined to unlearn any supposedly privileged access to an indigenous episteme, resolutely refuse to wager.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. For the sake of convenience I have not put the phrase "third world" into quotation marks throughout the dissertation, but strictly speaking the term should be mentally enclosed in "scare quotes" at all times, as a reminder of Spivak's point that it is a discursive construct, not a pre-existing entity and that to forget or obscure this is to risk repeating the colonising gesture of "worlding" made by "the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialized was in fact previously uninscribed" (Spivak 1990a, 1).

2. This issue – the need for an indigenous theory – is one which has been raised at some point at every South African literary conference I have ever been to. However, the best known example of this position within African cultural debate is probably Chinweizu's *Decolonising the African Mind*, in which he excoriates both "bourgeois Euro-modernists" and "proletarian revolutionary internationalists" for their reliance on Western theory, and concludes that "the crucial part of the liberation business is the dismantling of the authority of all foreign traditions" (241). Leaving aside Chinweizu's polemic, which has been comprehensively answered "from within" by Anthony Appiah -- see "Topologies of Nativism" in *In My Father's House* -- I take the point that all cultures do have "indigenous theories" in the form of norms and conventions relating to aesthetics and culture, and that these are not always recognised as, or given the status of, "theory". My concern, and I think Spivak's, is not with the undoubted value of indigenous debates on cultural production, reception and evaluation, but with the notion that "foreign" theory is somehow tainted.

3. Spivak's analysis of these texts will be dealt with in chapter 6.

4. In "Responsibility" (1994), Spivak cites the example of a Mr Sattar Khan, an "aging leader of the peasant movement" in Bangladesh, attempting to give an address at a conference called by the European Green Party to discuss the World Bank's Flood Action Plan. The intention of the conference was to facilitate "participation" on the part of the Bangladeshi people; Spivak's account reveals the extent to which the structures of the conference made this impossible. An inadequately translated first section of Mr Sattar's speech exceeded the allotted time; he was cut off, but then allowed to continue speaking "by way of a gesture of benevolence toward someone who could not understand the rules. He read then at breakneck speed, and the entire *ad hoc* effort at translation collapsed" (62). Spivak goes on to comment that "[t]his incident can only stand in for the subaltern's inability to speak, for Mr Sattar, a middle-class peasant party leader, was far, indeed, from the landless peasant and the grass-roots fisher, however 'indigenous' he was by contrast with the other participants. It stands in successfully, however -- by virtue of the fact that the subaltern's inability to speak is predicated upon an attempt to speak, to which no appropriate response is offered" (62).

5. In this chapter I have drawn freely on formulations used in my own earlier work on Spivak (Arnott, 1996).

6. I am grateful to David Attwell for clarifying this point for me, and I have borrowed some of his phrasing. He also points out that “it is the same historical dynamic that installs realism as the favoured genre of first-generation postcolonial writers”, a comment which resonates with Lyotard’s critique of the realist mindset discussed in chapter 3.
7. Jacques Derrida, “Living On: *Border Lines*” in Harold Bloom et al, *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Seabury Press, 1979, p 84.
8. Derrida reiterates this point in “Structure, sign and play” when he writes: “. . . whether he wants to or not -- and this does not depend on a decision on his part -- the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency” (112).
9. Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adapted in Philosophy”, trans. John P Leave Jr., in *Semia*, p 71.
10. P V Kane, *History of the Dharmāsastra*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1963, p 635.
11. By this I do not mean that subaltern insurgency is never successful, but rather that the subjects of successful insurgency are by definition no longer subaltern. In order for subaltern struggle to be understood as effective it must have entered the arena of contestation of group rights or at least be functioning within some context definable in terms of normative discourses of political struggle. As Spivak says in another context, “Now if I understand the work of the Subalternists, every moment of insurgency that they have fastened onto has been a moment when subalternity has been brought to a point of crisis: the cultural constructions that are allowed to exist in subalternity, removed as it is from other lines of mobility, are changed into militancy. In other words, every moment that is noticed as a case of subalternity is undermined”. (“Subaltern Talk” in Landry and Maclean, 289). In “Woman in Difference” Spivak uses Devi’s story “Douloti the Bountiful” to show the extent to which the true subaltern is excluded from what is commonly defined as political activity. This will be discussed in chapter 6.
12. This particular formulation of the distinction is borrowed from Belsey, 1985, 295.
13. Although I disagree with Varadharajan on this point, I find interesting and provocative her suggestion that perhaps Spivak, approaching the effaced text of the silenced subaltern is not quite ready enough to be *surprised* – to find traces of a voice where none was expected to be. I do not myself think that this is likely to be true of Spivak, given her emphasis elsewhere on the necessity of seeking a *relationship*, however impossible, with the subaltern as subject for ethics. But I do find it a necessary cautionary note in relation to academic work in this area. If expecting automatically to find “agency” wherever you look in the postcolonial field is a problem that I touch on in chapter 6, expecting automatically not to find it could be equally problematic.
14. In fact this conflation of subaltern with native is so common amongst Spivak’s critics that to cite every instance of it would be repetitive and unproductive. I will mention two more instances. In the course of an otherwise interesting and sophisticated discussion of Spivak’s work, Asha Varadharajan claims that for Spivak “the ‘native’ represents the

ineffable, ontological residue of the failure of representation" (xxiv). Robert Con Davis and David S Gross, in an article generally sympathetic to Spivak's project, seem to go so far as to define Spivak herself as subaltern. They write: "In one sense this question [can the subaltern speak?] asks if the oppressed person can speak about her own struggle while struggling, and the fact of Spivak-as-major-critic answers the question affirmatively. She is herself a Third World woman and a commanding voice in contemporary cultural and literary criticism. Spivak struggles against the oppression of First World cultural hegemony and domination, and in so doing, she certainly 'speaks'" (79). Although they later go on to admit that Spivak herself answers her question in the negative, and that this is because the subaltern is not equivalent to "the subjugated person", the earlier point is worrying in its conflation of subaltern, oppressed, and "that dubious category -- 'Third World Woman'" (Spivak, 1993a, 123).

15. Spivak states that the notion of ventriloquism "has been developed with reference to the Shah Bano case, where a divorced woman voluntarily renounced alimony granted, after a long struggle, by the Supreme Court" (153).

16. Spivak's self-quotation is from "Reading *The Satanic Verses*". She gives the page reference for the original publication -- *Third Text* 11, (1990), p 53. The version of the essay used in this dissertation is the reprint in *OTM*; here the quotation is on p 231/2.

CHAPTER 5

“WOMAN WILL BE MY SUBJECT”: FEMINISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

I call myself an academic feminist so as to make my claim minimal. If one has to define oneself irreducibly, it must be in minimal terms (Spivak, 1990a, 68).

I.

Spivak's theorising of feminist issues, which she herself defines, in the quotation above, as the irreducible core of her academic practice, has been touched on only obliquely in the previous chapters. Although "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is concerned with the production of the gendered third world subject, its primary focus is on the encounter between imperial self and colonial other and the most important issues it raises are those concerning the politics of representation. In the next two chapters I will be exploring Spivak's use and interrogation of academic feminist theory. Hers is a feminism which is often disconcerting in its combination of the most abstruse (and apparently abstract) theorising about the metaphysical status and deconstructive potential of the name of woman with the most down-to-earth concern about the needs of actual women -- the education of female children in Bangladesh (1992g), the coding of reproductive rights, the exploitation of women within the international division of labour. Even more disconcertingly, Spivak refuses either to deny or to simplify the connection between these two levels.

Nor can this complexity be simply explained away by resorting to McCabe's famous labelling of Spivak as a "feminist Marxist deconstructionist" (1988a, ix), a label which may seem unproblematically to marry the concern with social justice characteristic of Marxism and feminism with the linguistic and philosophical concerns of deconstruction. McCabe himself acknowledges that his neologism defines "not an identity, but a network of multiple contradictions, traces, inscriptions" (1988a, ix). And Spivak is insistent that the projects implied by these three allegiances do not work cosily in tandem but are often radically discontinuous, bringing one another to crisis rather than mutually supporting one another and productive, sometimes, of aporias rather than recipes for right action. This is evident in comments like "the project of Western Marxism, indeed of much Western Marxist feminism, is discontinuous with feminism in general" (1987b, 46), or her reminder, in "Theory in the Margin", that in Coetzee's text the individualist feminist narrative of mothering and the anti-colonial narrative are incommensurate. But in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, in 1984, Spivak is explicit about her belief that while "the irreducible but impossible task is to preserve the discontinuities within the discourses of feminism, Marxism and deconstruction" (1990a, 15) this does not mean allowing the questions raised by one critical method to be "effaced" by the axiomatics and assumptions of the others. While she warns against the glibness of attempting to create "global situations that are coherent", she goes on to say:

On the other hand, it seems to me that one must also avoid as much as possible, in the interests of practical effectiveness, a sort of continuist definition of the differences, so that all you get is hostility. On one side you get a sort of identification of Marxism in the US left in the sixties, or with what has been happening since the British New Left in Britain, or the party

structure in France . . . and the slogan “Marxism is sexist” bears this hostility, not understanding that it is a method that is used in very different ways. On the other hand you get declarations by figures as powerful as Samir Amin . . . that feminism has been the movement that has been the most against social justice in our time. Of course deconstruction . . . is only textualist, it is only esoteric, concerned with self-aggrandizement, nihilist, etc (15).

Although these words were spoken thirteen years ago, and the examples are of their time, I think the point remains valuable in its reminder of the dangers of an attitude which credits some critical methods with the ability to bring about social transformation and others with an abstract theoretical purity, either valorised or denigrated. The corollary to this is the assumption that a focus on discourse or on sexuality runs counter to a concern with social justice, or, conversely, that an emphasis on material and political transformation necessarily leads away from a concern with the body, with affect, with the construction of identity and the definition of self. For Spivak, all these things are inextricably linked and she needs the resources of all her critical methods, in however tense a relationship, to make the connections between textuality, sexuality and gendered relations of power in the arena of global capitalism.

The hostility that Spivak speaks of has frequently been a feature of South African debates around the use of theory for feminism. In an influential and much debated essay entitled “Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa”, first published in 1990, Cecily Lockett raises the question of the usefulness of French feminist theory for South

African feminists and concludes that “post-structuralist theory may provide valuable deconstructive tools, but it fails to provide access to political and public debates” (11), this being a result, in her view, of “the refusal of the followers of French feminism of activism in favour of theorizing -- that is, their separation of theory from practice” (7). This is a position which Lockett herself moved on from soon after, and her essay has been comprehensively answered in the 1990 edition of *Current Writing*, yet my experience as a teacher has been that the essay remains enormously persuasive for many students, who reproduce the sentiments cited above quite uncritically, and my sense is that this is because Lockett’s essay continues to feed into a wide-spread perception of both deconstruction and French feminism as elitist, abstract and of little relevance to the urgent need for sociopolitical and material transformation which should be the focus of an indigenous South African feminism. Spivak’s own work has been perceived, locally, as problematic in this way, as when Marianne de Jong, reviewing *In Other Worlds*, concludes that Spivak’s analysis “[moves us] into other worlds but not into action” (361).

My main purpose in this chapter will be to provide a reading of two of Spivak’s essays from the early 1980s, “French Feminism in an International Frame” (1981) and “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman” (1983), and to use their application of deconstructive feminist theory to international (political and material) feminist concerns as an illustration of the potential usefulness of deconstructive and post-structuralist theory for South African feminism.¹ This may sound perverse in that “French Feminism in an International Frame” is in part a critique of the *misuse* of metropolitan theory in a postcolonial context but, as always, Spivak is critiquing what she cannot and would not

do without. That some French feminists, like Kristeva, have, in Spivak's opinion, misused Western theory in ways that effectively silence third world voices, does not mean that Spivak herself cannot use the tools of deconstructive feminism to offer powerful suggestions for the transformation of relations between first and third world women. In other essays, Spivak is concerned to foreground and analyse the disjunction between the individualist, emancipatory emphasis of Western feminism and the collective claims to social justice which direct much of the practice of women's movements in the postcolonial arena -- a difference she works at in her commentaries on Mahasweta Devi's fiction, in particular. In these two essays she uses deconstruction to show how *all* women are positioned by the discursive production and social coding of sexual difference *and* how that coding structures and sustains vast differences in power and privilege between women across the international division of labour. I would therefore take issue with her later self-criticism: that she "was not fully aware of the convictions of single-issue feminism guiding my reading in 'Displacement'" (1993a, 144). This is in the end not "single issue feminism", despite its apparent universalising concentration on the discursive operation of the "name" of woman. In fact, the essay, especially when read in conjunction with its companion-piece "French Feminism", leads to a greater understanding of the relationship between the metaphysical, the physical and the economic: the way discourse operates sexual difference and the way sexual difference operates the social structures which both require and enable the differential exploitation of women across the international divide. She is therefore able to present the relationship between first and third world women in terms of difference as well as of sameness.

In the final section of "Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle" (1984), a reading of Derrida's *La carte postale*, Spivak spells out her belief that deconstructive textual analysis, the politics of sexuality, and the politics of social transformation do not occupy separate realms:

Although sexual relations of reproduction are still crucial in every arena of politics and economics -- and the tradition of love letters has been the most powerful ideological dissimulation of those relations, such letters continue to be considered merely frivolous in a world of bullets and starvation. Although Derrida is using them as texts for interpretation and suggesting their complicity with the objective tradition of intellectual discourse, they can still be dismissed as a mark of bourgeois individualism. It would be absurd to claim that Derrida (like Joyce or Lacan) "writes for the working class". If, however, we academic women of the First World observe Derrida's minuet with the epistles of love, we might learn that sexuality, "the woman's role", is not in simple opposition to "real politics" . . . (35).

This conviction had already been explored in the essays under consideration here, essays which effectively deconstruct the separation between theory and practice and make ambitious, even utopian, but perfectly concrete suggestions for material and ideological transformation -- "real politics". Although the essays were written (or at least published) two years apart, they are mutually illuminating in ways which make reading them as a unit useful. I found, in fact, that reading them in reverse order was extremely fruitful, since the later essay -- "Displacement" -- articulates more fully a set of theoretical issues with which the earlier one is implicitly working. The later essay is thus in a sense implicit in the earlier one; they do not represent a linear progression.

In a footnote to "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" Spivak insists on both the separateness and the relatedness of the two levels of feminist activity outlined above: the examination of the status of the name "woman" in both phallogocentric and deconstructive discourse, and the need to challenge the social, economic and sexual practices that continue to cause suffering to flesh-and-blood women. She states that:

the absence of Marxist issues in this paper signifies nothing that cannot be explained by the following conviction: as women claim legitimation as agents in a society, a congruent movement to redistribute the forces of production and reproduction in that society must also be undertaken. Otherwise we are reduced to the prevailing philosophy of liberal feminism: "a moralistically humanitarian and egalitarian philosophy of social improvement through the re-education of psychological attitudes"².

The implication -- one which I believe the South African women's movement will need eventually to confront -- is that while there is no simple relationship between rethinking the issue of woman's status as subject or agent (including subject of discourse or subject of philosophy) and the restructuring of social and economic relations that place women at a disadvantage, the two projects are "congruent" (though not continuous) and both must be undertaken.

It is the former, obviously, with which Spivak is principally concerned in "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman". Fully aware of the potential of deconstructive thought to displace the concepts of self-presence, authority, propriety and law on which the phallogocentric order rests, Spivak as a *feminist* deconstructivist is still concerned to interrogate the uses made of the figure of "woman" in these philosophical moves, and to

investigate their possible effects on women who desire both to avail themselves of the insights of deconstructive thought and to “claim legitimation as agents in a society” -- which implies, of course, the claiming of subject status, even if that status is recognised as only a strategic position from which to critique the whole notion of the sovereign subject. Her position in the essay is that it is the male philosopher who is in a position to “problematize but not fully disown his status as subject” (173) and that he can do this through the double displacement of “woman”, simultaneously allowing her a more privileged relationship to the “truth” of subjectivity -- which is its *non-self* -identity -- and, in so doing, paradoxically recuperating his own subject status through figuring woman as the “model” for male (non)identity, the object of a male philosophical discourse of (non)self. The woman can thus figure, but not speak, her own ontological status, and the whole issue of woman’s access to philosophical discourse is called into question.

Spivak reaches this conclusion through a reading of a number of Derrida’s texts, including his reading of Nietzsche, contained in *Spurs*; the essay “The Double Séance” in *Dissemination*; and his complicated and obscure musings on “the name of the mother” (Spivak 1983, 176) in *Glas*. In all these texts, in different ways, Derrida undermines the status of the phallus as transcendental signifier and guarantor of presence and of identity. In her introduction to *Of Grammatology* Spivak provides useful summaries of several key terms in the Derridean assault on phallogocentrism. The first is “dissemination”, which she explains in the following terms:

Exploiting a false etymological kinship between semantics and semen, Derrida offers this version of textuality: A sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated. A semination that is not

insemination but *dissemination*, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin in the father. Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings Castration, the lack of superintendence by phallic authority, is what transforms the “author” or the “book” into a “text”. Presence can be articulated only if it is *fragmented* into discourse; “castration” and dismemberment being both a menace to and the condition of possibility of discourse. Somewhat extravagantly, the phallus may be seen as the knife that severs itself to perpetuate its dissemination. One begins to expect that a phallogocentric fable of meaning simply will not suffice (lxv/lxvi).

The second crucial concept³ (or “fable” or metaphor) which she identifies is that of the hymen, which functions in Derrida’s thought as a figure for absolute indeterminacy and undecidability, “always *another either/or* which is always between the “last” *either/or*.... (n)either virginity (n)or consummation (*n*)*either* inner (n)or outer” (Powell, 93). Spivak glosses it as follows:

The hymen is the always folded (therefore never single or simple) space in which the pen writes its dissemination. “Metaphorically” it means the consummation of marriage. “Literally” its presence signifies the absence of consummation.... This fabulous hymen “always intact as it is always ravished, a screen, a tissue,” undoes “the assurance of mastery” (1976, lxvi).⁴

Derrida’s concept-metaphors (or non-concept metaphors) thus undermine the symbolic association of writing (the production of meaning) with phallic authority at the same time

as they attack notions of presence through their figuration of undecidability. They have an undeniable value for any feminist concerned with the effects of the mutually reinforcing metaphysics of the logos and the phallus.

Spivak, however, is concerned not only to build on Derrida's work but to question it, drawing out its implications, both negative and positive, for woman as subject of (her own) philosophical discourse and for women as subject to exploitation on the grounds of material sexuality. She begins her essay by re-stating her faith in the importance of Derrida's critique of phallogentrism, affirming that "the question [of the transfer of authority from father to son in the phallogentric order] is not merely one of psycho-socio-sexual behaviour, but of the production and consolidation of reference and meaning" (169). (Again the theme of the discontinuous but indissociable projects of transforming meaning and transforming structures and practices is sounded). But she goes on to ask the key question: can this critique "provide us a network of concept-metaphors that does not appropriate or displace the figure of woman?" (170). With this question in mind she begins her reading of Derrida's reading of Nietzsche.

What Derrida finds in Nietzsche is a concept of woman as irreducibly self-divided, non-self-identical. This is figured in Nietzsche's description of woman as always "playing" herself, presenting and re-presenting a self that is never wholly present to itself. Spivak re-quotes the "well-known" Nietzschean comment that "they [women] 'give themselves' even when they -- give themselves. Women are so artistic"⁵. She also refers to Nietzsche's belief that women fake orgasm even at the moment of orgasm. The implications of this are spelled out slightly more clearly in "Love Me, Love My Ombre,

Elle" than they are here (another instance of the potential benefits of reading Spivak's essays in reverse order) so I will use that explanation here:

Women, "acting out" their pleasure in the orgasmic moment, can cite themselves in their very self-presence. It is as if the woman *is* quotation marks and vice versa. If men think they have or possess women in sexual mastery, they should be reminded that , by this logic, women can destroy the proper roles of master and slave. Men cannot know when they are properly in possession of them as masters (knowing them carnally in their pleasure) and when in their possession as slaves (duped by their self-citation in a fake orgasm). Woman makes appropriation -- the establishment of a thing in its appropriate property -- undecidable (22).

Thus what may well seem like misogyny in Nietzsche becomes for Derrida a "name" -- "woman" -- for that which disrupts and displaces all ordinary notions of the self as presence, as propriety/property, as sovereign. And this places "woman" in a very privileged relationship to the central project of deconstruction. Throughout this work, Derrida asks us to notice that *all* human beings are irreducibly displaced, although, in a discourse that privileges the centre, women alone have been diagnosed as such; correspondingly, he attempts to displace all centrisms, binary oppositions, or centres (170).

Women, then, are philosophically privileged by a reversal of the founding opposition man/woman, in which man is traditionally the "positive" term designating presence and woman the "secondary" term which, through its difference, confirms the self-identity of

"man". For Derrida, it is woman who has the "truer" relationship with identity, since she models an identity already displaced, always a re-presentation rather than a presentation of self.⁶ Her "style" becomes exemplary, rather than deviant. *But*, Spivak goes on to argue, there is a cost attached to this use of woman to "model" a deconstructed subjectivity: what she calls the "double displacement of woman". There are two strands to her argument here. On the one hand, she is concerned by the fact that "the woman who is the 'model' for deconstructive discourse remains a woman generalized in terms of the faked orgasm and other forms of denial"⁷ (170) -- the privileging of "woman" as the model for non-self-presence stems from the denial or displacement of women's sexual pleasure and -- a theme developed later in this essay and very fully in "French Feminism in an International Frame" -- may inadvertently reinforce, rather than challenge, a symbolic *and* socio-economic order founded on "the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris" (1988a, 151). Her second concern is that despite Derrida's good intentions there is a slippage, in his discourse, between woman as subject in the sense of "I" and woman as subject in the more colloquial sense of "what is being talked about" -- that is, as object. In other words, the sentence "Woman will be my subject" (171) can slide from "woman will be my model for the 'I'" to "woman will be the subject I investigate, the object of my philosophical inquiries". This slippage doubly displaces woman - the positive first move is the positing of woman as the figure for the originary displacement of any subject; the second move is for the man to step into the place of the (displaced) subject, displacing woman in a second, negative way, ousting her from the space of the "I" and re-establishing man as the enquiring self "problematiz[ing] but not fully disown[ing] his status as subject" (171).

This is an important issue: it bears on the whole question of women's ability to investigate, establish and speak their own subjecthood and agency. It is, however, the first line of argument -- that concerning the denial of women's pleasure and of the sexed specificity of the female body -- that I wish to pursue, since I feel that it provides a powerful and persuasive example of deconstructive thought (here a deconstructive approach even to deconstruction itself) providing startling and illuminating new ways of thinking about how women are positioned in any social and sexual economy.

Spivak's next move in her challenge to Derrida is to remind her readers that "we cannot dismiss our double displacement by saying to ourselves: "in the discourse of affirmative deconstruction 'we' are a 'female element', which does not signify 'female person'" (174). In other words, while she is fully aware that Derrida is using "woman" as a *name* for non-self-identity, she wishes to preserve the awareness that the appropriateness of that name is posited upon a particular understanding of the sexuality of real women. This is an example of what Spivak calls, after Derrida, "the consequences of paleonomy" (1993a, 27) -- the fact that any term carries with it the burden of its history in discourse, the charge that historically and socially specific usage has given it. Thus, however "nominal" Derrida's use of "woman", the term cannot escape its history of usage within a phallic discursive and sexual economy. This leads her to a critique of Derrida's use of the hymen as the figure for undecidability. In the passage from the introduction to *Of Grammatology* quoted above, Spivak seemed content merely to explain, rather than to interrogate, Derrida's metaphor. Here, however, she asks:

Yet is there not an agenda unwittingly concealed in formulating *virginity* as the property of the sexually undisclosed challenger of the phallus as

master of the dialectics of desire? The hymen is of course at once both itself and not-itself, always operated by a calculated dissymmetry rather than by a mere contradiction or reconciliation. Yet if the one term is virginity, the other is marriage, legal certification for appropriation in the interest of the passage of property (174).

Up until this point of her argument, and despite her concern with woman's ability to think her own subjectivity, it is possible that Spivak could be (mis)read as providing justification for the view that, in its focus on language and sexuality, "French" (read deconstructive) feminism is both abstract and privatising, making it inappropriate, even potentially dangerous, in a context where material change is the most urgent of priorities. Again, this is a view which has surfaced frequently in debates concerning the uses of theory for South African feminism. One South African feminist academic argues thus:

Concentrating solely on the body is a distraction from the material world in which its experiences are embedded. It overlooks social, ideological and political determinants (van Niekerk 1991, 17).

What Spivak demonstrates, however, is that *not* paying attention to the ways in which women's sexuality is figured in discourse -- even deconstructive discourse -- helps to obscure, and thus by default to legitimize, the ways in which sexuality is used to situate women in the material world. In this respect, deconstructive feminism stands as a challenge and a corrective even to mainstream (masculinist) deconstruction: Spivak illustrates that it is all too easy for even the most affirmative of discourses to deny or displace sexual specificity, and that doing so helps to perpetuate many forms of material disadvantage. In "Displacement" she argues very powerfully that the celebration of

woman as the name for the disruption of presence can backfire by drawing attention away from the fact that in the existing reproductive economy the female body *functions* as presence in a way absolutely crucial to the maintenance of the patriarchal order -- through its material status as the site of "law", where "law [is] the code of legitimacy and inheritance. "Property", in the economic sense, is secured and passed down the male line through the peculiar "property" of the woman's body: the fact that she

has no need to "prove" maternity. The institution of the phallogentric law is congruent with the need to prove paternity and authority, to secure property by transforming the child into an alienated object named and possessed by the father, and to secure property by transforming the woman into a mediating instrument of the production and passage of property (184).

Spivak has thus moved from what might have appeared to be the most academic of concerns, expressed through a highly theoretical discourse, to an analysis of issues of immediate practical concern for women: their status as "instrument[s] for the production and passage of property" rather than as having access to and control over property. By extension, this analysis draws attention to the many abuses that women are subject to in the attempt to ensure their sexual fidelity and hence the uninterrupted and legitimate transfer of property, as well as to the psychological and legal construction of motherhood. And what brings her to this point is not a move away from deconstruction but a reflection on deconstruction that leads her to a further deconstructive insight: "In this narrow but 'effective' and 'real' sense, in the body of the woman as mother, the opposition between displacement and logocentrism might itself be deconstructed" (184). The positive move

of displacing woman, using her as the figure for the "truth" of subjectivity, which is non-self-presence, can paradoxically reinforce, through rendering invisible, the function of woman as maternal presence enabling the traffic of property from father to son and thus covertly support a metaphysics of presence most damaging to actual women.

In "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" Spivak teases out the complex relation between a deconstructive musing on deconstruction and the challenging of women's status in the material world. In "French Feminism in an International Frame" she elaborates more fully the relationship between the libidinal and the political, not only looking at how sexuality is used to situate women in the material world, but suggesting the possibility of an alternative to the existing sexual/socio-political/economic order.

The essay follows a rhetorical pattern similar to that of "Displacement" in that it begins with a warning of the dangers and limitations of metropolitan theory and ends by using deconstructive thought to refigure socio-cultural, economic and ethical issues in powerfully suggestive ways. Much of the first section of the essay consists of a critique of Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*, a text which Spivak offers as illustrative of the danger that an attempt to know the other can collapse into a consolidation of the self. She points out that Kristeva, although apparently investigating the subjectivity of "Chinese women" (Spivak is understandably critical of such a generalising category), is really concerned to understand better her own relationship to these others:

Her question, in the face of those silent women, is about her own identity, rather than theirs: "Who is speaking, then, before the peasants at Huxian?" (p. 15). This too might be a characteristic of the group of thinkers to whom

I have, most generally, attached her. In spite of their occasional interest in touching the *other* of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who are we (not), how are we (not)?

It is therefore not surprising that, even as she leaves the incredibly detailed terrain of the problem of knowing who she herself is exactly -- the speaking, reading, listening "I" at this particular *moment* -- she begins to compute the reality of who "they" are in terms of *millennia*... (137).

Because she is not really concerned with touching the other as other Kristeva produces, in Spivak's view, an account of Chinese women which ignores historical change, collapses class differences, and creates a synchronically and diachronically homogenous, generalised "Chinese woman" whose function is to facilitate the self-understanding of the West. In the interests of producing this self-consolidating other, even the most fundamental scholarly and interpretive skills are abandoned: novels are taken as unmediated representations of social reality (139), the complexities of translation are glossed over, and in the section of the book which deals with modern China, "the author's source of literary information -- a few simple statistics -- is a single article by Al-Li S. Chin, 'Family Relations in Modern Chinese Fiction'" (139). Spivak's concern is not only that Kristeva creates a homogenised other, but that in doing so she posits a homogenised West, a monotheistic West which "supports the argument of the difference between China and the West" (140). As Spivak rather crossly points out, "[t]he splendid, decadent, multiple, oppressive and more than millennial polytheistic tradition

of India has to be written out of the *Indo-European* picture in order that this difference may stand" (140).

Kristeva's attempt to "touch the other of the West" fails, Spivak argues, because it is structured by the imperatives of French "anti-feminism" (so called to distinguish it from feminism as activism), which "puts its trust in the individualistic critical avant garde rather than anything that might call itself a revolutionary collectivity" (140). Within this context, a principled theoretical purity prevents Kristeva from considering the relationship between textual theory and political action. But while the alliance between French High "Feminism" and anti-humanist philosophy lies at the root of Kristeva's inability, or unwillingness, to make connections between avant-garde theory and agency expressed as political activism⁸, Spivak sees in this same alliance, removed from the context of the "partisan conflict" within the French Left, a route to understanding that relationship.

Spivak warns that anti-humanism in general can, from a feminist perspective, be negative in its "presupposition of the *necessarily* revolutionary potential of the avant-garde" (144), a presupposition that can lead its proponents down the blind alley of "poetic revolution" (148) -- belief in the efficacy of a purely linguistic level of opposition/transformation, and a consequent repudiation of the need for activism. But in the work of Cixous, whom she calls "the most Derridean of the French 'anti-feminist' feminists" (145)⁹, Spivak finds "the sort of anti-feminism that has its ties to anti-humanism understood as a critique of the name of man or of phallogentrism" (147) -- a feminism informed by the critique of the sovereign subject and an awareness of the complexities of subject production, yet concerned with challenging the violence done to

women within a phallogocentric order -- not a doctrinaire anti-essentialism which can only theorise the impossibility of grounded action or agency. (This is an issue which Spivak will return to in her later essay "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations", discussed later in this chapter).

The essay here foreshadows the concerns of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as Spivak quotes approvingly a passage from Cixous which indicates the latter's awareness of the ideological construction of the subject and of the consequent impossibility of a politics founded on the assumption that the experience and needs of the oppressed can, in any simple way, be known or articulated either by themselves or by the first world intellectual. In the light of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" it is clear that this is not a denial of the reality of material oppression, but an admission of the impossibility of representing that oppression in a way unmediated by ideology:

Men and women are caught in a network of millennial cultural determinations of a complexity that is practically unanalyzable: we can no more talk about "woman" than about "man" without being caught within an ideological theatre where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications constantly transforms, deforms, alters each person's imaginary order and in advance renders all conceptualization null and void (145).¹⁰

Cixous, however, does not run the risk of remaining a "poetic revolutionary": it is precisely her awareness of discursive and ideological subject-constitution that make it possible for her to bridge the gap between linguistic and material levels of opposition.

For the remainder of the essay Spivak considers the opposition between what are, in the French context, labelled “radical” feminists -- women who insist on the necessity of examining oppressive practices in all their historical, political and economic specificity -- and so-called anti-feminists like Cixous with their *apparently* more abstract concern with consciousness, sexuality, subjectivity and representation. She concludes that while attention must be paid to radical feminist warnings that too singular a focus on “language and the imaginary” can blind academics to “the reality of struggles” (Catherine Clement, quoted by Spivak, 149), a concern with textuality and with the body are not inimical to material transformation:

In the long run, the most useful thing that a training in French feminism can give us is politicized and critical examples of “symptomatic reading” not always following the reversal-displacement technique of a deconstructive reading. The method that seemed recuperative when used to applaud the avant-garde is productively conflictual when used to expose the ruling discourse (149).

The discussion of clitoridectomy with which she ends the essay stands as a very persuasive example of such a reading: an analysis which breaks down the opposition between the discursive and the material, between textuality (where text is not writing narrowly conceived, but the structure of social norms and practices) and struggle. Clitoridectomy is conceptualized both as a culturally specific and all-too-material oppressive practice which must be opposed by an activist politics of resistance and as a metonym for a whole mode of cultural organisation -- what she calls “uterine social organisation” (1987a, 151) -- which must be continually challenged and “denormalized”

at the level of discourse, where women's position in the existing libidinal economy is confirmed and perpetuated. She writes:

Male and female sexuality are asymmetrical. Male orgasmic pleasure “normally” entails the male reproductive act -- semination. Female orgasmic pleasure (it is not, of course, the “same” pleasure, only called by the same name) does not entail any one component of the heterogeneous female reproductive : ovulation, fertilization, conception, gestation, birthing. The clitoris escapes reproductive framing. In legally defining woman as object of exchange, passage, or possession in terms of reproduction, it is not only the womb that is literally “appropriated”; it is the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that is effaced. All historical and theoretical investigation into the definition of woman as legal *object* -- in or out of marriage; or as politico-economic passageway for property and legitimacy would fall within the investigation of the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris (151).¹¹

The significance of this mode of analysis lies in the extent to which it succeeds in demolishing the opposition between Anglo/US feminism, with its emphasis on social action, whether based on materialist analysis or on empirical investigations of oppression, and Continental theory with its concern with symbolic and linguistic modes of analysis and the representation of female sexuality. In the essay referred to above, Lockett states that

Even in the hands of women critics, post-structuralist feminism derived from the French models is problematic in the South African context. Its

failure to make an impact outside of the universities is a result of its lack of a cogent (gender) political program of action. It serves largely to define or explain the misogynistic status quo and existing paradigms of power without suggesting what might take their place in a post-poststructuralist society (10).

In response I would argue that Spivak goes well beyond mere description in her analysis of how sexuality is used to position women in the material world and of how a particular discourse of sexuality underpins and naturalises that positioning. Spivak's symptomatic reading of clitoridectomy illustrates this perfectly. The specific instance of the denial of the non-reproductive aspects of female sexuality that is physical clitoridectomy takes on added significance when read as a metaphor for the denial of an alternative mode of social organisation -- one in which woman's freedom is not limited by her definition as "legal object as subject of reproduction". It has already been shown, in the discussion of "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman", that this definition of woman as maternal presence enabling the transfer of property and legitimacy from father to son can be effected not only by an essentialist but also by a deconstructive discourse of femininity. Read together, the two essays show us how attention to "the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris", with the emphasis on "varieties", can reveal the relationship between discursive strategies, whole economies of thought, powerful systems of social organisation and individual, concrete instances of the abuse of women. Thus an awareness of, and opposition to, the displacement/effacement of clitoral sexuality within the realm of discourse must work to denormalise the whole system of human relations and practices within which the particular horror of physical clitoridectomy is situated and

from which it derives its logic.

This seems to me a sufficiently cogent political activity (if not exactly a program), but those who insist on a macro-political dimension should pay attention to Spivak's own argument that to theorize, and in doing so to challenge, the "uterine" mode of social organisation is, ultimately, to attack both capitalism and the international division of labour at their foundation:

At the moment, the fact that the entire complex network of advanced capitalist economy hinges on home-buying, and that the philosophy of home-ownership is intimately linked to the sanctity of the nuclear family, shows how encompassingly the uterine norm of womanhood supports the phallic norm of capitalism. At the other end of the spectrum, it is this ideologico-material repression of the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that operates the specific oppression of women, as the lowest level of the cheap labour that the multi-national corporations employ by remote control in the extraction of absolute surplus value in the less developed countries (152-153).

"Investigation of the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris", then, works not only to undermine the definition of woman as passage for property and propriety but also to suggest an alternative to "existing paradigms of power", in fact, to the whole existing set of international relations of power.¹² Spivak is well aware that this does not provide feminists with an immediately implementable programme of action, in the sense that it is not possible, either through direct political action or through theoretical challenges, to sweep aside the "uterine" social structure and institute a "clitoral" one. Rather, she

argues, “[t]he uterine social organization should . . . be situated through the understanding that it has so far been established by excluding a clitoral social organisation” (152). If the idea of a social and sexual order not predicated on the status of woman as agent of reproduction seems utopian, that does not negate its value as a conceptual starting place for a critique of the existing order, a critique which could ultimately lead to material changes. As Judith Butler points out “Cultural fantasies . . . do ultimately come to constitute new organizations of reality” (Butler, 1987, 140).

II.

Spivak ends “French Feminism in an International Frame” with a moving assertion of female commonality across the undeniable barriers of race, class and colonial relations of power. She offers her reading of clitoridectomy as one which “will not necessarily escape the inbuilt colonialism of First World feminism towards the Third” but which might yet “promote a sense of our common yet history-specific lot” (153). It does this by revealing the connection between third world victims of physical clitoridectomy and first world women damaged by the denial of clitoral sexuality. This connection, while not trivialising the far greater suffering of the clitoridectomised and invaginated third world female child, or the peasant woman exploited by the logic of the uterine/capitalist/property-owning social order, does systematically undo the “ideological-material opposition” and bridge the divide between the concerns of first and third world women.

However, in keeping with her habit of re-thinking and reworking even her most apparently satisfactory conclusions, Spivak does not allow the issue to rest there. In “Feminism and

Deconstruction Again: Negotiations" (1989) she reopens the question of the relationship between deconstruction and ethical action.¹³ I hope to show, in a brief account of the essay, that this revisiting is the inevitable consequence of the theoretical issues that the essay itself puts forward. Spivak is thus not reopening her own questions simply because she has had time to think about her answers and has reached different conclusions; instead she is, among other things, meditating on the theoretical basis for her own practice of challenging her own earlier positions .

I have already argued above that Spivak's rejection of Derrida's use of the figure of woman in deconstruction is not a denial of the usefulness of deconstruction for feminism, since she provides a deconstructive reading of Derrida's text which itself leads to enabling insights concerning the production and deployment of sexual difference. However, in "Feminism and Deconstruction" she chooses to re-enter Derrida's text for a different purpose: both to provide an example of what she elsewhere calls "the radical interruption of practice by theory and of theory by practice" (1990a, 44), and to re-examine the relationship between the anti-sexist project of understanding the production of "woman" within the phallogentric order and the deconstructive insight that the name "woman" is a catachresis: that, as in her discussion of power in "More on Power/Knowledge", "woman" has no literal referent.

In the 1986 interview from which the quotation immediately above is taken, Spivak describes the shift in emphasis which engenders this dual focus. Asked about her concern, in "Displacement", with "restoring woman to the position of the questioning subject" (42), she replies:

When I was talking about putting woman in the position of the questioning subject, I was really thinking more about the context of phallogentrism. It was a critique of the discourse of woman as produced by men.... But since then, I've moved on a little, since I now think about the arena of practice in a somewhat broader way. It also seems to me, now, that the women who can in fact begin to engage in this particular "winning back" of the position of the questioning subject, are in a very privileged position in the geopolis today. So, from that point of view, I would not say that as a woman . . . my particular enemy is the male establishment of the most privileged Western tradition. They are my enemy in the house where I give interviews, where I teach...and there I have to talk about winning the position.... But if I think in terms of the much larger female constituency in the world for whom I am an infinitely privileged person...what I really want to learn about is what I have called the unlearning of one's privilege. So that not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency. And furthermore to recognize that the position of the speaking subject within theory can be an historically powerful position when it wants the other actually to be able to answer back (42).

I have quoted at such length because this passage sums up in straightforward terms the agenda of an essay which would not be written for another three years. "Feminism and Deconstruction" is a continued engagement with anti-sexist feminism within "the most privileged Western tradition", as Spivak responds to Jacqueline Rose's critique of

deconstruction, but it is also an essay which could be characterised as offering a theory of action as it explores both the usefulness and the necessary limits of anti-essentialist thought.

In the introduction to her book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Rose accuses Derrida of reinscribing sexual difference in his critique of logocentrism:

Behind the Western logos of presence, Derrida locates an archi-trace or *différance* which that logos would ideally forget, but this then requires a psychic amount of how/why that forgetting takes place. And sexual difference also returns with all the trappings of the binary polarisation which Derrida seeks to displace. For the effect of this general dispersal of subjectivity into a writing process where narrative, naming and appropriation are undone, is the constant identification of the woman with the underside of truth. Precisely as a logical consequence of the "critique of humanism as phallogocentrism", the woman comes to occupy the place "of a general critique of Western thought"¹⁴ -- at once the fantasy on which male appropriation relies as well as the excluded fact of that appropriation which gives back to it the lie. But the effect is a massive sexualisation of Derrida's own discourse. ...The critique of the psychoanalytic focus on the Oedipal triangle and of the phallogocentrism of language can only be pursued, therefore, in terms of the very sexual antagonism which it was intended to displace. That the woman then comes to be set up in a classic position of otherness is only the most striking effect of this move. (21)

There is an obvious affinity between this critique and Spivak's arguments in "Displacement" and in "Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle", as Rose herself acknowledges. But she rightly notes that while Spivak's critique is based on her sense that Derrida has been *insufficiently* deconstructive, for Rose it is the very nature of the deconstructive project -- what she calls the "endless dispersal of subjectivity" (20) -- that produces this reinscription (cf Rose, note 38, p 21).

In "Feminism and Deconstruction", Spivak takes issue with Rose's position by challenging the notion that deconstruction is best understood as "*only* a narrative of the fully dispersed and decentered subject" (124). As she has repeated over and over in her work to this point, deconstruction cannot, and was never intended to, found a politics -- it is, rather, a theoretical safeguard against the "varieties of fundamentalism" (132) that can occur when a founded political programme naturalises and monumentalises its founding gestures, "forgets" the slippery moment of beginning. The deconstructive counter-narrative of decentering is an important part of such safeguarding, providing, for example, theoretical tools for dismantling notions of originary identity and critiquing their political consequences. But, Spivak suggests, in order to be politically useful, the narrative of deconstruction must be complemented by a "morphology" of deconstructive thought: deconstruction is also "about the limits of epistemology" (125).

It is this emphasis, rather than an insistence on the fully dispersed subject, which enables her to diagnose the key potential weakness of Rose's own anti-sexist (and anti-essentialist) psychoanalytic project -- a project with which Spivak is very much in sympathy. This weakness is the unexamined assumption that the subject of

epistemology and the subject of ethics are wholly continuous -- that self-knowing necessarily leads to right action, or that "the subject recognising herself (woman) [does so] in order to act in the interests of social justice" (125). The usefulness of deconstructive thought, in this context, is its insistence on the impossibility of what Spivak calls a "cleansed epistemology", an absolute self-recognition which will provide grounds for right action. Derrida's insistence that the "proper" self is by definition inaccessible, since it is always the product of a prior moment of thinking "not-self" (which itself assumes the notion of "self", and is thus always part of a process of infinite regression), undermines any notion that ethical action can be securely grounded on the recovery of a self which has been disguised, distorted and denigrated by the historically bound definitions and hierarchisations of phallogocentric society.

The central section of "Feminism and Deconstruction" is extraordinarily densely argued. Rather than rehearse each step of that argument my intention is to draw out its two central threads: the need for the anti-sexist project to acknowledge, and use, the deconstructive awareness of catachresis, and the opposing insight that this must never be allowed to harden into a doctrinaire anti-essentialism that would indeed disable activism. It is this holding in tension of two apparently conflicting positions that makes the essay difficult to follow on first acquaintance, as Spivak argues by constantly undermining her own insights just at the point where they threaten to become foundational. On the one hand, a feminism that is not informed by the knowledge that there is no pure ontological essence of woman that can be grasped outside of and prior to patriarchal discourse, is in danger of collapsing the distinction between self-knowledge and ethical action and finessing the question of the grounds of action by implying that a

“cleansed epistemology” -- the ability to think “self” outside of history and discourse -- is possible and will lead automatically to right action in the interests of social justice. This conflicts not only with the tenet that one can never get outside of one’s discourses but also, crucially, with Spivak’s belief that, as discussed in Chapter 2, ethical action is always choice in the face of undecidability. On the other hand, the deconstructive “desire for the impasse” (124, 137) -- the awareness that there is always something prior to what appears to be the founding moment of thought and that a search for origins always becomes a process of “infinite regression” -- must be “normed” by the need for practice, that is, for agency and ethical action, for a starting point of some sort. Spivak therefore suggests that the diachronic “narrative of the fully-dispersed and decentered subject” -- a story that can lead to no political action -- needs within feminism to be complemented by the synchronic morphology of “deconstruction [as] about the limits of epistemology” (125) and then that, within the epistemological safeguards that this provides, a new narrative of anti-sexist action can be thought, where “to act is...not to ignore deconstruction but actively to transgress it without giving it up”(121). Thus theory interrupts practice by theorising the difference between the subject of knowledge and the subject of action and therefore between epistemology and ethics, while practice interrupts theory in the sense that although, theoretically, there can be no absolute foundation for action, action does nevertheless take place.

For Spivak, it is the concept of catachresis that best characterises this negotiation between the demands of theory and those of practice, since catachresis in the general sense is the mark of the impossibility of a “cleansed epistemology” -- if all language is catachrestic it is because there is no essence or property which can be named and thus

it is impossible to recognise and name the self “correctly” -- while catachresis in the narrow sense -- what one might call “working” catachreses like “nation”, “identity” or “woman” -- are the very condition of possibility for action: recognition of the “falsity” of a name is what enables opposition and change. To flesh out her point she reopens the texts by Derrida and Nietzsche which were discussed in “Displacement”, but comes at them from a significantly different angle, not retreating from her earlier critique but finding in these texts a different kind of usefulness, identifying a progressive moment rather than acceding to or rejecting the conclusions reached by the texts. This is the “affirmative critique” discussed in Chapter 3.

What Spivak “gives assent” to here is the way Nietzsche’s text foregrounds both the narrow and the general senses of catachresis: “‘woman’ is...used in such a way that one cannot locate an adequate literal referent for the word” (126), while the quotation marks around truth suggest a more general awareness of catachresis, Nietzsche’s scepticism concerning the possibility of foundational thought. The second important theoretical insight that she again takes from Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche, but uses differently, is that, however nominalist one tries to be, it is impossible to escape wholly the burden of paleontology. Nietzsche, attempting to use “woman” as one *name* for the “non-truth of truth”, cannot avoid the influence of the misogynistic historical associations of the name, so that the patriarchal ideologeme “feminine duplicity” becomes the grounds for thinking woman in this way. Spivak has already made this point in the course of her argument in “Displacement”, but whereas in that essay she identifies this as the text’s key weakness, the moment which enables the double displacement of woman, in the later re-reading she wants to look for what is potentially useful in this recognition.

Going one step further, Spivak's reading of Derrida's *The Ear of the Other*, focuses on what might be called the anxiety of naming, the philosopher's fear that his nominalist use of "woman" as the name of preappropriation, the "living", will be contaminated by all the ideas and values and prejudices associated with "real women" (142). So, from Nietzsche, Spivak takes the "emancipating moment of emergence of woman as catachresis" (127) (which is not the same as accepting "woman" as the model for indeterminacy and non-self-identity, the consequences of which are revealed in the earlier essay) . Ironically, it is because of his prejudice that Nietzsche can think "woman" in this way, but in this essay Spivak chooses to "ab-use" his text, focussing not on the misogynistic sub-text but on the usefulness of the catachresis. And from Derrida she takes the "anxiety of naming" -- his awareness not only that all names are catachrestic but also that all names are embroiled in paleontology, that meaning is within history. And she makes of these insights something politically useful, in her case when applied in a third world context and used to clarify the difference between the first world feminist project of self-knowledge and the third-world feminist project of access to agency.

The name of woman as "non-self-identity", as used in masculinist deconstruction, "misfires for feminism", but *naming* woman with a full deconstructive awareness of the *act* of naming as catachrestic has important consequences. Consider the following:

[i]ncanting to ourselves all the perils of transforming a "name" to a referent -- making a catechism, in other words, of catachresis -- let us none the less name (as) "woman" that disenfranchised woman whom we strictly, historically, geopolitically *cannot imagine*, as literal referent. "Subaltern" is the name of the social space that is different from the classed social circuit,

the track of hegemony. By proposing the irreducible other in that space as holding the name “woman”, I am attempting to deflect attention from the “poor little rich girl speaking *personal* pain as victim of the greatest oppression”-act that multicultural capitalism... would thrust upon us. Let us divide the name of woman so that we see ourselves as naming, not merely named. ...the anxiety of this naming will be that, if we must think a relationship between the subject of onto/epistemology (ourselves, roughly, in this room at Cambridge, or Elaine Showalter at Princeton) and the object of onto/axiology (that disenfranchised woman, not even graduated into that subject, whose historicity or subjectship we cannot imagine beyond the regulation “women’s union” or “personal pain” human interest anecdote), the hope behind the political desire will be that the possibility for the name will be finally erased (139/140).

From this passage several related but distinct points emerge. Firstly, “seeing ourselves as naming”, where “we” are the “relatively enfranchised agents” (135) of first world feminism, we are forced to acknowledge our complicity with Western masculinist philosophy and to “share and understand the philosopher’s anxiety about the nasty historical determinants which allow this name [‘woman’] to exist” (135). In other words, we are forced to share the anxiety of paleontology, rather than claiming a privileged access to the “truth” of woman, and this anxiety will prevent the anti-sexist project of “recognising” the self from hardening into essentialism. At the same time, finding ourselves compelled to acknowledge both our complicity with and our anger at “the nasty historical determinants of that name” is crucial to the anti-sexist project.

Paleontology is not *just* a theoretical issue; it makes visible the ideological production of woman (and of feminism) and the need for an activist engagement with that process.

The second, related, point that the passage makes is that this act of naming revitalises the relationship between the general and the narrow senses of catachresis: this is an act of giving a known name -- a name whose ontological referent we think we have access to -- to what is strictly, literally unknowable. Since "woman" in this sense cannot be the subject of knowledge she must be the subject of ethics, where ethics involves both the recognition of her radical alterity and of her right to "a subject-effect of sovereignty in the narrow sense": the acknowledgement of a selfhood which does not share in our search for the "true" feminine, a self which in no way consolidates our selves. We share a name and we do not share it. It is a violent misnaming, and that violence must be opposed through political action, but because it is a misnaming it is useful, enabling change, making visible the ethical relationship of relatedness in difference, of responsibility to what cannot be known but must be responded to.

So, finally, giving "the" name -- understood as not "the" name at all -- to the disenfranchised woman drives a wedge between the project of self-knowledge and that of ethical action, firstly because it foregrounds the violence of catachresis and secondly because it reveals catachresis as enabling. The violence of catachresis is made starkly visible because (as the next chapter will illustrate) to define someone as "woman" in the context of neocolonialism is to insert her into a specifically gendered text of suffering and disinheritance, of property and exchangeability, of silencing and of exploitation often misrecognised as self-sacrifice. Thus any feminist project conceived in response to this

naming will be one that is almost the opposite of “single-issue feminism” - rather than valorising the name of woman one will be forced to work for its obliteration: if all names are catachrestic, this is a particular, violent catachresis that must be undone through social action, and *can* be because it is a catachresis, because it does not name something real.

My reason for including a brief look at this essay is because it illustrates so clearly the integral relationship between content and methodology in Spivak's work. In one sense the ground traversed in “Feminism and Deconstruction” is not new to Spivak: she looks in depth at the consequences of catachresis, particularly in “More on Power/Knowledge”, which has already been discussed. But it is those consequences which provide not just the content of, but the occasion for, this essay. Methodology and content intertwine to the extent that Spivak revisits her earlier ideas not just because she wants to examine the catachrestic nature of language, but as a *consequence* of the catachrestic nature of language. If language is the tool of the *bricoleur*, rather than the scientific instrument of the engineer, then anything built with that tool must constantly be overhauled. Spivak's rewriting, then, is not merely a response to the imperatives of professional academic practice but to those of her own theoretical emphasis, and the theory/practice opposition is undone once more.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. This chapter uses material from Arnott, 1996, op. cit.
2. Quotation from Charnie Guettel, *Marxism and Feminism*, Toronto: Women's Press, 1974, p 3.
3. The word "concept" should properly be placed under erasure here since the hymen does not function as a concept. It is not a "thing", not a third term which can undo or sublimate a binary opposition, but is itself the unresolvable play between two poles of an opposition.
4. Quotation from Derrida, 1972, p 260.
5. From Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe*, v, vol. 2, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin; W De Gruyter, 1970, p 291; Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter J Kaufmann, New York; Vintage Books, 1974, p 317.
6. Slavoj Žižek presents an interestingly similar argument in the course of his discussion of the Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner*. He contends that it is the replicants in that film who most accurately figure the condition of human subjectivity, since they cannot dwell in the illusion of full self-presence and so always experience subjectivity as divided, apprehending directly "the Lacanian distinction between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated" (211). In Žižek's words: "It is only when, at the level of enunciated content, I assume my replicant status, that, at the level of enunciation, I become a truly human subject....replicants are pure subjects precisely in so far as they experience the fact that every positive, substantial content, inclusive of the most intimate fantasies, is not "their own" but already implanted. In this precise sense, the subject is by definition nostalgic, a subject of loss" (221).
7. There is perhaps some degree of rhetorical sleight-of-hand going on here, since in Derrida's essay the argument is made by way of the orgasm that is both real *and* faked. However, Spivak's emphasis is chosen in the interests of "the practical enterprise that produces a reading" (Spivak, 1988a, 30) – here the project of examining the way in which using certain "feminine figurations"(1983, 174) as metaphors for the "non-truth" of subjectivity potentially has consequences for the construction of sexuality in the social world.
8. In their Introduction to *New French Feminisms* Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron discuss some of the internecine disagreements in French Feminism and explain that groups like the "politique et psychanalyse" collective distance themselves emphatically from feminism as political activism because they feel that the latter reproduces humanist assumptions about subjectivity. In an interview with Kristeva, whom they plainly regard as "one [who] participate[s]" in their practice, the collective make the following statement: "The issues that are crucial in our practice involve the notion of the subject, its fragmentation, the inscription of heterogeneity, difference – These are issues that feminism skirts by postulating that women are 'complete separate

individuals' with their own 'identity', or by demanding such things as 'names for women' (Marks and de Courtivron, 140). Consequently they "refuse to be included in this history of Feminism...[which] is compelled to acknowledge on its reverse side the other-counter side of the old order, Humanism" (ibid, 32). Spivak would obviously be wholly in sympathy with the emphasis on subject construction and heterogeneity: her point here is that the sense of being an embattled theoretical vanguard can lead to too rigidly principled an adherence to the tenets of anti-humanism, which in turn makes activism theoretically impossible. This issue will be dealt with at length in the final part of this chapter.

9. Spivak is not implying here that Kristeva is unaware of Derrida's work. She acknowledges that "Kristeva's association with Derridean thought dates back to the sixties", but argues that Kristeva's project is not really congruent with Derrida's, in that "[h]er project ... has been, not to *deconstruct* the origin, but rather to *recuperate*, archeologically and formulaically, what she locates as the potential originary space before the sign" (1987a, 146).

10. Cixous, 1981, p 96.

11. There are problems with this analysis: it is heteronormative and presents a questionable and rather instrumentalist view of male sexuality in which there is no acknowledgement that male sexual pleasure might involve, or be increased by, the *giving* of pleasure. In this respect, I think the essay is of its time: the past seventeen years have seen enormous changes in the understanding and representation of sexuality in general. Methodologically, though, the essay remains a powerful and though-provoking analysis of the connections between discursive constructions and material abuses.

12. I am not suggesting, here, that this essay, or any other academic intervention, is going to change the world order, or bring international capital to its knees. Spivak's essay is just one very small, but none-the-less important, contribution to the project of thinking alternatives without which change cannot happen.

13. "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics" (1992) is a similar revisiting of the issues raised in "French Feminism in an International Frame". Space constraints make it impossible to discuss the former essay in this chapter -- a complete account of its dense and complicated argument would be prohibitively long -- but a key section of it will be touched on in Chapter 6.

14. This is a quotation from Spivak, 1984c, pp 24, 22.

CHAPTER 6

READING THE GENDERED SUBALTERN

I.

A reader encountering Spivak's thought initially through the essays discussed in the previous chapter might well be forgiven for assuming that Spivak is primarily a feminist philosopher or psychoanalytic theorist; she herself insists that she is first and foremost a feminist literary critic.¹ In keeping with this emphasis, and with my own disciplinary affiliation, my purpose in this chapter is to foreground some of the strategies of reading that Spivak offers through her commentaries on fictional texts. These commentaries potentially open up ways of reading as a feminist which go beyond the problematics of liberal feminism to engage with issues of subject-construction, psychobiography, the cultural production of the sexed female body and the possibilities for "reading" the body, as well as exploring the relationship between materiality and representation. Several of these readings also pay attention to the structure and rhetorical strategies of texts in a way which can usefully supplement the more common emphasis on content, and offer accessible and teachable examples of the "reversal/displacement" technique of deconstructive analysis.

Before 1981, Spivak's application of feminist ideas to literary criticism takes the form of revisionist readings of canonical texts: characteristic examples are "Three Feminist Readings: McCullers, Drabble, Habermas" (1979), "Unmaking and Making in *To The Lighthouse*" (1980), "Finding Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats" (1980). However, her

increasing interest in the textual treatment of the third world woman, signalled by her 1981 translation of, and fairly brief commentary on, Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", comes to fruition in 1985 in her famous account of the relationship between the self-actualising first world feminist individualist and the "self-immolating" third world other, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism".

The general theoretical issues which inform "Three Women's Texts" have been briefly outlined in chapter 4: the body of the essay consists of a reading of three literary texts which reveals the production of the third world subject in the texts of Western high feminism and opens up some ways of critiquing and even deconstructing that process of production. The three texts are *Jane Eyre*, read as an example of the way in which nineteenth-century Western individualist feminism can be complicit in the production of the female colonial subject as other (in fact, requires this process for the fulfilment of its own project); Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, examined for the potentialities and limitations of the desire to "give the other a self" within the postcolonial context; and *Frankenstein*, which Spivak reads as "an analysis -- even a deconstruction -- of a 'worlding' such as *Jane Eyre's*" (244).

However, before embarking on her reading of the first of these texts, Spivak makes a series of ground-clearing gestures, forestalling a number of potential criticisms. She establishes that her purpose in reading *Jane Eyre* in this way is not to "blame" the individual author, Charlotte Brontë, for reflecting the cultural and political axioms that structured the discursive fields on which she inevitably drew, and which included what Spivak defines as "the axiomatics of imperialism" (247). Though aware that the

opposition between text and author is a false one, Spivak argues that “we must...strategically take shelter in an essentialism which, not wishing to lose the important advantages won by U. S. mainstream feminism, will continue to honor the suspect binary oppositions -- book and author, individual and history” (244).

Spivak's reading of *Jane Eyre* is the most straightforward section of the essay. She identifies as the “axiomatics” that structure the plot both the founding assumptions of the emergent Western feminist movement and those of imperialism understood as social mission. The axiomatics of nineteenth-century Western feminism she understands as those of individualism: “the constitution and ‘interpellation’ of the subject not only as individual but as ‘individualist’” (244). I understand “individualist” here to refer to the perception of the individual not simply as a discrete human being but as the subject of rights, the seeker of autonomy and fulfilment. The arena of struggle for the Western high feminist, then, was that of entitlement to the same individual rights and freedoms as men. However, Spivak argues, the simultaneously operating axiomatics of imperialism as “civilizing” mission ensured that the pursuit of individual fulfilment was played out in different registers for men and women. She puts it in these terms:

This stake is represented on two registers: childbearing and soul making. The first is domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as “companionate love”; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission. As the female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the “native female” as such (*within* discourse, as a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm (245).

Not only is she excluded, but the successful emergence of the Western feminist heroine as individual may well be at her expense. Spivak reveals this process in *Jane Eyre*, showing how these axiomatics give Brontë the machinery she needs for moving her plot in the direction of Jane's fulfilment at Bertha Mason's expense. She sees the novel as structured around a series of oppositions between family-in-law and counter-family, and argues that the narrative challenge facing Brontë is how to move Jane "from the place of the counter-family to the family-in-law" (247), where she can play out her individual destiny in the register of childbearing and companionate love. Her answer is that "[it] is the active ideology of imperialism that provides the discursive field" (247). The "higher" register of individualism, she has established, is that of "soul-making" -- in the imperial context, the production of colonial subjects through "civilizing mission". This is represented in the novel by the activities of St John Rivers, activities from which Jane is excluded, or chooses to exclude herself. In this sense, the limitations of women's access to the highest forms of fulfilment are marked. But it is this concept of "soul-making" that also provides the justification for Jane's accession to her "not-quite" status as *female* individualist heroine. This comes about through what Spivak identifies as a perversion of Kant's categorical imperative. Kant's dictum she quotes as: "In all creation every thing one chooses and over which one has any power, may be used *merely as a means*; man alone, and with him every rational creature, is an *end in himself*" (248).² But if the project of soul-making as imperial mission is understood as "*make the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself*" (248), the corollary is that the third world subject is *not* fully human, not a "rational creature" and may justifiably be used as a means to an end. This "axiom" provides the discursive raw material for Brontë's presentation of Bertha Mason as more animal than human, and the winning of

her readers' consent to Bertha's disempowerment and eventual immolation as the means to the end of Jane's fulfilment as individualist feminist heroine³. For Spivak, this is "an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (251).

Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which retells the story of *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the first Mrs Rochester, sets out to make visible this violence and to restore to Bertha (here named Antoinette) the humanity that Brontë denies her. In her reading of the novel, Spivak is concerned both with the necessity of this project and with its limitations. In dealing with this novel, it is particularly important to bear in mind the Caliban/Ariel distinction mentioned in Chapter 4. Whereas in *Jane Eyre* Bertha Mason, the "white Jamaican creole" occupies the textual space of *the* third world subject, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette is positioned in relation not only to the representative first world subject, Rochester, but also to the Jamaican indigenes, the "true" natives, as well as her nurse Christophine, imported from Martinique. Rhys's project, then, is not to recover a self for the native as such, but for a more ambiguously positioned product of the colonial self/other dynamic.

In this she is partially successful: she rewrites key scenes in the novel in ways which reveal the rational motivations behind "Bertha Mason's" apparently bestial and irrational actions. But she is also concerned to trace the process of the production of Bertha/Antionette as other, and does this through a presentation of what Spivak has elsewhere called "regulative psychobiographies", the "model narratives that give

'meaning' to our readings of ourselves and others" (1989a, 227). Spivak argues (in "Three Women's Texts") that "even so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism" in the sense that those politics and their relations of power may determine or deny access to a range of these psychobiographies. She goes on to describe the Western psychobiographic norm in the following terms:

If in the nineteenth century, subject-constitution is represented as childbearing and soul making, in the twentieth century psychoanalysis allows the West to plot the itinerary of the subject from Narcissus [the "imaginary"] to Oedipus [the "symbolic"]. This subject, however, is the normative male subject" (251, brackets in the original).

In her brief examination of Rochester's "regulative psychobiography", Spivak shows how Rhys's feminist thematics express themselves through a subversive withholding of fully achieved male identity: "Rochester" (or the character who corresponds to Brontë's Rochester) is denied a name, which Spivak reads in Lacanian terms as the denial of full access to the Symbolic through accession to the Name of the Father. Antoinette's coming to subjectivity, however, is far more radically fractured. Excluded by her femaleness from the male trajectory of Narcissus to Oedipus, it seems that Antoinette's position as third world subject (at least in relation to Rochester) ensures that she is trapped within not primary, but secondary, narcissism. In "Echo", Spivak identifies "primary narcissism" in the following terms: "In one Freudian articulation at least, primary narcissism is an 'absolute self-sufficien[cy] from which we step, towards noticing a changeful world outside...'" (Landry and Maclean, 180).⁴ Far from possessing a pre-

symbolic self-sufficiency which allows her to appropriate all that is other to the self, Antoinette can only attempt narcissistically to identify herself in what is other. I take it that this is what Spivak means when she says that "Narcissus' madness is disclosed when he recognises his Other as his self...Rhys makes Antoinette see her *self* as her Other" (250).

Antoinette's psychobiography, as the white Creole female third world subject, is one of repeated misrecognitions of self to the point where that self is wholly othered. Spivak quotes a relatively early passage in the novel in which Antoinette thinks that she recognises herself in Tia:

We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her.... When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it....We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass (250, Rhys, 38).

Spivak does not comment explicitly on this passage, but it is apparent that this is a misrecognition on Antoinette's part; she and Tia are distinguished very clearly -- "blood on my face, tears on hers". The violence of colonialism (blood) and the suffering of the oppressed (tears) are shared by both girls, but from different positions. The blood is Antoinette's own; she is a victim of colonial violence. But she is ambiguously placed in relation to that violence, both its victim and allied with its perpetrators (as the relatively privileged white Creole, and "owner" of Christophine); she both bleeds and is stained with the blood of those more completely victimised. The Ariel/Caliban distinction, here the distance between the privileged colonial subject and the "pure native" is scrupulously

marked. "Caught between the English imperialist and the black native" (250), Antoinette is unable to resist the progressive othering of herself through these increasingly alienating misrecognitions, until finally she (mis)recognises herself for the last time in the figure of Bertha Mason and accepts her destiny: to "act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (151). In this acerbic summary, the complicity between the individualist ideals of European high feminism and the annihilating epistemic violence of the imperial project is made brutally explicit.

But if Rhys can trace the process of Antoinette's subject constitution in ways that make that epistemic violence visible, she is unable to do the same for those more absolutely victimised by it: Spivak notes that the text "marks with uncanny clarity the limits of its own discourse in *Christophine*, Antoinette's black nurse" (252). Though not strictly speaking subaltern, *Christophine* remains a figure that "cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native" (253). Thus Spivak marks the limits of the benevolent Western feminist desire to "give the other a self" or to "give the native a voice". Rhys's project in the novel is to rescue the selfhood of the third world subject from the violent othering that allows for the production of a Bertha Mason. But if she "gives" *Christophine* a full voice-consciousness she will also become complicit in that othering, disguising the extent of the violence that has fragmented the latter's self-knowledge and of the forces which ultimately silence her. Benita Parry has taken issue with Spivak on this point, arguing that

What Spivak's strategy of reading necessarily blots out is *Christophine's*

inscription as the native, female, individual Self who defies the demands of the discriminatory discourses impinging on her person....Christophine's defiance is not enacted in a small and circumscribed space appropriated within the lines of a dominant code, but is a stance from which she delivers a frontal assault against antagonists, and as such constitutes a counter-discourse. Wise to the limits of post-emancipation justice, she is quick to invoke the protection of its law when "Rochester" threatens her with retribution: "This is free country and I am free woman" (1987, 38).

By quoting, without irony, this statement by Christophine, Parry inadvertently proves Spivak's point for her, because of course Christophine is *not* a free woman, just as Jamaica is far from being a free country. Where Parry sees an undeceived and sovereign Self articulating an effective counter-discourse, Spivak recognises a Christophine who, though shrewd and courageous, inevitably *misrecognises* her status as a subject and in doing so serves the interests of a state to whose advantage it is to have a people in bondage believing they are free. Christophine may invoke the Law, but to what purpose? Her voice will never really be heard, to the point of being effective, within the circuits of an alien legal system and her abrupt exit from the text is emblematic of that effective exclusion from the hegemonic discourses *and* counter-discourses.

In the final section of "Three Women's Texts" Spivak produces an account of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which argues that this text is unusual in that it "does not speak the language of feminist individualism" and, though it "is ostensibly about the origin and evolution of man in society, it does not deploy the axiomatics of imperialism" (254). This

insight is indicative of the fact that despite her desire to see English literary texts of this period as operated by the structures and assumptions of the discursive fields "at hand in the socius" (247), Spivak's model of literary production is not a deterministic one. She argues that Shelley's novel, though certainly not without imperialist sentiments at the level of content, is still able to challenge the central projects and founding assumptions of imperialism. This complicates what might otherwise have seemed to be an emerging picture of a monolithic Western consciousness and -- to some extent -- answers Robert Young's anxiety that Spivak is at times in danger of "los[ing] Bhabha's insight into the ambivalence of the authority, the textual complications, of the colonizer's representations" (159), and hence of doing her own "worlding", producing a homogeneous *first world* as object of postcolonial knowledge.

To illustrate her thesis concerning Shelley's text, Spivak undertakes a deconstructive reading using what has been called the "reversal-displacement" method. Mark Krupnik explains that "Derridean deconstruction proceeds by way of displacement, first reversing the terms of a philosophical opposition, that is, reversing a hierarchy or structure of domination, and then displacing or dislodging the system" (1). While this is, obviously, only one kind of deconstructive move -- a fact which Krupnik's formulation de-emphasises -- it can be a powerful and versatile strategy of reading which Spivak uses here to produce a "politically useful" reading of a literary text. Having identified the soul making/childbearing binary as one of the foundational principles on which the axiomatics of imperialism are grounded, Spivak proceeds to reverse and displace this opposition by reading Shelley's text as an allegory of womb envy. In a text like *Jane Eyre* the hierarchical nature of the soul making/childbearing opposition is clearly apparent: Spivak

states that "nineteenth-century feminist individualism could conceive of a 'greater' project than access to the closed circle of the nuclear family. This is the project of soul-making beyond 'mere' sexual reproduction" (248). Shelley's text can be read as reversing that hierarchy and revealing reproduction to be the primary term: "In Shelley's view, man's hubris as soul-maker both usurps the place of God and attempts -- vainly -- to sublimate woman's physiological prerogative" (255). This move implies and makes inevitable the second move: that of displacing the opposition. If the opposition *can* be reversed, it is because neither term is in fact the "positive" and self-identical one: each term of the binary relies on the other and they are "accomplices" (cf Spivak 1976, xxviii, lix), in a relationship not of opposition but of supplementarity. Having undermined this originary "opposition", then, Shelley's text cannot become "a battleground of male and female individualism" and thus escapes the dynamics of othering which have been revealed as the corollary to that battle. Spivak is not claiming that *Frankenstein* is untouched by the ideology of imperialism at the level of content, but rather that it escapes the structuring imperatives which govern the canonical texts of nineteenth-century individualist feminism and hence examines the self/other relationship on quite different territory.

There is a second way in which Spivak's reading displaces the subject-constitution/sexual reproduction opposition, and this is by bringing out the status of the monster as a figure who cannot be wholly contained within either term of the opposition, thus undermining it as a "true" opposition. Frankenstein's engendering of the monster is only an approximation or parody of childbearing: as Spivak points out, the monster has no childhood. But nor can the monster be adequately categorized under the rubric of soul-making; he cannot be contained within civil society, as the words of the magistrate,

which Spivak quotes on page 258, make plain:

“I will exert myself [he says], and if it is in my power to seize the monster, be assured that he shall suffer punishment proportionate to his crimes. But I fear, from what you yourself have described to be his properties, that this will prove impracticable; and thus, while every proper measure is pursued, you should make up your mind to disappointment”⁵ [F, p.100].

The monster’s “properties” are such that he cannot be brought within the ambit of the law, but if this is so then he cannot either be regarded as outside the law, since the idea of the “illegal” depends on that of the “legal”. The monster cuts through this opposition, too. He cannot be fully humanized, and as such remains “the absolutely Other [that] cannot be served” (258), marking the limits of the soul-making project and, in doing so, undermining the opposition which depends on the self-adequacy of this term.

Spivak also notes that the novel contains “a thoroughgoing critique of the eighteenth century European discourses on the origin of society through (Western Christian) man” (256), and in doing so implicitly critiques the enlightenment values which underpinned the “soul making” project -- the production of the colonial subject and the colonial social order. She argues that the novel contains three characters who represent the tripartite Kantian subject: Victor Frankenstein standing for “theoretical reason or ‘natural philosophy’; Henry Clerval [for] the forces of practical reason or ‘the moral relations of things’ and Elizabeth Lavenza [for] . . . aesthetic judgement” (256). Frankenstein, creating his monster in the light of pure theory and without ethical foundation illustrates again the potential for distortion of the categorical imperative as the human subject is created within a framework of “scientific” social engineering rather than one of ethical

relationship.

Lastly, Spivak identifies in Shelley's text a taxonomy very similar to that of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Safie, the educated "Christianized 'Arabian'" (257) occupies the same space as Antoinette, while the monster, like Christophine, cannot ultimately be contained within the text or given adequate access to its most liberatory discourses. Spivak notes that, through his eavesdropping on Safie, and his reading of texts by Milton, Plutarch and Volney, the monster seeks access to what Spivak calls "an enlightened universal secular, rather than a European Christian, history, written from the point of view of a narrator 'from below'" (257). This is going a step further than Rhys's recording of the exclusion of the native subject from the hegemonic discourses. It is a measure of Shelley's achievement both that she seeks a non-hegemonic discourse that *might* accommodate the subaltern -- a history "from below" that would not automatically exclude the other -- and that she realises the impossibility of her task: the Ariel figure, Safie, is "the proper recipient of these lessons" (258); the Caliban/monster remains unassimilable -- even his apotheosis as the self-immolating subaltern subject takes place, crucially, *outside* of the text.

The essay thus provides the feminist literary critic with a range of potentially very illuminating critical strategies. The opening section sketches the outlines of a powerfully suggestive contextualised reading of literary texts in relation to the discursive fields which shaped and were shaped by the imperial mission. One could imagine, for example, a reading of *The Story of an African Farm* as a critique of Lyndall's exclusion from the project of soul-making and a calling into question of the axiomatics of imperialism through

the latter's refusal to accede to the ideology of individual self-fulfilment through childbearing and companionate love. The closing section of "Three Women's Texts" is, as I have argued, useful in providing an accessible example of a certain kind of deconstructive reading, while the analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* illustrates the use of Freudian theory, not as offering a normative metanarrative of the development of a universal subject⁶, but as a tool for examining the relationship between the macropolitics of imperialism and the micropolitics of gender and identity. By implication, it also raises an issue later more explicitly formulated in "The Political Economy of Women as Seen by a Literary Critic" (1989) -- that of the need to investigate the alternative psychobiographies which govern the construction of subjecthood for those outside of Western literary and cultural traditions:

We are used to working with variations on, critiques of, and substitutions for, the narratives of Oedipus and Adam. What narratives produce the signifiers of the subject for other traditions? Always in a confrontation and complicity with the epistemic re-constitution of the subject-in-imperialism, traces of this psychobiography can be found in the indigenous legal tradition, in the scriptures, and of course in myth. . . . However humble the woman or women you are considering, the grandeur of the regulative psychic narrative remains undiminished....In fact, and here I am stepping completely into the realm of probability, I would like to examine if and how these narratives are de-hegemonized and made the site of emergent power in self-and situation-representation of the few female leaders within the Third World proletariat that I have heard of (227).

Jean Rhys can present the psychobiography of her Creole protagonist in order to reveal the violence done to the selfhood of the “domesticated other”; she cannot provide any narrative of coming-to-subjecthood for Christophine, or for Tia, any more than Olive Schreiner (since I have already invoked her) can begin to imagine a psychobiography for the shadowy “others” who haunt the margins of her anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist texts. In the passage quoted above, Spivak issues a daunting but fascinating challenge to “sympathetic” Western feminist theorists.

II.

In the opening chapter of *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler encapsulates feminist resistance to poststructuralism in three frequently asked questions: “If everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is text, what about violence and bodily injury? Does anything *matter* in or for poststructuralism?” (28). Butler is concerned to counter the assumptions which underlie such questions -- the assumption, in particular, that “constructedness and materiality [are] necessarily oppositional notions” (28). She does this in philosophical terms, via a reading of Irigaray, arguing that the material has traditionally been figured as feminine, and that the feminine is inescapably inside patriarchal discourse in the sense that it is its constitutive outside. In an earlier essay, she provides a characteristically incisive account of the effects of this association of the feminine and the material: she argues that masculinity

seeks to safeguard its own disembodied status through identifying women generally with the bodily sphere. Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. If women *are* their bodies (to be distinguished

from “existing” their bodies, which implies living their bodies as projects or bearers of created meanings), if women are only their bodies, if consciousness and freedom are only so many disguised permutations of bodily need and necessity, then women have, in effect, exclusively monopolized the bodily sphere of life. By defining women as “Other”, men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies -- a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally -- and to make their bodies other than themselves. (1987, 133)

To insist on the irreducibility of the sexed female body is to risk playing straight into the hands of this masculine bid for the ultimate power: that of transcendence of the material and hence of mortality itself. At the same time, the physical abuse or exploitation of the female body -- clitoridectomy, rape, prostitution, forced sterilization, excessive childbearing -- is a matter of the utmost political urgency. International feminism, then, needs to find a way of talking about the body which neither reduces the materiality to the discursive nor sees the material as outside of discourse.

I believe that Spivak’s work offers examples of a poststructuralist and feminist reading which uses the “sexed specificity of the female body” (Butler, 1993, 28) to mark the limits of existing discourses of analysis and of resistance, but without finally grounding her reading in a concept of materiality which escapes the discursive. Without implying that there is anything illusory, or “merely” discursive, about women’s pain and the materiality of the body, her readings of the suffering women of Mahasweta Devi’s stories enable a powerful understanding of the construction of that materiality. Of course “reading” here

does not mean only the reading of written texts, but also of social and psycho-sexual ones, as well as of the text which is the potentially interpretable materiality of the body.

My first example will be Spivak's extensive commentary on Devi's story "Stanadayini" or "Breast Giver", a commentary which uses the figure of Jashoda to mark the limits of a number of interpretive and explanatory discourses, but without, I believe, implying that the subaltern body, because it cannot be fully comprehended within our existing discourses, is therefore outside of discourse or unconstructed. This is a Lyotardian gesture towards the unrepresentable, not an attempt to separate constructedness and materiality.

Jashoda is a wetnurse, a "professional mother" (Spivak, 1988a, 222) whose husband, a Brahmin but poor -- caste and class are completely discontinuous in this society -- is accidentally crippled by the son of the wealthy Haldar family. Jashoda becomes wetnurse for the Haldars, her body conceptualised -- by herself and others -- in terms of a tradition of absolute female and maternal self-abnegation:

Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani (226).

But this body is also understood in materialist terms as the means of production: "At night when Kagalicharan started to give her a feel she said: 'Look. I'm going to pull our weight with these. Take good care how you use them'" (228). In order to do her work

as wetnurse (which requires an endless flow of milk) Jashoda, already a mother of three, bears seventeen more children and suckles thirty of the Haldar offspring. Her feckless husband becomes a hanger-on at the temple of Shiva, dedicated in particular to “the Lionseated goddess... the Mother-goddess of Shakti -power” (223), deifying motherhood while his own wife lives motherhood as exploitation but experiences it as fulfilment. Eventually Jashoda’s abused breasts develop cancer, and she dies an appalling death.

Spivak looks at this story through the lenses provided by four different possible theoretical approaches: the author’s own reading of the story, buttressed by the presumed authority of the authorial voice; a Marxist-feminist reading, a reading from within Western liberal feminism and a reading informed by the poststructuralist tenets of contemporary French feminist theory. In each case the chosen discourse proves inadequate to capture fully what Spivak has elsewhere called the “ethical singularity” (1995a, xxiv)⁷ of the gendered subaltern in all the specificity of her constructed materiality. Understanding this becomes, among other things, a guard against the easy appropriation of “third world literature”, a realisation that Western theory can *both* read this literature in potentially illuminating ways and simultaneously be read by it: there is no clear hierarchy in this dialogical relationship.

If the figure of Jashoda cannot be contained by any of these discourses, does this imply that her “sexed specificity” is somehow outside of, prior to, discourse? I would argue that neither Spivak nor Devi allows for such a reading. It is significant, in the light of the issues Butler identifies, that Jashoda is at first unable to “read” the signs of her body’s disintegration. When the eldest daughter-in-law of the Haldar household notices

something alarming about Jashoda's body, the following dialogue takes place:

'Brahmin sister! Why does the top of your left tit look so red? God!
Flaming red!'

'Who knows? It's like a stone pushing inside. Very hard, like a rock.'

'What is it?'

'Who knows? I suckled so many, perhaps that's why?'

In a later gloss on both this story and the Bhuvanewari episode in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak comments that "it is parts of the sexed body -- menstruation, lactation -- that are invested with meaning and yet are not heard and not read" (1995a, xxvii). Similarly, in a discussion of Harriet Fraad's analysis of anorexia, she points out that: "what she is really talking about is the body as a kind of textualized agency that the anorectic is not able to read correctly" and goes on to emphasise "the idea that we are constituted as subjective agents by reading the body's signals right" (1994d, xv). In the case of Jashoda, recognising the body as text does not lead us away from the acknowledgement of "violence and bodily injury"; instead it allows one to see how that textuality and its misreading are the very condition of possibility for physical suffering and exploitation. Far from being the self-knowing subaltern subject, Jashoda is unable to read what one might assume to be the most self-intimating of texts, that of her own body. And this is because she is attempting to read it by way of a discourse of mothering which simply disallows the possibility that nurturing may be synonymous with the abuse of the body or that her breasts may signify death rather than the giving of life. Affective coding⁶ within a particular discourse of Indian motherhood has written her body for her in such a way that other forms of bodily "writing", other material signifiers, become illegible or

indecipherable. Rather than being in opposition to textuality, or outside of it, Jashoda's body is lived as a sort of palimpsest, in which one text overlays, obscures or disallows another. (Before she dies, however, Jashoda does have a moment of insight into the way in which affective coding creates a false relationship between motherhood as chosen identity and the exploitation of the maternal body: "If you suckle you're a mother, all lies" [236]).

If Jashoda is, for the most part, unable to decode the constituting discourses of her own embodiedness, does this imply that a Western observer, outside of the specific ideologies which shape Jashoda's self-understanding, will be able to provide an ideology-free and hence full and undistorted reading of the text of the gendered subaltern body? Spivak has stated unequivocally that "[third world women's] access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion" (1981b, 156), and this is one of the essays in which she explores the limits as well as the explanatory power of "superior theory".

Her opening move is to dispose fairly briskly of Devi's own interpretation of her story: Devi reads her story as a "parable of India after decolonisation"; Spivak in turn interprets this reading, with its reduction of Jashoda to a metonym for the nation, as itself a parable of the effacement of the subaltern by the narrative of nationalism. In her view, Devi is forced to deny the ethical specificity of her own subaltern character, because "if the story of the rise of nationalist resistance to imperialism is to be disclosed coherently, it is the role of the indigenous subaltern that must be strategically excluded" (245). For Spivak, far from embodying the post-colonial nation, as Devi would have her do, the figure of

Jashoda marks its limits. This is an insight which will be more fully developed in Spivak's reading of Devi's later story, "Douloti the Bountiful".

Next, Spivak moves on to an examination of what an orthodox Marxist feminist reading can do to illuminate Jashoda's story. She sums up the "representative generalisation" which might guide such a reading in the following terms: "It is the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the child-bearing period, and not the sex division of labour itself, that forms the material basis for women's subordination in class society" (247).⁹ The point, presumably, is that what feminism brings to Marxist analysis is an awareness of the exploitation of reproduction, since the latter does not produce surplus value and hence provides the basis for a gendered relation of dependency. Spivak points out that Jashoda's situation reverses this logic: through reproduction she supports her husband who, by giving her children, becomes her "means of production". But her control over both her body and her husband as means of production is vitiated by her affective coding as the infinitely exploitable maternal nurturer and wife. The ways in which her body is inscribed in culture completely undermines the theoretically liberatory potential implied by either the reversal of the relations of production defined in the Marxist-feminist quotation or the undermining of the notion that reproductive labour by definition does not produce surplus value. Professional mothering is a culturally specific practice which exceeds the limits of a mode of thought which aspires to universal explanatory power. Spivak makes it clear that her point is not that this exception invalidates or devalues Marxist analysis but that the gendered subaltern cannot be easily recuperated into *any* universalising discourse. What the story reveals is that reversing the sexual division of labour is not necessarily emancipatory or in the interests of justice:

rather, the process of reproduction, even when productive of surplus value, is susceptible to culturally determined idealisation which translates directly into exploitation. Jashoda, “living [her] body as a project, or bearer of created meanings”, rereads the founding assumptions of Marxist feminism in surprising ways.

Liberal feminism proves equally unable to account adequately for Jashoda, and Spivak’s illustration of this provides her with an opportunity to criticise what she calls “homogenizing and reactive critical descriptions of Third World literatures” (253). This involves a lack of attention to class- and caste-specificity in postcoloniality, the creation of an homogenising category -- “Third World Women” -- and a tendency to position all such women in relation to Western feminist concerns with individual emancipation. Assuming Jashoda as an individualist feminist heroine effaces “indigenous class formation under imperialism and its connection to the movement towards women’s social emancipation” (254). As Spivak points out in a much later comment, the figure of Jashoda “is at a distance from the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois female” (1993a, 49). In fact, it is the exploitation of Jashoda’s body that enables the comprador-class women of the Haldar household to “move into a species of reproductive emancipation seemingly outside of patriarchal control” (255). Her suffering is the very condition of possibility of their freedom: an insight which liberal feminism, naming as “third-world woman” the elite women of postcolonial nations and diasporas, helps to obscure.

Finally, Spivak reads “Stanadayini” in relation to French feminist theory -- specifically, in relation to Lacanian notions of *jouissance*. Here she is subjecting to critique one of her

own most useful theoretical insights -- the idea, developed in "French Feminism in an International Frame", that clitoral "excess" can be theorised as the possibility of an entirely different social, material and symbolic order. As so often, her rereading does not invalidate her earlier conclusion, but adds a warning, an awareness of the limits and dangers of an enabling position. Here, almost as a black joke, Spivak reminds us that the excess of pleasure that escapes the reproductive circle is not the only excess the sexed female body can produce: the inscription of Jashoda's body within the text of professional foster-mothering produces another kind of excess altogether -- that of the metastasising cancer-cells.

Finally, though indirectly, Spivak uses Jashoda's story to signal the limitations of Western psychoanalytic theory as a universal narrative. She does this primarily by invoking once again the notion of alternative psychobiographies -- the reminder that "There are many accesses to the mother-child scene" (264). While a psychoanalytic emphasis on the divided subject is helpful in understanding Jashoda's body as what Spivak calls "the *place* of knowledge rather than the instrument of knowing" (260), the precise terms in which Jashoda lives her body as "bearer of created meanings" cannot be understood through reference to an Oedipal narrative, but rather through the narrative of sanctioned suicide which Spivak has examined in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". This narrative itself can only be understood in the context of a polytheism characterised by the ideological use of goddesses and mythic, heroic women as icons of motherhood. Such icons function to "dissimulate women's oppression" (264) by confusing the gaze from above -- the construction of the nurturing subaltern mother as object for exploitation -- with the gaze from below -- worshipful respect for the divine mother. In this context the final lines

of the story become complicated to the point of undecidability: Devi writes: "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone" (240). Earlier she has claimed that "[o]ne must become Jashoda if one suckles the world" (240). Here "Jashoda" stands both for the protagonist of the story and for the mythic mother of Krishna: the ideological confusion between exploitation and worship is clear. But Jashoda's misrecognition of her own exploitation as privilege cannot be simply dismissed as lack of self-knowledge: within the complex dynamics of a regulative narrative of sanctioned suicide, self-sacrifice, even self-destruction, must be recognised simultaneously as the failure of agency inscribed by gender ideology and as "choice". The equation of Jashoda's death with the death of God cannot have either a positive or a negative charge: within this regulative psychobiography choice understood as internalised constraint (Spivak 1993a, 231) is still choice, and the denial of self which is suicide is also an assertion of self. Jashoda's "failure" to read the text of her own body is thus only a comparative failure. She cannot recognise her own victimage within the terms of most of the discourses which are available to Western theorists attempting to understand the material and ideological production of gender and gendered affect. And her exclusion from these sources of "self-knowledge" is a genuine problem. But the denial of the validity of her "reading" of her body as bearer of meaning within the terms of her culturally specific psychobiography is problematic too, since the remedy which offers itself is again what Spivak calls "counter-coercion through the orthodoxy of reason" (1993a, 231). The ending of the story thus marks the site of an aporia, the double-bind already discussed in chapter 4, with the difference that what is at issue here is less the insertion of the subaltern into the

circuits of capital and the political discourse of rights as the “enabling violence” of the rewriting of the sexed subaltern body as bearer of created meanings. Devi’s prose encompasses this aporia in the undecidability of the final sentences of the story which can equally be read as a satiric exposure of the ironic connection between mother-worship and the material exploitation of mothering or as a sympathetic acknowledgment of the validity of Jashoda’s limited deployment of selfhood and agency within a narrative of sanctioned self-destruction, the paradoxical narrative of suicide, self-obliteration, as “arising out of *tatvajnana* or the knowledge of the “it”-ness of the subject”.¹⁰ The difficult task of respecting the subaltern’s access to the created meanings of her body as text while simultaneously critiquing the ideological construction of those meanings gives rise to the fundamental ambiguity of the story’s ending.

“Woman in Difference” (1990), Spivak’s analysis of Devi’s story “Douloti the Bountiful”, picks up some of the issues raised in her discussion of “Stanadayini” but inflects them with a more overt emphasis on the concerns that have characterised much of her work in the nineties: in particular the complex relationship between gender oppression and struggles for subject status and access to civil rights within the neo-colonial state and in the context of the debt-bondage engendered by the workings of global capital. So, where the sexed specificity of Jashoda’s inscription as victim of oppression marks the limits of a range of Western theoretical discourses, Douloti’s does the same for the political discourses of individual rights, legislative justice, national unity, development and class-based liberation struggle -- the constitutive discourses of subjecthood (in the political rather than psychoanalytic sense though the distinction is never absolute) in the postcolonial state.

Douloti's story echoes Jashoda's in many respects. She is the beautiful teenaged daughter of Ganori "Crook" Nagesia, a *kamiya* or bonded labourer in the service of Munabar Chandela, the biggest landowner in the vicinity of Nagesia's home village of Seora. When her father is crippled as a result of being forced to pull Chandela's ox-cart, he is unable to continue working to pay off the loan that made him the latter's bondslave. He and his wife are thus not inclined to ask questions when the apparently benevolent Paramanada offers to pay the debt in return for permission to "marry" Douloti. Having purchased her for the price of her father's release from debt Paramanada forces her into prostitution as a "*kamiya-whore*" in his brothel in Madhpura. Not only does she understand herself to have "taken the yoke of Crook's bondslavery on her shoulders" (Devi, 73) but she soon becomes hopelessly burdened by debt herself, since her exploiter "lends" her money for her basic needs and then charges exorbitant interest on this forced loan. Her body is her only means of raising money for this perceived debt. After Paramanada's death his ruthless and venal son forces the *kamiya-whores* to increase the number of clients they service until their bodies are entirely devastated. Finally, too ill to work -- and still in her early twenties -- Douloti is ejected from the brothel and refused treatment at the local hospital. With a body "hollow with tuberculosis" (90) and ravaged by venereal disease she walks as far as the school in Bira village and collapses in the courtyard. In the morning, the schoolmaster, coming out to raise the flag for the celebration of Independence Day finds her body sprawled across the map of India which the students had drawn in the courtyard -- the scandal of bond-slavery and exploited womanhood covering the face of the postcolonial nation.

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the himalayas, here lies *bonded labor* spread-eagled, *kamiya-whore* Douloti Nagesia's

tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

Today, on the fifteenth of *August*, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mahan do now? Douloti is all over India (93).

Spivak uses this grim story to do a number of things: to measure the distance between Douloti's narrative and the Western feminist narrative of the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois subject of rights, to critique unexamined notions of class-struggle and collective consciousness, and to suggest the need for new ways of understanding community and responsibility.

Spivak's commentary makes explicit the ways in which Devi uses the figure of Douloti to call into question the idea of collectivity, whether at the level of family, community or nation-state. This is not because either Spivak or Devi are opposed to the *use* of the idea of collectivity in the interests of resistance: Spivak points out that when Devi lists the multiplicitous and heterogeneous tribal communities there are instances where she "rather unexpectedly uses the Bengali word customarily used for 'society': *shomaj*" (80) -- a word which would be unremarkable if used to describe individual communities but which "undergoes a startling transcoding into a broad collectivity when used in the context of the far-flung *society* of bonded labor" (80/81). The word thus underwrites the desire for the bonded labourer's access to a potentially progressive collectivity. But the figure of Douloti fractures this collectivity and undermines the whole notion of a chain or

hierarchy of collectivities beginning with the family and progressing unproblematically from family through community to nation. Spivak argues that “[m]any readers still hold the implicit evolutionary assumption, sometimes in contradiction with their overt politics, that the true formation of collectivity travels from the family, through society, into the possibility of the ethico-rational abstraction embodied in the nation-state” (81). Douloti, in the specificity of her sexed, gendered and material femaleness, undermines this narrative of progression at all levels.

Spivak has remarked elsewhere that “[w]omen carry internalized the lesson of the exchangeability of the home, the base of identity” (1993a, 252). This is nowhere more starkly evident than in the case of Douloti who is literally exchanged for her father’s debt, an exchange made possible by her internalising of gendered concepts of responsibility and self-sacrifice. It is this gender-specific sense of responsibility for her family -- a responsibility not in itself ethically negative -- that allows for her exploitation and marks her distance from the male victims of the bonded labour system. This difference is revealed in one of the poems that are scattered throughout the story:

These are all Paramanada’s kamiyas

Douloti and Reoti and Somni...

The boss has turned them into land

The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop

They are all Paramananda’s kamiyas.

Where the male bonded labourers work the land, producing resources for “the boss”, the women have become resources, transformed wholly into commodities. And this transformation is made possible by a complex and overdetermined process of the

production of the “meaning” of the sexed female body within the context of the family, of the community and of the nation. Spivak suggests that the logic of debt-bondage in a sense reverses the hierarchy family/community/nation, producing a chain which begins with transnational global capital and moves via national industrial capital to local class-based debt-bondage to patriarchal family structures to woman as property to woman’s body as commodity for “absolute sexual and economic exploitation” (82). Rather than the family being “the first step toward collectivity” (81) it is the site of the last stage of a process of fragmentation beginning at the level of the fracturing of community by colonial and capitalist relations of exploitation. The “meaning” of the sexed female body is thus written within the text of international capitalism. But it is also, as Spivak points out, “the last instance on the chain of affective responsibility”, and changes in relations of exploitation at the level of nation-building are not necessarily the solution to internalised gendering perceived as choice – like Jashoda’s, Douloti’s suffering is structured by gender-specific assumptions about responsibility and sacrifice and this puts her at a considerable distance from struggles that seek to change the economic and political status quo.

The story thus raises a whole cluster of issues. In terms of ethics it suggests the need to rethink responsibility so that it becomes something other than feminine self-abnegation understood as choice. At the same time it offers a nuanced political account of the possibilities and limits of resistance in neocolonial space. Neil Lazarus has pointed out that Spivak’s reading of “Douloti the Bountiful” provides an effective counter to Parry’s claim that Spivak ignores and even suppresses accounts of “native resistance”. He points out that:

For Parry, apparently . . . “native agency” betokens Indian resistance to British colonialism. . . . But the nationalist representation of (anti) colonialism cannot be uncritically affirmed. There is now an abundance of scholarship to suggest that in colonial India, as elsewhere in the colonial world, local struggles and everyday forms of peasant resistance were often entirely divorced from and unassimilable to the “vertical” political concerns of elite anticolonial nationalists (207).

Spivak is not attempting to deny the reality of indigenous resistance nor to underestimate the effectiveness of struggles for national liberation, but to ask the reader to recognise the heterogeneity, stratification and unevenness of that agency and to reveal how constituting the nationalist struggle as homogenous, works, in Lazarus’s words, “to render ‘subaltern’ a variety of forms of self-understanding, social practice and struggle in India – forms that do not articulate themselves in the language and syntax of national consciousness” (208). While agreeing with Lazarus’s reading as a counter to Parry’s charge of denying native agency, I would want to push his argument further and foreground what his account does not – the extent to which, in this story, true subaltern identity-in-difference is structured not by class but by gender.

Certainly, Spivak draws out of Devi’s story the complexity of the varieties of “native agency” in resistance to colonial power and the different extent to which various groups have access to the discourses of national liberation. She focusses on a moment which reveals how far the *kamiyas* are from thinking of themselves as “Indian” and hence in a relation of resistance to the colonial powers. Latiya is giving a speech intended to rouse in his listeners feelings of national pride and identification:

Calls out, give whatever you have into this shawl.

Why sir?

Isn't there a war on?

Where, I don't know.

You will never know, bastard motherfucker. China has come to spoil India's honour.

Yes, yes? But where is China? Where again is India? (87)

Behind the comedy is a very serious concern with the gulf between the ideal of national identity and the reality of exclusion. But class and caste alone are not sufficient to structure a relation of complete subalternity in relation to political resistance. The untouchable, Prasad Mohato, forms a militant splinter-party "at some distance from "the now weakened legacy of Gandhian nationalism" (83), and is joined by Douloti's uncle, Bono Nagesia. Devi's gloss on this event is a simple sentence: "Douloti didn't know this news" (Spivak, 83).

What Devi's story, in Spivak's hands, demonstrates once more is the absolutely relational and contingent nature of subalternity. The male tribal may be in a relation of subalternity to the discourse of religious multiculturalism, by virtue of the refusal to define animism as a religion. The same individual may (or may not) have a degree of access to the discourses of resistance – may in this respect be not subaltern, but simply "the oppressed". In this story the female body marks the outermost limits of any discourse of collective resistance, any talk of undifferentiated "native agency". In Varadharajan's words, the "body of the gendered subaltern"... emerge[s] within or at the edges of master narratives as the sexual differential they seek to suppress. ...the body of woman figures

subalternity because it cannot be accommodated either within the modes-of-production narrative or within the relay race between imperialism and independence" (107/111). This is not to argue for the irreducibility of bodily experience and bodily suffering but to show how that suffering is the product of woman's simultaneous encoding within and exclusion from the discourses of collectivity and resistance.

Devi's portrayal of Douloti, and Spivak's commentary on that portrayal provide an answer to the objection, raised by Annamaria Carusi, that "locating otherness in the same space as the unrepresentable *leads* to the passivity of the other" (1991, 4, my emphasis). One answer to this would of course be that to place something in the space of the unrepresentable is not to deny its reality or effectiveness, but to acknowledge the limits of one's own epistemology. But another would be to point out that passivity sometimes exists and its determinants need to be recognised. Douloti is almost entirely passive, but not because she, or the flesh-and-blood women she represents, have been theorised as such by postcolonial academics. As Spivak shows, Douloti's lack of agency is structured by a combination of her exclusion from, indeed lack of understanding of, any discourse of liberation whatsoever and her internalisation of gendered notions of responsibility. As a tribal she has no access to the law within the neocolonial state engendered by the national liberation movement and other supposedly progressive discourses like that of development not only exclude her but actively dispossess her.¹¹ As a woman she has no access to the alternative liberation movements which hold out some promise for her uncle and his peers. Her family's extreme poverty enmeshes her father in debt-bondage; her gendered understanding of responsibility ensures that she takes over that burden. Carusi's argument is symptomatic of a perfectly reasonable anxiety that academic theory

not be seen to undermine or negate progressive political praxis by calling into question the agency of the oppressed -- an anxiety understandably acute in South Africa at the time the article was written. The case of Douloti, though, is a clear illustration of Bruce Robbins's counter-argument: that, while it has become something of a truism that denial of native agency leads to political defeatism and paralysis, it is less frequently remarked that "as a critical procedure or paradigm, the formulaic recovery of inspirational agency may foster political quiescence" (187) -- if agency is always discernable, despite the mechanisms of silencing and the ideological distortion of self-knowledge, the latter are not, after all, of immediate concern to the left-wing critic and need not be so urgently addressed by the activist. Robbins shrewdly points out that while the discovery of native agency may give an academic political credibility and professional kudos, there is still a need for the "more difficult though less pious procedure of *not* assuming agency to be everywhere present, but trying to explain why it is where it is and why it isn't where it isn't" (187).

Spivak does not, in any case, simply discount Douloti as agent, despite her and Devi's ruthless exposure of why Douloti's agency "isn't where it isn't". If her political agency has been effectively undermined, her ethical agency has not, and paradoxically Spivak acknowledges Douloti and the other *kamiya-whores* as agents in the arena where she has revealed their agency to be most compromised: that of responsibility. Not self-destructive responsibility but responsibility re-read through the experience of mothering as a different way of understanding the political. Spivak's reading of the five texts discussed thus far ranges over an extraordinarily broad field of issues, but they do have one strand in common, a reading and re-reading of reproduction and motherhood.

Spivak foregrounds maternity as a key trope which, depending how it is used, can define woman as “legal object as subject of reproduction” -- transmitter, but not possessor, of the Name of the Father through her role in the re-production of the patriarchal law of legitimacy and inheritance -- or, which, through a deployment of maternity as metaphor, can suggest other ways of conceiving the mother-child relationship and, by extension, the relationship between self and other.

In her discussion of *Jane Eyre*, the significance of motherhood is structured by the discursive field of imperialism as social mission so that it becomes both the arena in which Jane can find fulfillment as individualist feminist heroine and the mark of her exclusion from the field of soul-making – the measure of the distance between masculine subject and woman as the aspirant to subjecthood who, in her exclusion from full access to the cultural mission, affirms the colonial male’s status as *the* subject of culture. In Mary Shelley’s hands, motherhood becomes a figure which troubles and undermines the soul-making/childbearing opposition and thus the secure opposition between man as subject of culture and woman as bearer of culture.¹² In “Stanadayini”, motherhood understood as sacrifice becomes both the site of Jashoda’s exploitation, the macro-text within which she inevitably misreads the micro-text of her own body and, paradoxically, the site of her ethical choice within a narrative of sanctioned suicide largely inaccessible to Western understanding (though the figuring of motherhood as sacrifice is not). But it is in her account of “Douloti the Bountiful” that Spivak first touches on an alternative way of reading motherhood which has far-reaching ethical and political consequences, and which she will explore in depth in “French Feminism Revisited”.

Faced with Douloti's *de facto* exclusion from the discourse of constitutional rights, Spivak concludes that the solution is "not simply electoral education" (88) and turns, rather, to look for an alternative discourse, one which will facilitate thinking the political in a way which does not exclude the subaltern woman -- in fact one to which she may have greater intuitive access than does the elite woman. And, in keeping with the insights offered in the essays discussed in chapter 5, she finds a way in through elite theory. Discussing the mother-child relationship in the context of *kamiya* prostitution, Spivak invokes Simone de Beauvoir's argument that

In the continuum of gestation, birthing and child-rearing, the woman passes over and crosses over her inscription as an example of her species body to the task of producing an intending subject. ...however much the woman may want a child, however much she may bestow an intentionality upon it, she cannot desire *this* child. Beauvoir suggests that the rearing of the child, once it is born, is a chosen commitment, not the essential fulfillment of a woman's being (89).

This passage pulls together a number of the concerns informing the essays discussed so far. It feeds into a general concern with the way in which whatever "excess" the female body produces, that excess is coded as value in terms of a specific socio-sexual economy. Thus *jouissance*, the excess of non-uterine sexuality, is valued (or devalued) in terms of the needs of a uterine social order. In "Stanadayini" the cancer which Jashoda's body produces as excess stands metonymically for the unhealthy way in which her excess -- of maternity, of self-sacrifice -- is exploited. In "Douloti" Spivak argues that "pregnancy as the result of copulation with clients allows the working out of the inscription of the female body in gestation to be economically rather than affectively

coded. ...Yet these women are absolutely committed, in the best sense of *engagement*, to the future of their children" (89/90). In Spivak's understanding, Devi allows the reader "an impossible step, before the coding of value" (90), a moment which can unsettle all the existing ways in which motherhood is understood either within the patriarchal discourses of exploitation or the liberal discourse of reproductive rights. What the de Beauvoir passage offers, in this context, is something similar within Western feminism: a way of thinking maternity which does not code the child as property or motherhood either as self-fulfillment or as the passage of property, but understands the child as "excess" in the ethical sense of "that which exceeds the self".

The importance, for Spivak, of this figuration of motherhood as responsibility to what exceeds the self and the self's fulfilment becomes apparent when the same de Beauvoir passage appears in "French Feminism Revisited", and reading this essay in parallel with "Woman in Difference" both clarifies and supplements the latter's themes. The essay is a "revisiting" in the sense that where "French Feminism in an International Frame" was concerned to alert the reader to the potential misuses of elite feminist theory in attempts to "know" the third world woman, "French Feminism Revisited" finds in the writings of de Beauvoir, Cixous and Irigaray matter which resonates both with specific feminist issues in decolonised nations and with the complex negotiation between, firstly, metropolitan and postcolonial feminists in an international relationship, and, secondly, elite feminist and subaltern woman within the postcolonial nation. Spivak suggests that rethinking motherhood and sexual difference itself in the terms provided by these elite, metropolitan theorists can both offer a counter to patriarchal accounts of female sexuality that define a "proper" femininity as reproductive, and help define and clarify the ethical relationship.

The occasion for the essay arises from a reading of a text by Algerian feminist activist Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas. Characteristically, Spivak does not summarise this text for her readers, or quote extensively from it, but she appears to be focussing on two aspects: Hélie-Lucas's account of the way in which Algerian women are controlled through their inscription into a reproductive order and her comments on the need – only recently acknowledged by herself -- for communication and co-operation between postcolonial and metropolitan feminists. In relation to the first of these aspects, Hélie-Lucas talks about the extent to which Algerian women are defined in relation to childbearing and to which feminist efforts in that country centre around reproductive issues – a husband's right to "repudiate" his wife for being infertile, the attempted control of women's bodies either through refusal of access to contraception or forced sterilisation, the close association of religious with sexual morality, the definition of children as the "property" of the state (7). Spivak acknowledges that these issues are not necessarily the ones which would be considered most urgent by grass-roots Algerian women activists, but feels that this is an area in which French feminism can speak to the postcolonial woman activist not only of her own definition as sexually proper, and sexual conduit for property, but also both of the relationship between the metropolitan feminist and the elite postcolonial feminist (a relationship with an other all too easily appropriated as a self) *and* that between the elite feminist and the subaltern woman (a self or "subject in the narrow sense" all too easily othered). Spivak warns against "too easy ethical exchange" (154) between feminists situated in very different political and cultural contexts, but she also suggests that the elite postcolonial feminist needs both to acknowledge her own inescapable relationship with the metropolitan feminist and to "negotiate with the structure of enabling violence that produced her" (145). This is the other side of the elite

feminist's imperative to recognise the very different selfhood, the ethical singularity, of the subaltern woman.

However unwilling she may be to acknowledge this, part of the historical burden of that "emancipated" postcolonial is to be in a situation of *tu-toi*-ing with the radical feminist in the metropolis. If she wants to turn away from this, to learn to "give woman *to the other woman*" in her own nation state is certainly a way, for it is by no means certain that, by virtue of organizational and social work alone – doing good from above, itself infinitely better than doing nothing – she is in touch with the Algerian gendered subaltern in that inaccessible I-thou (157)

What Spivak draws out of the three French texts that she "places before" the Algerian text is, then, twofold – she finds in these works both a way of thinking childbearing and female sexuality that undermines, rather than reinforces, appropriation, and a series of resonant metaphors for a truly ethical, non-violent, non-appropriative relationship between self and other, a relationship which attempts to negotiate the Scylla and Charybdis of a violent and self-consolidating othering and an equally violent refusal to respect and recognise difference. Such a relationship would demand that one acknowledge one's absolute lack of access to the "mental theatre" and sovereignty in the narrow sense of the other, yet somehow, impossibly, respect that other's selfhood.

Returning to the de Beauvoir passage, Spivak argues that de Beauvoir's account of the female body in gestation and of the mother-child relationship is essentially another account of the ontico-ontological difference. The relationship between pregnant mother

and child cannot be brought within the realm of ontology, since the child cannot be known as itself, as *this* child, this particular being. Yet the mother must take responsibility for the well-being of what she cannot know. This concept can be read in two ways in the context of this both essay and “Woman in Difference”. On the one hand it can be read metaphorically as figuring the relationship between self and other. Spivak comments that de Beauvoir “writes the mother as the situation that cannot situate itself but must take responsibility -- the risk of a relationship in view of the impossibility of relating” (149). This seems to me a moving formulation of the counter-intuitive leap which the metropolitan or the elite postcolonial feminist must make as she seeks to forge a relationship with the subaltern woman whose selfhood is inaccessible to her but whose good she must none the less seek.¹³ But this understanding has immediate and practical political consequences too: equally moving is the footnote in which Spivak draws on her own experience to illustrate the way in which this attitude carries over into a relationship between mother and grown child to enable a liberating moment when the mother transcends tradition in the interests of a child seen as exceeding rather than extending the self. In de Beauvoir's words “The child brings joy only to the woman capable of disinterestedly desiring without reflexion [*retour sur soi*] the happiness of another who seeks to exceed [*dépasser*] her own existence” (149)¹⁴. Spivak writes:

I must here record that my own birth-mother, Sivani Chakravorty, liberated me from an arranged marriage in 1957 (at her own peril, how much I could not then know), understanding responsibility beyond cultural norms, “giving the mother to the other woman” that I would be, using almost the same words, which I reproduce here in translation: “I cannot imagine your future good because it exceeds me” (310, n 16).

Spivak goes on to draw out the implication of de Beauvoir's picture of the mother in ways that are directly relevant to the debates Hélié-Lucas is engaged in. De Beauvoir, she argues, presents the figure of the mother as prepropriative, in species life rather than in species being. In other words, because the relationship between mother and unborn child belongs to the realm of the ontic rather than the ontological it exceeds or eludes the coding of social and cultural laws, norms and values. And, she goes on,

[t]he reproductive rights debate can only begin after the body has been written into the normative and privative discourse of a law predicated on agency. The prepropriative description of gestation and the figure of the Mother as a site of passage *for* the Mother *from* species life to the project of species being (rigorously to be distinguished from the patriarchal view of the person of the mother as a passageway for the child) is irreducible to that discourse (152).

This has implications for the reproductive rights debate and for the need to rethink the relationship between rights and responsibility. As Spivak points out, if the child is seen as part of the species life of the mother, that might seem to support the pro-choice position, while the fact that the child and the child's being are "philosophically inaccessible" (152) to the mother -- that the mother cannot know what the child would "want" -- might equally well be used to support the "pro-life" position. This makes the issue of reproductive rights the site of a genuine ethical aporia, which does not mean that a stand cannot be taken, but that that stand cannot be seen as grounded. This in turn is a safeguard against "the rational abstractions of democracy" being naturalised in such a way that they facilitate the workings of law rather than of justice -- a Derridean distinction that Spivak invokes at the end of this section of the essay. Richard Kearney

defines the difference as follows:

Law, in contrast to justice, can be accounted for in terms of a good rule applied to a particular case. . . . Justice, on the other hand, is incalculable by definition for it entails moments in which the decision between just and unjust cannot be insured by a rule. Justice involves singularity. It concerns the “other as other” in a unique situation, irreducible to principles of duty, rights or objective law (36).

It has taken me a long time to circle back to “Woman in Difference” but it is this justice/law distinction that, I believe, illuminates the full significance of Spivak’s use of De Beauvoir in that essay. Douloti and the other *kamiya*-whores have no access to the processes through which they could achieve the status of subject of rights. Without in any way minimising the importance of the struggle for democratic rights Spivak warns against seeing the “rational abstractions of democracy” as the only route to justice since to do this will, once again, not only exclude the subaltern but occlude that process of exclusion. In emphasising responsibility rather than rights Spivak forces us to attend to the limits of conventional politics and to try to think another sort of politics altogether, a politics which *is* intuitively accessible to the women in this story in a way which it is not to the elite activist in pursuit of rights in the context of the nation state. Two points emerge. Firstly, that it is both possible and necessary to learn from those who are outside the circuits of what we understand as knowledge. To diagnose the political exclusion of the subaltern woman is not to negate her ethical agency, but rather to point to the need to learn from her new ways of understanding justice and responsibility which must supplement any ongoing struggle for access to constitutional rights. This is a move away from ideas of agency posited on the grounds of identity and thus vulnerable to “varieties

of fundamentalism", and towards the relationship between agency and responsibility. In an interview given in 1993, Spivak makes this explicit when she says:

Now, I don't think that agency necessarily follows from identity claims. . . .
. . . the idea of agency comes from accountable reason, that one acts with responsibility, that one has to assume the possibility of intention, one has to assume even the freedom of subjectivity in order to be responsible.
That's where agency is located (Landry and Maclean, 294).

And the second lesson that I find in this reading of de Beauvoir in the context of these two essays is that once again a focus on the decipherable text of the body -- this time in the species life of gestation -- does not lead inwards to the privatising and a-political, or to the ineffable, but outwards to the potential overcoming of oppressive cultural norms.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. For example, in the 1988 interview with *Radical Philosophy* the interviewers make the point that “[y]our introduction to *Grammatology* established you as a person of full professional competence in philosophy and the history of philosophy, yet you repeatedly say you’re a literary critic, not a philosopher. What does this mean?” Spivak replies: “It means that I take disciplinary boundaries very seriously. If you want to do interdisciplinary work, you have to admit that all those years of training in a discipline make a difference. . . . I don’t say that I am *just* a literary critic. I say I *am* a literary critic.” (1990a, 134)

2. Spivak gives as the source of her quotation Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: The “Critique of Pure Reason,” the “Critique of Practical Reason” and Other Ethical Treatises, the “Critique of Judgement”*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn et al. (Chicago: 1952), pp. 328, 326.

3. Laura E Donaldson takes issue with this account of the novel on a number of grounds. Firstly, she argues that “Spivak’s failure to see how the white woman, as well as the ‘native subject’ suffers the ravages of colonialism not only calls her problematic of ‘feminist individualism in the age of imperialism’ into question, but also raises grave questions about any politics of reading that privileges one oppression over another” (21). Secondly, she posits the idea that Jane’s achievement of subjectivity and self-fulfilment is, even at the end of the novel, partial and fractured -- her status as wife and mother is not the “triumph of [her] imperialist and unitary identit[y]” (28). Finally, she objects to the characterisation of Bertha as self-annihilating, reading her suicide as “an act of resistance” (30). These points can be answered in different ways. I would point out that Spivak does note Jane’s gendered exclusion from her cousin’s project of soul-making, and that it is, in fact, necessary to hierarchise forms of oppression within the novel -- the psychic costs of Jane’s passage to wife-and motherhood and her exclusion from masculine forms of self-consolidation cannot be seen as equivalent to Bertha’s total destruction as a human being. The latter’s final self-destruction may be a form of resistance, but it is not one which does her much good. Overall, it seems to me that Donaldson’s reading, while it offers a persuasive account of the development of Jane as a character, misses the point of Spivak’s interpretation, which is concerned less with the content of the novel than with its mechanics. It makes more sense to me to emphasise, as Spivak does herself, that her reading is allegorical, and that for her it is the *structure* of the book which allegorises the constitution of the Western self at the expense of the third world other.

4. Quotation from Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” in *Works*, vol 18, p 130.

5. Quotation from *Frankenstein*. New York, 1965, p 100.

6. Lockett is critical of what she sees as the normative use of psychoanalytic theory in non-Western contexts: she is sceptical of French feminist theorists on the grounds that they “construct their theories on the premise that *all* women’s bodies (and libidos)

operate in the same manner as that defined by the western psychoanalytic systems developed by Freud and Lacan” and argues that “[p]sychoanalysis too seems limited in the South African context, for although it can be used effectively to deconstruct the work of white middle-class women, it cannot be used in the same way with the work of black women since the Freudian oedipal “family romance”, which is the basis of its discourse, is derived from the model of the western nuclear family and cannot be used for the extended family in the third world” (1996, 6,10). These claims could be examined at length; my only point here is to suggest that Spivak’s use of the concept of (differential) regulative psychobiographies avoids these dangers, as does her more philosophical and metaphoric use of psychoanalytic narratives in an essay like “Echo” (in Landry and Maclean).

7. Spivak talks about “establish[ing] ethical singularity *with* the subaltern” (1995a, xxiv, italics mine) which implies a relationship of responsibility, an individual ethical response to a unique subject. But the phrase “ethical singularity” also seems to me useful in describing the impossibility of capturing the figure of the subaltern within any generalising discourse.

8. This is Spivak’s frequently used short-hand phrase for the way in which culture- and gender-specific values are internalised and cathected as emotional reflexes, “natural” affective responses.

9. The quotation is from Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983, p 147.

10. This seems to me quite different from Bertha’s suicide in *Jane Eyre*, though Donaldson wants to read the latter in similar terms. Brontë does not provide Bertha with any such explanatory psychobiography.

11. Mahasweta Devi, in the interview that prefaces *Imaginary Maps*, says of the tribals that:

They do not understand mainstream machination, so although there are safeguarding laws against land-grabbing, tribal land is being sold illegally every day, and usurped by mainstream society all over India, especially in West Bengal. In North Bengal, extensive lands are being converted into tea gardens, fruit orchards. ...All the big dam projects are made to fit the new rich Kulaks. For that the tribals are evicted from their home-land, with no compensation (x/xi).

12. My phrasing here deliberately echoes that used by Dorothy Driver in her seminal essay “‘Woman’ as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise”, work in which she makes creative use of Spivak’s ideas and which I will discuss briefly in my concluding chapter.

13. Of course, given the problem of paleontology discussed in Chapter 5, such a metaphor must be used with caution so that the identification of the subaltern woman with the child or child-like is not literalised.

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. HM Parshley. New York: Vintage, 1952, p 583.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As I argue in the Introduction, Spivak's intellectual trajectory thus far does not consist of a number of discrete phases marked by radical breaks or changes of direction. Rather, her ongoing critical project is characterised by shifts in emphasis brought about by the dialectical relationship between content and method, with new areas of interest being defined by, but also developing further, familiar theoretical paradigms. In my reading of Spivak's work I have focussed in particular on two strands: that concerned with representation and the relationship between self and other, and that which explores the idea of catachresis. In both these lines of thought, continuity as well as development is evident. The critique of identity as essence and of the self-knowing subject which is integral to Spivak's 1980 reading of *To The Lighthouse* provides the theoretical underpinning for her analysis of representation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", eight years later. The emphasis, in the second essay, on the need for the elite researcher to "speak to" the subaltern develops, in Spivak's work in the 1990s, into a dominant concern with the ethical relationship between the privileged Western self and the subaltern other. This, in turn, leads to a stronger focus on the need to respect the subaltern's ethical agency and acknowledge the possibility of "learning from below". And the latter is integrally connected to Spivak's recent meditations on the need to think in new ways about the relationship between law and justice, rights and responsibility. It is in this strand of thought, too, that the utopian aspect of Spivak's work (which I will discuss later in this chapter) is apparent in her awareness the "impossible necessity" of the ethical.

In the second major line of development, Spivak's interest in the catachrestic nature of all language, derived from her reading of Derrida, gradually changes its inflection until, by the early nineties, it is informing two parallel aspects of Spivak's work: her methodological insistence on revisiting and revising her own academic practices, and her political interest in the post-independence nation state, where the insight that "nation" is a catachresis has important political consequences. The two lines of thought intersect in, for example, "French Feminism Revisited", where Spivak's argument about the relationship between the mainstream feminist project of valorising the feminine and the ethical project of recognising the selfhood of the other woman is made by way of the catachrestic nature of the name of "woman".

Recognising the continuities in Spivak's work, however, does not mean denying significant changes of emphasis, or the way in which later essays supplement and retrospectively illuminate earlier analyses. Consider, for example, the way in which an essay like "Woman in Difference" argues that to postulate the subaltern as excluded from the dominant discourses of Western modernity is to point to the limits of those discourses, not to negate either the ethical agency of the subaltern or his/her claims to other forms of knowledge. This spells out, and pushes further, the conclusions implicit in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and in doing so may answer some of the reservations that have been expressed about the latter. The more recent essays develop, rework, modify or clarify the work of earlier periods, but are in no sense a repudiation of it.

I will argue, therefore, that while Spivak's most recent writing introduces invaluable new material, useful and important insights can be gleaned from the whole body of her work,

and found to be applicable to current debates. I will therefore end my dissertation by focussing on three areas of South African academic and political life where I feel that Spivak's key theoretical insights can be applied in illuminating and fruitful ways. These are: firstly, the South African women's movement, with its urgent questions of relationships between privileged and subaltern women and conflicts over representation and authority; secondly, questions of national identity and nation-building, to which Spivak's notions of catachresis and strategic essentialism and her deconstructive approach to the question of origins can be usefully applied; and lastly, institutional issues concerning the teaching of deconstructive theory and the role, within both politics and the University, of utopian thought.

I.

South African feminist academics are already making creative use of Spivak's ideas, adapted to local concerns.¹ Dorothy Driver, in her important essay "'Woman' as sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise" (1988) adapts Spivak's reading of clitoridectomy to a discussion of "excess" women in nineteenth century Britain: women who, like clitoral sexuality itself, "were threatening to become 'ex-centric from the reproductive orbit'" (7). The essay is an account of the discursive strategies through which this threat to the symbolic order was managed, given the complicating factor of race. White women, Driver argues, "were used in a phallic sense, as a mark of difference between white men and black women" (14), but this honorary access to phallic identity needed to be simultaneously affirmed (in order to mark the absolute otherness of black people) and undone (in order to mark the relative otherness of women and reaffirm the man as normative subject of culture). This analysis is closely related to Spivak's reading of

Frankenstein, in which she sees Shelley undermining the soulmaking/childbearing opposition and hence the secure division between man as subject of culture and woman as bearer of culture. Driver's and Spivak's essays are in this respect mutually illuminating, and indicate that Spivak's paradigms can be effectively adapted and applied to local concerns.

In another instance, Wendy Woodward, discussing "settler and subaltern women" contends that:

we need to consider how this subject lives in her body, because it is this body which functions at a point between discursive construction and the old humanist subject; it is this body which functions relationally, spatially and historically. We need to consider how the speaking subject, or the body subject, engages with the cultural body-image imposed on her and theorise the lived body which is individual, social, linguistic" (129).

This is a project very much in keeping with the way in which Spivak's readings of the text of the subaltern body undermines the opposition between constructedness and materiality, and indicates that even critics who do not explicitly mention Spivak in relation to their work may be pursuing projects which cathect with hers. I would add that this is also a project that could incorporate Spivak's warning that the subject can engage with her body in a way that undermines her own subjectivity, as is the case with Jashoda.

However, perhaps the most obvious way in which Spivak's ideas could be invaluable is in clarifying the terms of some of the internecine disagreements which have for some time bedevilled the South African women's movement, especially those involving issues

of representation and authority. There are a number of reasons why, for the past ten years, conflict over representation has been the most divisive and painful issue with which South African feminists have had to grapple. One is the understandable anger of those who have suffered hearing their pain described by those who have not. Another obvious factor is that black women have in large measure been excluded from academic and public forums and feel that to the injury of that exclusion is added the insult of having their voices usurped by those who take their own inclusion for granted. In the post-apartheid dispensation, this has modulated into a concern that those newly able to access the right to public expression should not find themselves pre-empted. Finally, one needs to take cognisance of the importance in South African resistance politics of the ideal of participatory democracy as opposed to the representational democracy of the Westminster model. This tradition, which continues in grass-roots organisations and NGOs, encourages people to value very highly the idea of “speaking for oneself” rather than having someone speak on your behalf.

I have written elsewhere (Arnott, 1996) about the debates about representation that arose at the Women and Gender conference held in Durban in 1991. The issues were not resolved, and erupted once more in the wake of the controversial conference on Women in Africa and Africans in the Diaspora, held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in July of 1992. In an article entitled “Nigerian Gender Conference Revisited” Lumka Funani reopens the question of whether white women academics attending the conference should have been allowed to present papers detailing and analysing the experiences of black women. In concluding that they should not, Funani argues passionately that only someone who has “lived” an experience can adequately represent

that experience, or, indeed, has the right to attempt such a representation. The model of subjectivity which informs her argument is one in which “the person [is] identical with her predicament” (Spivak, 1988a, 254), where being and knowing are one and the subject inhabits a “self-intimating world”². She proceeds by giving a series of examples of the hardships she herself has suffered (implying that these are both fully representative, and fully representable) and concludes: “And a white colleague could claim she has lived such an experience! It is legitimate and justifiable for only black women to protest for what we so broadly and confidently know about our suffering” (1992, 65).

Responding to Funani’s article, white South African academic Fidela Fouché suggests, firstly, that there is an element of “translation” involved in any attempt to understand or share experience and, secondly, that Funani’s vision of communication without representation does not take cognisance of class differences amongst black women (40/41). Funani rejects this latter point with dismissive scorn and anger:

On the question of “*the difficulties of interclass communication*” . . . raised by Fouché, only a white person (especially South African) could have said this. I took time to briefly check the responses of 50 black women across the class line, and they were all condemningly agreeable: *no* black women, especially these days, could have said such a thing. Such a comment is as pathetic as it is comical, they all responded. A prominent academic and world renowned black female author stated: “this is just another white trick and attempt at dividing up black women in particular and the black struggle in general” (1993, 56).

This is as dramatic an example as one could wish for of desire working to obscure interest: the undeniable reality of differential class interests is disguised by what is desired as a politically useful concept of collectivity but functions as an ideology of classless racial solidarity. But Funani's formulations also provide a striking illustration of the rendering transparent of the investigating intellectual which is the inevitable result of the denial of representation. The responses of her fifty subjects are presented as unmediated self-expression: not only is the role of desire (for companionship, for political allies) in producing those responses ignored completely, so is the role of the interviewer in potentially shaping the responses: the form in which the question was put, the context in which it was asked, the relation of power between interlocutor and interviewee. "Such a statement is as pathetic as it is comical, they all responded". Since they cannot "all" have used the identical words, it is unarguable here that the phrasing is Funani's, and that, masquerading as the absent non-representer, she is in fact mediating heavily, to the point of usurping her subjects' voices to convey her own message.

Much of Spivak's work can serve as a sophisticated corrective to the assumptions governing Funani's response. A particularly clear and concrete example can be found in the discussion of the figure of the *devadasi* or temple-dancer which forms part of Spivak's 1991 essay "Once Again a Leap into the Postcolonial Banal". The context is Spivak's reading of RK Narayan's novel *The Guide*, in which the central female character, Rosie, is transformed by her lover into "Miss Nalini", a temple-dancer (or, more accurately, a performer of temple-dances, since the class and cultural context in which she performs is utterly removed from that of the original dancers). If Rosie, by virtue of her class, cannot be a "representative" *devadasi*, Spivak goes on to make it plain that

there can be no such representative figure, since the temple dancers are irreducibly heterogeneous, divided by language barriers and by the differential structures of the various temple communities, each operated by “a gender hierarchy that mixes ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in its unique blend” (149). This does not mean that it is not at times strategically necessary to think these women as a collective in the interests of social justice: heterogeneity must never be used as alibi for the non-delivery of constitutional promises:

These are subaltern women, unorganized pre-capitalist labor, and it is not yet possible to think of them as an *Indian* collective, although the Indian constitution appropriately thinks of them collectively in terms of redress, a redress that has never been fully implemented in the individual States (149).

But strategically thinking a collective within the specific context of access to constitutionality is very different from obscuring class difference in the perceived interests of that collectivity. Spivak illuminates this point through her demonstration of the way in which the whole significance of the temple dance changes with its appropriation by the elite subject. As subalterns, the temple dancers are subject to prostitution. Spivak quotes a well known text on the subject, Frédérique Marglin’s *Wives of the God-King* (1985), and notes Marglin’s bland acceptance, enabled by cultural relativism, of this abusive practice. Here is Marglin’s account:

[T]he woman palace servant (*dei*) told me that her mother answered her query [about menstruation rituals] . . . in the following way: . . . “God has taken shelter” (in you). . . . “You have married and you’ll do the work of the

god . . .” The “work of the god” and the “shelter of the god” she said referred to the fact that from that time on she would start her rituals in the palace and would become the concubine of the king (150).³

For an elite woman like Narayan’s university-educated Rosie, however, temple dancing could be a route to social mobility and entrepreneurial success and take on a potentially resistant and even progressive aspect. Spivak notes that “[t]he transmogrification of female dance from male-dependent prostitution to emancipated performance is not unconnected to resistant mimicry on the part of the indigenous colonial elite” (150). As a result, the investigator who ignores class and caste divisions and thinks these women as a collective is in danger of portraying temple dancing in a way which conceals and so helps to perpetuate the exploitation and abuse of the subaltern *devadasi*.

And if her native informant happens to be a woman from the emancipated bourgeoisie -- the work of whose uneven emancipation was undertaken elsewhere by the slow acculturation of imperialism -- if this informant happens to be a careful student of the dance form, learning the entire social ritual as ritual reverently museumized in an otherwise postmodern existence, the dance seems directly expressive of female resistance in its very choreography. The result is Cultural Studies as alibi (151).

The feminist intellectual who, like Funani, dreams a classless collective of “Indian” or “black” women runs the risk of helping to perpetuate through concealment the exploitation of the very women she wants to claim as her bond-sisters in suffering: a result, I am sure, very far from what she intends or envisages.

To return, however, to the issue of the right to speak. Given the degree of anger which informs responses such as Funani's, it would not be surprising if South African feminist academics in positions of privilege simply took refuge in silence. Certainly it is not surprising that Fouché, comprehensively othered, and accused of racism, naïveté and complicity with the apartheid regime, makes no attempt to reply to Funani. There is in any case within her article one formulation which places her closer to Funani's position than she might wish by suggesting a symptomatic desire to "let the oppressed speak for themselves" -- to reduce the role of the academic to one of a facilitator, rather than a mediator. This is her description of the role of white women like Helen Joseph, Barbara Schreiner or Jean Fairbairn who, she claims, have in transmitting the testimonies of the oppressed, "often act[ed] as the mouthpieces of black women". This wording elides the element of substitution involved in that transmission and makes the white academics seem nothing but neutral instruments for the undistorted reproduction of the voice of the other. Paradoxically, Funani, while resenting Fouché's reference to these women, seems to accept that it is possible to abrogate privilege and, by an act of political will, do away with the obstacles to representation that in all other instances strike her as insuperable:

To quote the names of cherished women such as Helen Joseph and Jackie Cock, for example (who have by the way, renounced their "whiteness" and its associate privileges so publicly that some were even harassed and jailed as a result) within this context is rather mischievous and downright irresponsible (1993, 55).

But privilege cannot simply be "renounced" and it is impossible to facilitate without mediating. It is true that one of Spivak's most famous formulations is her exhortation to

Western or Westernised feminists to “learn that their privilege is their loss” (287). But unlearning privilege, realising both the limitations of Western epistemes and the extreme difficulty of access to the epistemes which construct the selfhood of the subaltern woman, is very different from attempts to refuse or deny privilege. Spivak makes it plain in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that attempts to abrogate privilege and become merely neutral conduits through which the experience and desires of the oppressed can travel are problematic and contribute to, rather than militate against, the silencing of the subaltern. She shows that a refusal of institutionally structured privilege is not merely an empty gesture, but actively works in the interests of ideology: the appearance of neutrality once again concealing, and thus helping to perpetuate, the reality of differential class interests.

The produced “transparency” [of the representing intellectual] 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.” One responsibility of the critic might be to read and write so that the impossibility of such interested refusals of the institutional privileges of power bestowed on the subject is taken seriously (280).

Drawing attention to the problems attendant upon Funani’s argument is not, or not intended to be, an instance of “blaming the victim”: the logic of her position is one produced with ruthless inevitability by the epistemic violence to which she has been subjected (and which, ironically, it helps to render invisible). My point, rather -- one made from within the limits of my own race-and-class structured subject position -- is that Funani’s stance seems to offer the white South African academic only two (contradictory)

alternatives: either accept that difference is absolute and representation across difference impossible, or obliterate difference by an act of will, making representation unproblematic (or imperceptible). Spivak would certainly not endorse either option, since both in fact exacerbate rather than solve the problems of representation. The first renders transparent the element of *vertretung* involved in any act of self-portrayal (the other must not be spoken for, but can, in an ideology-transcendent way, speak for herself) while the second renders transparent the mediating intellectual (the other *is* speaking for herself, I am simply transmitting her voice). Paradoxically, what seem to be opposing options turn out to be complicit with one another in the surreptitious production of a sovereign and ideology-transcendent subject and the disguising of the relationship between desire and the misrecognition of interests.

At the end of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak implicitly offers a way out of these dangerous alternatives. She does this through her introduction of the anecdote concerning the suicide of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri. Bhuvanewari's attempt was to speak out of the ideologically inscribed space available to her, and it is not sameness but difference that allows the mechanics of her silencing to be rendered visible. Spivak -- the privileged postcolonial intellectual -- is able at least to produce a text from the actions of the silenced subaltern woman: her scholarship and her theoretical position allow her to read Bhuvanewari's suicide as "an unemphatic, ad-hoc rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide" (308), while the women who might be expected to be closest to Bhuvanewari in terms of shared experience (and thus best qualified to represent her) mishear her completely, claiming that "it was a case of illicit love" (308). This is not a case of subaltern understanding being "*corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened

compassion" (1988a, 135). Spivak is not usurping Bhuvanewari's erased voice or claiming to rediscover it, nor is she blaming Bhuvanewari's family for their normative view of feminine motives and potentialities. But it is, paradoxically, her own *difference* from Bhuvanewari that allows her to theorize the latter's silencing; to "reinscribe her" and to "analyze and represent her text" (Spivak, 1990a, 57) without disguising or denying that process of representation.

It is my belief that South African feminists have an important lesson to learn from this example of "speaking to" an "historically muted" subject. The desire to "speak for oneself" on the part of formerly silenced people is both understandable and potentially politically productive in its generation of texts and testimonies that are not outside of ideology but nevertheless contain valuable expressions of the subjective experience of oppressed peoples and should be attended to with the utmost respect. In a 1994 interview, Spivak is emphatic that the critique of the sovereign subject and of the authority of experience is not to be misused to silence or dismiss the testimonies of previously silenced subjects:

The whole hierarchical taxonomy of concrete experience which has been regarded as completely valid for so long is exactly what has to be got under. At the same time one cannot use that as a terrorism on the people who were obliged to cathect the place of the other, those whose experiences were not quite "experience" (1994a, 129)

On the other side of the power-divide, the desire to abrogate guilt-producing privilege and merely to enable the unmediated self-expression of the oppressed is equally

understandable and, while extremely risky if unrecognised, is at least an improvement on an arrogant assumption of superior access to the “truth” of other people’s experience. But what we need to accept, with all its attendant difficulties, is that representation is ineluctable -- it will not “wither away” (Spivak, 1988c, 308) -- and that foregrounding and problematising, rather than denying, the process of representation is one of the most important responsibilities facing a women’s movement riven by difference and historically produced anger and guilt.

However, if Spivak allows us to understand difference as potentially enabling a certain sort of representation, she does not thereby provide us with a glib formula for thinking international feminism. As ever, she offers both a tool for analysis and a reminder that the tool is only an instrument of *bricolage*, and must be subjected to persistent critique. The safeguard against any attempt to translate the fact that representation cannot *not* take place into an alibi for a facile and ill-informed global feminism is contained in Spivak’s own reminder of the importance of acknowledging the ontic, accepting that the “everyday” of the other woman is ultimately unknowable. If the ontic is “that which is lived so intimately that it is inaccessible to ontology” (Spivak, 1992b, 15), then every question about experience is a question about the “staging” of that ontic, that everyday. Attention to that *staging* is of profound importance, but always with the proviso that if a person can only “know” her own everyday at a level of apprehension profoundly difficult to articulate, the investigator can, and must, ask questions of that everyday, but cannot enter or hope ever fully to grasp it.

Spivak writes of her interest in and admiration for the Nigerian scholar Ifi Amadiume, but

also admits the limits of her ability to “catch” Amadiume’s everyday, or those of the women she in turn represents:

She then is a woman belonging to the general international class to which I belong. I think I can join her reactive struggle in the name of the colonially messed-up self. But how is her everyday staged? Judging from her mother’s first name . . . she is Christian by birth. How does that contribute, however surreptitiously, to the staging of the inscription that originates her? . . . What is religion as an origin? Is it not always inscribed as a conversion, coercive or willing? What is it to will? How does the animist tangle with the Christian, not as a staged cultural self, but in their at-homeness, as a whole mulch of unorganised pre-comprehensions? I can’t catch her there (10).

Spivak can ask these questions, but not (in a characteristic Derridean phrase) “venture up to the perilous necessity of actually answering [them]” (16). Anthropological research by definition cannot provide answers to questions about “that nebulous unorganised imaginary pre-comprehension”. No amount of sophistication in terms of research methods, no privileged access to resources, can be of help here: privilege can only be recognised as loss. Yet the questions must be asked, because asking the unanswerable question of the ontic is the ultimate safeguard against “recognition through assimilation”, the production of the self-consolidating other. It ensures that the agenda of a global feminism is informed, but not paralysed, by an awareness of its own impossibility, that “the hope of a global feminism flounders, in a space where floundering cannot be distinguished from the most abiding hope” (10). Questions addressed to the everyday

of the other woman are real questions in the sense that "the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer already to have initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently articulated within the very syntax of the question" (Derrida, 1978, 80). No arrogant appropriation of another woman's experience -- experience always understood as "a staging of experience" (9) -- no translation of otherness into the terms used to understand the self, is possible while the question of the ontic remains asked but unanswered. Perhaps if South African feminist academics could assent to the counterintuitive process of sometimes asking questions they know cannot be answered, this might signal a respect for difference and for different "everyday" realities (where that phrase connotes far more than its common-sense meaning) that could go some way towards allaying the understandable fears and resentments informing interventions like Funani's.

Disputes and anxieties connected with issues of representation and authority are, of course, not confined to the women's movement in South Africa: within the academy, a number of historians, for example, are struggling with the implications for their discipline of foregrounding processes of representation and problematising authority.⁴ It is therefore worth citing what is probably Spivak's most direct, intervention in the debate on "who can/should speak?". It is a formulation with which most readers of Spivak are likely to be familiar, but is worth repeating as a concise summary of much of what has been said so far:

...can men theorize feminism, can whites theorize racism, can the bourgeois theorize revolution, and so on. It is when *only* the former groups

theorize that the situation is politically intolerable. . . . The position that only the subaltern can know the subaltern, only women can know women and so on, cannot be held as a theoretical presupposition either, for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity. Whatever the political necessity for holding the position, and whatever the advisability of attempting to “identify” (with) the other as subject in order to know her, knowledge is made possible and sustained by irreducible difference, not identity. What is known is always in excess of knowledge. Knowledge is never adequate to its object (1988a, 253/4).

It must be apparent from the length at which I have developed my examples, that I feel that the greatest contribution that Spivak’s work can make in a South African context is in the arena of struggles around representation and the right to speak of or for oneself and others. The end of the struggle against apartheid has not seen all of the formerly oppressed speaking, but all too often displaced into a new silence. While acknowledging the general advances made since the achievement of the new democratic order, we need to remember the inequalities of power which remain both within the nation and, as Spivak would remind us, in the international division of labour. It is in this regard that Spivak’s work is also relevant to my next area of concern: questions of nation-building and national identity.

II.

In an article published in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* in May 1994, (immediately in the wake of South Africa’s first democratic election) *Guardian* columnist Martin Woollacott

captures something of the problematics of identity in a new nation state founded essentially on a precariously sutured division and disunity. He asks: "what is the basis upon which South Africa can now be a community?" and speculates that a new South African identity will have to be forged out of both the experience and repudiation of oppression and the forgiveness of oppression – in other words, will have to both incorporate and overcome moral and historical differences:

South Africa will have to try to derive its modern identity from the idea that it was founded on a crime -- the crime of western conquest and settlement, followed by the further offence of irresponsibly setting in motion vast population movements, some slave, some semi-slave, some voluntary. Without this past there would be no nation. Without a repudiation of this past, by oppressors and oppressed alike, there can be no future (34)

In the four years since the elections, the real politik of the new nation-state has both revealed the limits of this model, and made clear how important it is to hold on to, and push further, some of the insights which inform Woollacott's arguments. The hopes which Woollacott's piece expresses have been tempered, both by the rise of Africanist identity politics under the banner of the "African Renaissance" and by the easy accommodations of a liberal pluralism which offers no real acknowledgement of the need to change power relations fundamentally. But, on the other hand, the ideal of national identity, for all its pitfalls, occupies at present a surprisingly progressive space in South African political discourse, as a way of resisting conservative ethnic identity politics on the one hand, and conservative internationalist free-market ideology on the other.⁵

Spivak's adaptation and deployment of the concepts of catachresis and the *pharmakon* and of the thematics of undecidability are extremely helpful in negotiating this slippery terrain. The trope of catachresis enables one to think the nation as simultaneously necessary and dangerous; as "real" and as a construct; as immensely powerful and as founded upon thin air. Seen as another example of the *pharmakon*, the nation is at once the "medicine" of access to constitutional rights and legislative justice and the "poison" of a discourse which functions to obscure differential interests, asymmetrical relations to those rights structured by gender or subalternity, and the production of a homogenised, abstract subject of rights which disguises those asymmetrical relations. And a deconstructive approach allows one to keep intact the critique of an essentialist national identity and to acknowledge the enabling power of the staging of national origins. I will give one extended illustration of the last of these points.

In "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies" Spivak cites Derrida's essay "Declarations of Independence," which identifies the originary moment of undecidability which both enables and undercuts the whole notion of citizenship, or the national subject of rights. Discussing the American Declaration of Independence, Derrida points out that the legitimacy of the declaration depends on it speaking for "the American people" whom it, in a sense, creates or designates. They have no "authority" until the declaration gives it to them, yet the validity of the declaration depends on its speaking in the name of, and on the authority of, a "people" which it itself brings into being and authorises. It is this "indispensable confusion" that both "guarantees the identity of the national agent [and] produces the national agent *as such* who is also the guarantor of the guarantee... . Undecidability secures the agent's ability to decide as a free national

agent" (1993, 267). Paradoxically, then, undecidability can be seen to enable, rather than destroy, agency and identity.

But Spivak argues that this necessary originary "ruse" must be made visible "[s]o that the possibility of agency is not taken to guarantee the self-proximity of the subject, and national or ethnic *identity* do not become fetishized" (267). We, in South Africa are at a historical juncture at which such a reminder of the sleight of hand that is the creation of the subject of constitutionality may be a salutary one. Spivak goes on to point out that Derrida's insight is of particular importance to the postcolonial world since if the moment of political independence is perceived as *founding*, rather than *enabling*, a new identity, political independence will come to be "seen as an end in itself" and the process of the constitution of national agency, with all its problems and limits, will be effaced. As Spivak reminds us, "some remain outside this constitutive/performative ruse" and that exclusion will remain invisible if that "undecidable and slippery" performative moment is wholly erased rather than placed under erasure.

To recap: given South Africa's particular historical and political circumstances as a very new democracy it is unusually necessary for us, now, to use the discourses of legislative justice, parliamentary democracy, individual rights, citizenship, nationhood and even -- dangerous word in Spivak's vocabulary -- development. But it is as important to remain alert to what these discourses may silence and exclude; alert to the dangers of naturalising and monumentalising the "identities" they produce, and to the existence of differands which demand the making of apparently impossible ethical and political choices. I would argue that one of the lessons we can learn from Spivak's work is that

it is a deconstructive attention to the (necessary) staging of origins allied to the central tenets of a politically responsible postmodern thought -- that thought which allows us to "be witnesses to the unrepresentable" and to find agency in undecidability -- that can give us some of the tools we need to do these things.

III.

The third way in which I see Spivak's work as potentially useful in a South African context is in relation to her capacity for countering some of the most common academic misapprehensions concerning deconstruction, and consequent misconstructions of the relationship between the academy and society. Spivak repeatedly insists upon the importance of her responsibility, as an academic, to her fellow academics and students. Her essay "Responsibility" which deals, in its later sections, with macro-political questions concerning the responsibility of the first world towards the third, opens with an invocation of *academic* responsibility. Quoting Derrida, she asks "[W]hat could be the responsibility...[towards] a consistent discourse which claimed to show that no responsibility could ever be taken without equivocation and without contradiction."⁶ To open an essay with such a question is perhaps already to betray the ideal of academic responsibility in which one was trained" (19). Of course she is being ironic, to the extent that the essay's intention is to critique and transform simplistic notions of what is "academically responsible". In South Africa, as elsewhere, there is a pronounced tendency amongst academics hostile to, or relatively unacquainted with, Derrida's work to parody or misquote its premises in a way that functions to reproduce the most conservative of traditional academic norms. This is academically and politically irresponsible in that it obscures the potential that deconstruction has to help us think in

flexible and non-essentialising ways about issues of obvious and immediate social and ethical import, like those outlined above. Spivak's role in clarifying the nature of deconstructive thought and its uses is thus not at all "academic" in the narrow, or pejorative, sense of the word. Moreover, she explores in the most rigorous way the possibilities of what Leon de Kock defines as that deconstructive thought which "allows for an ethical subject who can recognise the tyrannies of identity, but who nevertheless must work from a basis of identity which is politically defined" (60) while never allowing her reader to forget the warning which deconstruction offers concerning the need to pay attention to the unavoidable finessing of both the origins and the ends of all action.

An example of the sort of misrepresentation that I am concerned with is Cape Town academic Paul Taylor's response to Spivak's TB Davie Memorial lecture at the University of Cape Town.⁷ Taylor's article is both symptomatic and conveniently contains more misconceptions about deconstruction than one could reasonably hope to find collected in a single article. Five of these -- that "logocentrism is a fallacy", that deconstruction claims that meaning is endlessly deferred, that deconstruction collapses the distinction between poetry and philosophy, that "text" for Derrida means verbal text, and that deconstruction equals scepticism -- Spivak disposes of briskly by referring Taylor to the appropriate sources in Derrida's opus.⁸ However, her own work also offers some surprisingly accessible and immediate examples which militate against such misunderstandings. She does not, in replying to Taylor, challenge his concluding point, that "in suggesting that the existing structure is wrong, and needs alteration, he [Derrida] presupposes an impossible vantage point outside it -- the vantage point from which the structure is judged" (168). This may be simply because she is tired of correcting this

particular misapprehension, but it could also be because her work illustrates so frequently and so clearly that deconstructive work is always -- as I have argued in Chapter 3 -- critique from within. Both her deconstructive critique of masculinist deconstruction itself and her simultaneous willingness to work with the tools offered by the very discourse she is challenging inform her argument in "Feminism and Deconstruction".

Another example: claims that deconstruction denies the existence of an external reality are, as I have argued earlier, based on a mistranslation or misunderstanding of Derrida's dictum "*Il n'y a pas de hors texte*", helpfully glossed by Derek Attridge as "there is nothing that completely escapes the properties of textuality" (1992, 102)⁹. Obviously one need look no further than Derrida's own work for clarification of the precise meaning of his aphorism. But because Derrida tends to concentrate on minutely detailed readings of written literary and philosophical texts, a superficial examination of his work may *seem* to be leading the reader ever deeper into a hermetic world of traditional textuality and reinforce, rather than correct, the misunderstanding. Spivak, for all her surface difficulty, provides specific and easily understood examples of the more generalised textuality within which all written, oral or psycho-sexual texts are articulated. Examples are: her reading of clitoral sexuality as a signifier which both takes its meaning from and potentially disrupts a socio-economic text whose master signifier is reproduction; her analysis of the changing legibility or illegibility of the text of the subaltern body; her argument that the "axiomatrics of Imperialism" provide the wider textual fabric out of which written texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are woven.

Finally, Spivak reminds us of the value of the utopian in political thought. Taylor bases his attack on Spivak's "obscurity" on a perceived opposition between "reason" and "rhetoric" and claims that while the use of reason in academic enquiry can, in Kantian terms, "[help] to free us from a sense of dependence on authority... [r]hetoric... is a variety of seduction; by evading our reason, it deprives us of the opportunity for considered assent" (160) and is hence, presumably, a covert form of authoritarianism.¹⁰ John Higgins, in his response to Taylor, undermines the reason/rhetoric (truth/rhetoric) opposition by showing how Hume, Taylor's chosen representative of philosophical rationality, was for almost two centuries widely regarded as a "mere rhetorician" (Higgins, 185). Not only does this make the point that reason and rhetoric are defined by their construction within a specific socio-intellectual paradigm, not by some innate and absolute difference, but Higgins goes on to argue that this apparent dismissal is in fact proof that *as a rhetorician* Hume was regarded as "so intensely threatening that [his work] should never be allowed a place in the university" (186). This implies a recognition that the rhetorical can have a transformative and progressive function very different from the manipulative and hegemonic role assigned to it by Taylor.

Ironically, it is in the work of Spivak herself that a counter to Taylor's view of rhetoric, and an illustration of Higgins's, can be found. The rhetorical in Spivak's work functions to alert her readers to the necessity of continually *trying* to think outside of existing structures and traditions, to think the as-yet unthinkable. This seems to me to be of the utmost value to a society which is -- or ought to be -- concerned not simply with development but with the far more far-reaching task of transformation. "Transformation" has become a banal political buzz-word, but if its full implications are attended to, it is

evident that it signals a need for radically alternative ways of conceptualising social structures: the sort of radical alternative Spivak points to when she uses the idea of a clitoral social order, not as an achievable political goal, but as a conceptual tool for shattering our perception of the uterine social order as natural, unquestionable. From another perspective, allowing space for the utopian within the academy may act as a corrective to the more instrumentalist, “outcomes-based” model which is becoming increasingly influential in South African thinking about the university and the role of tertiary education.

The penultimate paragraph of “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” offers a brilliant example of the use of a utopian rhetoric to point to the *possibility* of ethical alternatives. Drawing to a close her discussion of *Frankenstein*, Spivak writes:

I would now suggest that there is a framing woman in the book who is neither tangential, nor encircled, nor yet encircling. “Mrs Saville,” “excellent Margaret,” “beloved sister,” are her address and kinship inscriptions She is the occasion, though not the protagonist, of the novel. She is the feminine *subject* rather than the female individualist: she is the irreducible *recipient*-function of the letters which constitute *Frankenstein*. . . . Here the reader must read with Margaret Saville in the crucial sense that she must *intercept* the recipient function, read the letters as recipient, in order for the novel to exist. Margaret Saville does not respond to close the text as frame. The frame is thus simultaneously not a frame, and the monster can step “beyond the text” and be “lost in darkness”. Within the allegory of our reading, the place of both the English lady and the unnameable monster

are left open by this great flawed text. (259).

Spivak is suggesting that Shelley provides the imaginative space for a breaking down of the absolute distinction between the individualist and individualised first world subject and the self-immolating third world other. Like the monster, Margaret Saville is not presented as a sovereign subject with a fixed place within the social text, nor does she provide an individuated correlative for the reader's own subjectivity -- Spivak points out in a footnote to this passage that because of the inevitable "interception" by the reader of the letters, Margaret Saville's status as receiver becomes that of an "empty" subject position rather than a realised subject. "Margaret Saville is not made to appropriate the reader's 'subject' into the signature of her own 'individuality'" (261, n. 28). In this way, she, like the monster, has at least the potential to occupy a position outside of both the texts and the counter-texts of imperialism, and the absolute inevitability of a violent and annihilating relationship between first world self and colonial other is, even if in the most minimal way, called into question. It is indeed "satisfying for a postcolonial reader to consider this a noble resolution for a nineteenth century English novel" (259)

This argument on Spivak's part could be dismissed as mere verbal pyrotechnics, "rhetorical" cleverness without real substance or practical application. Rhetorical it certainly is, but that does not imply "empty" rhetoric. There is a connection between rhetoric and ethics in the sense that rhetoric is potentially the route to new ways of conceptualising "the good", of picturing in language as-yet unimagined ethical relationships. The ending of this essay seems to me a good example of what Spivak refers to elsewhere as reading narrative as "ethical instantiation" ("Echo" in Landry and Maclean, 176, 178). It is a way of allowing narrative and narrative structures to suggest

ethical alternatives that may not yet exist but must be brought into being, even if, in the first instance, “only” at the level of rhetoric. In reminding us of this, Spivak again reminds us that (to return to Butler’s formulation) “cultural fantasies...do ultimately come to constitute new organizations of reality” -- a reminder which helps us resist the paralysis which can result from an overwhelming sense of the unassailable power and stability of existing relations of power, existing modes of social organisation. Even the most utopian of visions, then, is a potential source of agency, a form of *pouvoir/savoir* -- not in the sense that being able to conceive of an alternative translates into being able to bring it about, but in the sense that without being able to think that alternative, we shall *certainly* never be able to struggle for it.

This belief that the function of thought is in part to lead towards the not-yet-thinkable is epitomised by a passage from “Feminism and Deconstruction”, in which Spivak argues that to complete the moves of reversal-displacement is not to complete the project of deconstructive thinking:

To call by the name of man all human reality is move number one: humanism; to substitute the name of woman in that mode is move number two; to put scare-quotes around “woman” is move number three, not a synthesis but a provisional half-solution that always creates problems because it is or is not mistaken for the second move; therefore always looking forward, while making do, toward a fourth move, that never happens but always might (131).

It is that vigilant commitment to what “never happens but always might”, that bearing witness to the (as yet) unrepresentable, which marks Spivak’s alignment with the best

possibilities of a progressive postmodern thought, and makes her work so relevant in a country still struggling to bring into being new relationships, new practices, and new ways of thinking about justice, ethics and responsibilities.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. This is not to suggest that feminist debates are the only area in which Spivak's work is being used by local academics. On my own campus, Spivak's ideas have in several instances been well-received, and applied in a number of disciplines. In Theological Studies, Gerald West has adapted Spivak's formulation "speaking to" the subaltern to the project of understanding readings of the Bible that come from members of "poor and marginalised" squatter communities (25) in a way which does not posit the reader as self-knowing subject nor usurp his or her voice. Citing my earlier work on Spivak as one of the starting points of his own thinking, West argues that work with non-elite readers of the Bible "requires that biblical scholars remain constantly alert to, and interrogative of, our own positionality and that of our discourse partners, so as to ensure that the mediating process of representation remains visible" (25). Spivak's work in the field of pedagogy has also received some attention: in a 1995 conference paper, Anna von Veh looks at the issue of pedagogic authority through the lens provided by Spivak's account of catachresis, which, she claims, "allows one to see that concepts such as dialogue, voice, democracy and the canon, cannot work for an unexamined good, but that they can, nevertheless, be used" (237). Her analysis is also informed by Spivak's emphasis on the need to acknowledge complicity rather than declare opposition when examining one's own relationship as a teacher with "the authority of the institution" (236).

2. I borrow this neat formulation from Jenny de Reuck.

3. Frédérique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1985, pp 67 and 73.

4. To give an example: in a 1996 University lecture, delivered at the University of Natal, John Laband meditated on the writing of his most recent book on Zulu history, *Rope of Sand*, and expressed his anxiety that from the standpoint of "modern theory" he could be judged, as a white man, to have neither the right nor the ability to write about the history of the Zulu people:

After all, here again was a non-Zulu, in Michel Foucault's terms, using his power as an academic to determine what counted as knowledge or acceptable discourse. I asked myself, was I falling yet again into the trap exposed by that celebrated postcolonialist, Edward Said, of creating an historical narrative that perpetuated Eurocentric stereotypes of another unfortunate colonial people who were never permitted to speak for themselves; a narrative, in other words, that was incapable of viewing them objectively and served only to prolong Western dominance? In other words, as Michel de Certeau would have believed, was I committing, in writing this book, an act of oppression against the very people I was attempting to describe? (My transcription).

Spivak's argument concerning both the impossibility of avoiding representation and the need to make its processes visible, should go some way to allaying this sort of anxiety.

5. At present much of the critique of the pluralist nation state is coming either from residual ethnic nationalisms or from the centre-right of mainstream politics (it is Democratic Party pamphlets that have recently been bewailing “the demise of the rainbow nation, and this is the party most clearly allied with and sympathetic to the forces of international capitalism). Against both these positions, the Left, and in particular the South African Communist Party, urges the need to recognise the importance of a sense of common identity in promoting respect for the constitution – one of the world’s most progressive – and enabling access to rights and distribution of resources at national level. See Susan Mathieson and David Attwell, “Between Ethnicity and Nationhood”, pp 122/123 for an account of the relationship between ethnic nationalism and critiques of the multicultural state.
6. Jacques Derrida, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’ “, in David Wood, ed., *Derrida: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, 9.
7. The issue of *Pretexts* which contains the Taylor piece also contains a revised version of Spivak’s lecture. Readers are thus likely to encounter both pieces, and John Higgins’s reply to Taylor, at the same time. This makes Taylor’s article, slight in itself, part of a more substantial debate.
8. Spivak’s revised version of the text of her lecture -- “Academic Freedom” (1995) -- includes her response to Taylor’s comments on the lecture itself. For her refutation of the specific misconceptions concerning deconstruction outlined above, see pp 146/147 and notes 63-69.
9. Spivak’s own translation of the phrase -- “*There is nothing outside of the text*” (Derrida 1976, 158) -- is the one most readers are familiar with, and, taken too literally, seems to support the misreading “there is no apprehensible reality outside of language”. She does, however, offer the alternative translation “there is no outside-text”, which, carefully read, might have clarified Derrida’s meaning. However, if Spivak’s translation may have failed to foresee the misunderstandings it could encourage, her own work offers many examples of the meaning and validity of Derrida’s *mot*.
10. Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller rely on the same opposition, slightly differently formulated, when they attack Spivak’s revisionist reading of the *Prelude* on the grounds that her argument “would be better served by a greater degree of philosophical -- as opposed to rhetorical -- cogency than is apparent in her article (39). In his reply to their article, Ian Saunders points out that the employment of this distinction between the “properly philosophical” and the rhetorical is ironic in the light of the fact that deconstructive “textual practice...continually seeks to undo philosophy’s claim to be ‘proper’, its claim to operate in a privileged mode beyond the indirections of the rhetorical or the demands of opportunist desire” (42).

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(Note: I obtained copies of Spivak 1994g and 1995i too late to incorporate into my argument.)

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