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## **Authorizing Gender and Development: "Third World Women," Native Informants, and Speaking Nearby**

**Cynthia A. Wood**

### **ABSTRACT**

Postmodern and postcolonial feminist theories applied to development have opposed universalizing and essentializing notions of a homogeneous "third world woman" posited as in need of saving by first world experts. Deconstructing development requires a recognition of diverse experiences, which suggests the need to listen to the previously "silenced voices" of third world women. My paper will consider whether this can be done without relying on an equally problematic demand for authenticity from "native informants," and explores the implications of such an analysis for a postcolonial feminist approach to (post)development.



ESSAYS

**Authorizing Gender and Development**  
“Third World Women,” Native Informants,  
and Speaking Nearby

*Cynthia A. Wood*

Postmodern and postcolonial feminist theories applied to development have opposed universalizing and essentializing notions of a homogeneous “third world woman” assumed to need saving by first world experts (see Marchand and Parpart 1995). From this perspective, alternative constructions of development require that we recognize the diverse experiences and “listen to the previously silenced voices” of third world women (Chowdhry 1995, 39). But can this be done without relying on demands for authenticity from “native informants” that maintain existing structures of power and approaches to development?

“Development” as a discourse is revealed in the theoretical commentary of both academics and “practitioners,” as well as in the application and evaluation of policy by international agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>1</sup> In general, this discourse is one that operates among professionals working “in” development rather than among people designated as the recipients or beneficiaries of policy. It is difficult, therefore, to avoid confronting the problematics of power in development discourse. To escape this problematic, recent critics (themselves academics and practitioners of development) attempt to better incorporate the voices of development’s subjects, particularly poor third world women. In doing so, these critics acknowledge and seek to counter the power of colonial and postcolonial representations of “the native” to shape development (further)

into a medium of domination. Speaking with and listening to previously silenced women, they suggest, will transform development into something good.

I argue below that, though motivated by the desire to limit or eliminate the complicity of development in postcolonial forms of domination, the new demand to give voice to the voiceless third world woman authorizes, in new and equally problematic ways, the theory and practice of gender and development as a field. Further, listening to “previously silenced voices” in postcolonial contexts is certainly more vexed a process than development critics envision it to be and may be impossible in the way that they mean. To listen in ways that are not themselves complicit with the operation of postcolonial domination may require more than these critics are willing or able to give, on terms and with results that will not satisfy. Either way, the problematics of power in development are not eluded. Ultimately, the founding definitions of development may forestall that possibility.

### 1. Universal Victim/Universal Savior

Representations of women in development theory and practice have been a particular focus of postcolonial and postmodern feminist critics.<sup>2</sup> According to Chandra Mohanty, much of the literature on women and development “discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world” and thereby “produces the image of an ‘average third world woman’” who is the object of development (Mohanty 1991, 53, 56; see also Ong 1988). This homogenization is problematic in itself; without acknowledgment of women’s diversity, universal principles of gender and development can be and are applied uncritically across region, culture, class, and ethnicity.

Beyond the problem of homogenization, however, is the one of how women are homogenized. The average third world woman defined in the women and development literature, Mohanty argues, has very specific attributes that are presented as essential to her character: she is ignorant, irrational, poor, uneducated, traditional, passive, and sexually oppressed (see Mohanty 1991, 56, 72). So defined, the third world woman cannot be anything but a victim—of a similarly homogenized third world man, of universal sexism, of globalization, and of history.

The essentialist characterization of the third-world-woman-as-victim serves simultaneously to define the first world woman as liberated, rational, and competent (Mohanty 1991, 56). In the context of development theory and practice, first world women appear as academic specialists on

gender and development or as development practitioners at international agencies and NGOs. Mohanty suggests that the third world woman is constructed as essentially “other” to a similarly essentialized and homogenized first world woman. As Aihwa Ong (1988, 85, 87) points out, since “non-western women are what we are not,” the passive and ignorant figure of the third world woman points to the cultural and intellectual superiority of the first world development expert.

Construction of the third world woman as Other and victim thus functions to authorize the role of the first world academic and development practitioner as her savior. Since the third world woman cannot save herself from the forces that oppress her, the development expert must save her. Because the third world woman is irrational, ignorant, and uneducated, it is not only unnecessary for the development expert to consult her about the process of development, it would be a mistake to do so. As she is “identical and interchangeable” (Ong 1988, 85) with every other third world woman in the ways that matter for development, knowing one woman, what she needs, and how to fulfill those needs, is sufficient for the development expert to know and develop all other third world women.

These representations of third world women in the field of gender and development supplement what Anna Tsing (1993, 172) describes as the “invocation of the narrative of progress and development” to justify why and how development is “done,” particularly to women. The power of such representations cannot be overstated. Between 1967 and 1996, the World Bank alone either implemented or approved eight hundred projects with some “gender-related action,” and this is in addition to “the gender content of selected sector work” (Murphy 1995, xi, 1; 1997, 1). To the degree that the ideology of “third-world-woman-as-victim” dominates development discourse, it enacts the romantic (post)colonial drama, as Gayatri Spivak (1999, 284) suggests, of “white [wo]men saving brown women from brown men.”

## 2. Authorizing Voices

Calls for autonomous, democratic development policies empowering women and emphasizing the variety of their experiences preceded Mohanty’s critique of representations of third world women in the gender and development literature (e.g., Sen and Grown 1987, 18-19). However, academics and development practitioners exploring the implications of postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist theories are particularly preoccupied with the deconstruction of development discourse based on

homogenizing visions of third-world-women-as-victims and first-world-women-as-experts (Marchand and Parpart 1995, 17). Combined with a general rejection of top-down approaches to development, these criticisms have led to widespread acknowledgment in development circles of third world women's diversity, their privileged knowledge of the circumstances facing them, and their right and ability to work for changes they perceive to be necessary. The transformations of development theory and practice required by these acknowledgments are seemingly distilled in the demand that academics and practitioners must listen to the previously silenced voices of third world women.

Marianne Marchand argues, for example, that scholarly analyses of women's movements in Latin America confirm Mohanty's perspective by establishing a hierarchized dichotomy between "modern" first world feminists and Latin American women who are traditional even in their activism. In order to challenge the dominance of first world women in development theory and policy, she contends that we must "create discursive spaces which will allow the voices of Latin American and other Third World women to be heard" (Marchand 1995, 64–65). In particular, she suggests that life histories in the form of testimonies such as Elvia Alvarado's in *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo*, Señora Aurora's in *Por amor y coraje*, and Rigoberta Menchú's in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* are one way (probably the only way) that "Third World women with little formal education can actively participate in the production of knowledge about Gender and Development" (58, 71). These testimonies reveal "a goldmine of information, ideas, and knowledge" about such issues (70).

Other forms of testimonial are implied by the need to listen to the silenced voices of third world women in new iterations of development. The most obvious is to ask women what they think and to allow their answers to dominate the creation and implementation of policy. This approach, critics suggest, would make women "participants in, rather than recipients of, the development process" (Chowdhry 1995, 39). The demand that development reconstitute itself on the basis of hearing what third world women have to say thus represents an attempt to evade problematic structures of power and authority that permeate its contemporary theory and practice.

But is such a project possible? If possible, does it do what critics of development desire when they declare that we must "listen to the previously silenced voices of third world women"? There are reasons why voices are silenced or cannot be heard. Asking questions and listening to answers always occur in historical and political contexts that shape (and

may determine) the encounter. The theory and practice of “development,” in particular, is a postcolonial endeavor.<sup>3</sup> Postcolonial theory, especially its feminist and poststructuralist varieties, suggests that listening to the silenced voices of third world women for the purpose of development is a project fraught with difficulties that may be impossible to resolve.

To get at these difficulties, let’s consider some possible responses to questions posed by the development practitioner. What if the unsilenced third world woman desires a McDonald’s on her street corner? What if she is obnoxious and selfish, and so wants what is best for her and hers, even (or especially) if it hurts others in her community? What if she tells you what you want to hear, or what she thinks you want to hear, because that is the way to survive? What if she says she doesn’t want you around, and really means it? What if she is just disagreeable and rude? The dissonance of these possibilities reveals the implicit expectations behind the new need to listen. In fact, we know what the answer is supposed to be, what our “listening” should reveal.

The result of listening to “previously silenced voices” in this context is to replace the vision of third-world-woman-as-victim with the no less essentialist vision of third-world-woman-as-authentic-heroine, a woman who is close to the earth, self-aware, self-critical, nurturing of culture, community, and family. This vision has been lurking on the edges of the gender and development literature for some time, of course. Gita Sen and Caren Grown dedicate their book *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives* (1987) to “the poor and oppressed women of the world whose anonymous struggles are the building blocks of a new society” and suggest that “when we start from the perspective of poor third world women, we give a much needed reorientation to development analysis” (18). Other empowerment approaches, such as the ecofeminism of Vandana Shiva, “have a tendency to lapse into a romantic, essentializing vision . . . in their effort to valorize poor Third World women” (Chowdhry 1995, 38; see also Agarwal 1992).

Postmodern and postcolonial approaches to gender and development may also participate in the creation of this romantic vision, but more subtly. In general, this literature asserts the validity and importance of arguments that the theory and practice of development are based on (neo)colonial representations of third world women, then insist on a rejection of these stereotypes and an acknowledgment of women’s diversity. However, so much insistence that the view of third world women as traditional, irrational, and uneducated is unfounded implies that the opposite is true.

This is reinforced when the only examples of “diversity” used to counter essentializing and homogenizing (neo)colonial representations are those of women who are articulate, political, and active, as in Marchand’s discussion of third world women’s testimony. In effect, even as representations based on oppositions between first and third world women are rejected, the hierarchies simultaneously asserted by these oppositions—that traditional, uneducated, and irrational is inferior to active, political, and articulate—are not. This may be framed in terms showing the successes women have had in getting past these (their?) impediments: “*Despite* her lack of education, so-and-so became a leader and organized women to victory in such-and-such a place.”

I am not suggesting that portrayals of third-world-woman-as-victim are accurate. However, in rejecting (neo)colonial representation, as Mohanty does, we must allow not only the possibility that some third world women may actually be traditional, or passive, or irrational, but also that these may not be deficient characteristics. Otherwise, when poor women fail to live up to the heroic standards required of them by this new homogenizing and essentializing vision, as they must, alternative approaches to development (or postdevelopment perspectives that reject development discourse altogether) based on such a vision will founder.<sup>4</sup>

As with any essentialized figure, that of the third-world-woman-as-authentic-heroine denies diversity of experience. However, there is more to it than that. Why has this particular essentialized vision come to replace that of third-world-woman-as-victim? We return to the issue of the authorization of gender and development.

Having dismissed the persona of development expert along with the third-world-woman-as-victim, how is the development academic or practitioner to justify his or her role in a system that requires the imposition of development regardless of the desires of its “beneficiaries”? The academic/practitioner must be invited in. Just as the vision of third-world-woman-as-victim authorized the development “expert” to act for her (because she cannot act for herself; the expert knows better), so does the authentic heroine’s speech to the listening development academic or practitioner authorize development, and in a way that elides (or attempts to elide) the problematics of power surrounding it. As the agent of the third world heroine, acting at her behest and on her behalf, the first world academic/practitioner sheds the role of development expert and becomes “merely” a facilitator.

### 3. Subaltern Speech and Development

When academics and practitioners of development “listen to the previously silenced voices of third world women,” they hope (or think they do) that it will give them direct access to the thoughts, needs, and desires of the people whom development serves, and that this will allow them to escape the postcolonial bind tying together development and the domination of subject peoples. But subaltern speech is of necessity a postcolonial encounter, and postcolonial theory suggests that as such it is highly problematic (see Spivak 1999). In the context of development, this becomes particularly clear.

Missing from calls to listen to previously silenced voices, for example, is any sense of the power of (neo)colonialism to shape the imagination of the colonized, a lesson well taught by Frantz Fanon (1963, 1967). “Scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped,” Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1992, 96) tells us; “the underdeveloped is first and foremost someone who believes in development” (Trinh 1989, 61). Even though many people defined as “underdeveloped” struggle in powerful and imaginative ways against this particular aspect of development discourse, it retains its strength.

Missing also from discussion of this listening is the role of fear and the need to engage in rational survival strategies when faced with the powerful and sometimes conflicting forces of postcolonial domination. For example, Tsing (1993, 106) points out that the Meratus of Indonesia are under “tremendous pressure to show their conformity to state standards of development—or else risk resettlement.” It may be that the visiting Javanese engineer Tsing discusses was attempting to listen to previously silenced voices when he heard the Meratus express “how pleased they were that the central government had signed away their lands to 2,000 Javanese settler families. They always benefited, they said, from the wisdom of the government” (19). Strategy dictates a permanent attitude of caution to those who know all too well the costs of error in encounters with development.

As agents of development, we attempt to set the terms of our encounter with previously silenced women. We decide to whom we will speak and which of the many silenced voices it is important to hear. We do not want to listen to anything unpleasant. It is unlikely that we will try to speak with someone we know is “uncooperative” or unsupportive of development. Implicit in our new project is the demand that the third world woman perform for us, within the limits of our needs and desires. Trinh



(1989, 88) shows the powers of domination underlying this demand, often filtered through the net of “authenticity” as defined by the interlocutor:

Now, i am not only given permission to open up and talk, i am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it. . . . They . . . are in a position to decide what/who is “authentic” and what/who is not. No uprooted person is invited to participate in this “special” wo/man’s issue unless s/he “makes up” her/his mind and paints her/himself thick with authenticity. Eager not to disappoint, i try my best to offer my benefactors and benefactresses what they most anxiously yearn for: the possibility of a difference, yet a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of their beings and makings.

It is true, as Marchand (1995, 68) argues, that third world women can decide whether or not to be interviewed.<sup>5</sup> However, this is a very limited power, especially in the context of development, since it is exactly the person who doesn’t want to talk to us that we don’t want to listen to. Choosing not to speak can become another way of being silenced: “Without other silences . . . my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or more point given to the silencers” (Trinh 1989, 83).

Choosing to speak can be equally problematic in this context. John Beverley (1996, 276) argues that “it would be yet another version of the ‘native informant’ . . . to grant testimonial narrators . . . only the possibility of being witnesses, but not the power to create their own narrative authority and negotiate its conditions of truth and representativity.” Requiring the mediation of “institutionally sanctioned authority . . . dependent on and implicated in colonialism,” such as that of the academic or practitioner of development, “who alone has the power to decide what counts in the narrator’s ‘raw material’ and to turn it into . . . evidence” (Beverley 1993, 97), does not extricate us from complicity in neocolonial domination.<sup>6</sup>

These constraints on the speech of the previously silenced are not random. Our interests are served in encounters that we work hard to control. Marchand (1995, 68) makes clear the purpose of listening to third world women: “Using various testimonies by Latin American women . . . , we can glean some insights into their potential contributions to the field of Gender and Development.” These testimonies are a “goldmine” from which we can extract what we need (70). For those familiar with the history of Latin

America and other colonized sources of raw materials, the metaphor is not lost.

Good intentions do not relieve us of our privilege. Having decided that it is important to listen to third world women and enabled conversation of a sort, we can just as easily decide that it is not important and marginalize talk from our agenda. It would be a great mistake to ignore the power of poor women to resist development. The question at issue here is to what degree an interview allows for such resistance. The subject can manipulate the interview, as Marchand points out. To explore the limitations of these manipulations in the context of the discourse of gender and development, I turn to the “case” of Rigoberta Menchú.

#### 4. What Rigoberta Did for Us/ What Menchú-Stoll Did to Us

In a recent essay, Beverley (1996) considers what it is that Rigoberta Menchú, the indigenous informant portrayed in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, does for us, the first world consumers of *testimonios*. In the context of gender and development, what she does is provide the prototype of the authentic heroine. As the English-language subtitle tells us, Rigoberta is best captured by the phrase “an Indian woman in Guatemala.”<sup>7</sup> “It’s not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people,” she tells us: “My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans” (Menchú 1984, 1). Uneducated, poor, traditional, an oppressed indigenous woman who was illiterate and spoke no Spanish until just a few years before the narration of her testimony, Rigoberta fought the state terror that killed several members of her family to become an activist and spokeswoman for her people, a Nobel laureate in native dress. She achieved all of this by breaking with tradition while still remaining true to the essence of ancient Mayan culture. What better representative of previously silenced third world women could there be? (e.g., see Marchand 1995).

Then comes David Stoll and his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999).<sup>8</sup> Stoll tells us that Menchú was raised in a relatively well-to-do family, that she did not witness the horrific death of her brother Petrocinio, which in any case did not happen as she described, that she both went to school and spoke Spanish long before she reported in her testimony, and that her activism did not begin until after she left Guatemala. The *New York Times* and Menchú eventually confirm at least some of what he says.

What does Stoll mean or do to us? Considered in the light of his book, what does Rigoberta Menchú do to gender and development? Most

immediately the book(s) relieve us of one of our authentic and heroic informants, not because she isn't heroic, but because she isn't authentic. Our Rigoberta was illiterate, didn't speak Spanish, wore native dress. These were signs of her authenticity, which merited her being listened to as one of the previously silenced. The Menchú revealed by Stoll was never poor, was educated, and spoke Spanish. Like the Tasaday (the Stone Age tribe "discovered" in the Philippines in 1971), she is discredited as an informant not by her lack of veracity, but by her failure to pass the test of authenticity (see Tsing 1993, ix–xi).

More dangerous, Stoll's book exposes the possibility that the subaltern can both choose to deceive and succeed in doing so. It is probably not least important that this hurts our feelings. Having wept for Rigoberta, we are angry at being manipulated. But is this the anger of friendship betrayed or of the *patrona* at the *empleada's* forgetting her place? Can it be the former, when she never offered friendship? (We just assumed that we could appropriate it.) If the latter, what is it that Rigoberta the *empleada* has forgotten? She has forgotten that we have control, and assumed it for herself. (So maybe we don't have control.)

Menchú knew that she had to be authentic to be heard, so she "painted herself thick with authenticity." First for Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the anthropologist-interlocutor to whom she told her story, then in her public persona as the native Guatemalan activist, she gave us what we wanted to see and hear. Beverley (1996, 278) suggests that wearing native dress in public contexts is a kind of "performative transvestism," through which Menchú clothes herself in authenticity.

Whether by inauthenticity or deception, Menchú calls into question the authorization of development based on subaltern speech. The "success" of Stoll's book highlights the power of her manipulation of representations of the third world woman as authentic heroine. Since we can't have the good native informant we thought we did, Stoll reminds us that we still have old representations to fall back upon—lying Indians and deceitful women are familiar characters. Menchú's refusal to serve our needs is transformed into a defect of character that doesn't threaten development discourse.

In the context of gender and development, the "previously silenced" third world woman can be allowed to manipulate an interview or conversation only insofar as the balance of power remains with her interlocutors and the encounter serves the needs of development. The threat of control slipping away will result in her dismissal as a proper subject.

### 5. Why Women?

It is possible to discuss demands to give voice to the voiceless in development discourse without attention to gender. I would argue, for example, that the World Bank's new interest in the participatory evaluation of poverty stems, at least in part, from the discursive need for development to be authorized by its "beneficiaries" (see Robb 1999; Narayan et al. 2000).<sup>9</sup> Some of the emerging postdevelopment literature may also inadvertently reproduce this subtle problematic by requiring authentic native informants' testimony to authorize itself (see Rahnema and Bawtree 1997). Even in these instances, however, I would also argue that whether or not women are obviously present, gender is fundamental to the functioning of development (and postdevelopment) as a discourse. It is not coincidental, even if it is overdetermined, that it is the figure of the third world woman which is so frequently called into the service of development (Spivak 1999, 274); Gayatri Spivak (1999, 200) suggests that this figure is a "particularly privileged signifier, as object and mediator."

Why is it especially necessary now, in the era of globalization and transnational capitalism, not only for the subaltern to speak, but also for her to be in so many cases a "third world woman?"<sup>10</sup> Spivak (1999, 223) suggests that there is ideological significance to the "revision of women-in-development (modernization) to gender-and-development (New World Economic Order)." That this transition is tied to a new need to listen to previously silenced voices is equally significant, not least because it "apparently grants the woman free choice as *subject*" (291). The hostility expressed in development circles to the suggestion that the subaltern cannot speak (and also to the revelations of Menchú's "deception"), I take as symptomatic of the importance of this speech to the discourse of development (see Marchand and Parpart 1995). What follows is a series of partial and speculative glances at the questions "Why women?" combined with Spivak's (1999, 309) "What is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks?"

One possible answer is that authorizing development through the figure of the third world woman, whether as victim or as authentic heroine, posits "third world man" as appropriately absent or irredeemable. Strategies to control recalcitrant men and the women who fail to see their own interests and continue to support such men (women always circle the perimeter of male influence, so they can only be their own agents with help from "outside") are therefore justified in the name of development.

Another answer could be that third world women are *available* to be represented, either because they are not interested in representing themselves or because they are not allowed to. So they *must* be represented, à la Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. At least initially, it functioned best for development that this representation be that of victim, because defense of the vulnerable is a tried and true justification for all sorts of behavior, heinous and otherwise. But in that case, why were children not the chosen mediators? Granted that there has been attention to children in the development literature, and granted also that part of the reason for attention to gender has always been women's reproductive and protective role vis-à-vis children; nevertheless it seems necessary to explain why "children and development" is not the hot topic in development circles that gender and development is. More recently, as "development" has become coincidental with neoliberal economics at so many international financial institutions, the importance of individual agency to this ideology requires women's voices to constitute them as rational economic actors.

According to Arturo Escobar (1995, 184), an international climate "fostering the new visibility of women," which was institutionalized in the U.N. Decade on Women, coincided in the early 1980s with "a worsening of the food situation in many countries and declining availability of funding for social services under the impact of the debt crisis. It was thus that the state 'discovered' rural women" only when such a discovery was also functional for development. Escobar argues that development reduces women "to the prosaic status of human resources for boosting food production" and quotes Lourdes Arizpe's insightful comment: "Everybody . . . seems to be nowadays preoccupied about the *campesinas*, but very few people are interested in them" (190–91). A new preoccupation with women's education and success in microenterprise again serves the needs of development in its emphasis on the market (see Summers 1994).

Spivak's (1999, 283–84) commentary on Freud and the hysteric points to another set of answers that lie in the complex and ambiguous need we feel as development agents to be desired by the third world woman:

Sarah Kofman has suggested that the deep ambiguity of Freud's use of women as a scapegoat may be read as a reaction-formation to an initial and continuing desire to give the hysteric a voice, to transform her into the *subject* of hysteria. The masculine-imperialist ideological formation that shaped that desire into "the daughter's seduction" is part of the same formation

that constructs the monolithic “third-world woman.” No contemporary metropolitan investigator is not influenced by this formation. Part of our “unlearning” project is to articulate our participation in this formation—by *measuring* silences, if necessary—into the *object* of investigation. Thus, when confronted with the questions, Can the subaltern speak? and Can the subaltern (as woman) speak? our efforts to give the subaltern a voice in history will be doubly open to the dangers run by Freud’s discourse. It is in acknowledgment of these dangers rather than as a solution to a problem that I put together the sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men” a sentence that runs like a red thread through today’s “gender and development.” My impulse is not unlike the one to be encountered in Freud’s investigation of the sentence “A child is being beaten.”

Spivak’s analysis suggests that third world women only achieve subjectivity in the context of development by actualizing the development academic and practitioner’s desire to be desired. We need brown women (mediating agents we define in homogeneous terms that best satisfy our desires) to need us. This compulsion simultaneously serves development, which needs the third world woman to want to be developed. Ambiguity arises: who is victimizer, who victim, and who mediator in the sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men”? Escobar (1995, 53–54) argues that development “reproduces endlessly the separation between the reformer and those to be reformed,” and therefore relies on a “perpetual recognition and disavowal of difference.” It thus also serves to reproduce the needs of its agents to reenact (perpetually) the satisfaction of their desires through the practice of development. Spivak (1999, 290) points to Derrida’s assertion that every copula is a supplement: third world women become subjects only (and forever) when supplemented by development, which recodes imperialism’s “civilizing mission” as the genteel gender “and” development.

Donna Haraway looks at another system of codes that suggests the function of gender in development discourse. Analyzing *National Geographic* specials on primates, Haraway decodes the meaning of Jane Goodall and other female anthropologists’ communication with the great apes in the context of decolonization and the bomb. Far from being innocent of history, the image of a chimp’s hand reaching out to touch Goodall’s is

replete with it. The white woman, closer to nature and therefore capable of creating conditions receptive to the redeeming touch of the animal, stands as the surrogate for white men, thrown out of the garden by their complicity in colonization and the nuclear age. Apes stand in this story as “(colored) surrogates for all who have been colonized in the name of nature and whose judgment can no longer be repressed” (Haraway 1989, 152). The ape reaches out in a gesture of redemption that necessarily brings white folk back into the garden: “In all of these stories humans from scientific cultures are placed in ‘nature’ in gestures that absolve the reader and viewer of unspoken transgressions, that relieve anxieties of separation and solitary isolation on a threatened planet and for a culture threatened by the consequences of its own history. But the films and articles rigorously exclude the contextualizing politics of decolonization and exploitation of the emergent Third World” (156). Haraway bases her analysis on documentaries from the mid-1970s. Just as the transgressions and stresses related to first world production and consumption of “the third world” have changed since then, so necessarily must the gendered, racially marked and postcolonial codes of redemption. Now, brown women mediate entrance to the garden of modernity, but only when supplemented by development. This vision does much to soothe the privileged. If we allow voices previously silenced to have a voice, and they speak to us, and they ask us to continue to “develop” them, and these voices are either innocent and victimized women or heroic women, both protectors of children and defenders of the hearth against, not us, but brown men (drunkards, abusers, and slackers all), must we not be satisfied? Are not our anxieties about the function of development and our presence in exotic, alien, and transformable terrain put to rest? That women of color can now stand and “speak” in the place of the mute apes is certainly no great advance, when the contextualizing politics of postcolonial globalization, development, and exploitation of the third world are equally disguised.

### **6. Conclusion in a Postcolonial Vein**

I am not, of course, suggesting that we should not speak with poor women of the South. The challenge is to understand the many limitations of this speech.<sup>11</sup> Postcolonial structures of power prevent subaltern women from setting the terms of engagement with development or from declining engagement altogether, and combat other forms of resistance directly, sometimes with force, sometimes with considerable subtlety. Unless these structures are actively resisted, we will continue to enact our part in the

development drama, demanding and receiving authority from authentic native informants.

Nor am I suggesting that pragmatic concerns with policy and material conditions are misplaced. My critique of development as a discourse is strongly motivated by its failures in these areas. However, these failures cannot be understood apart from issues of representation, and development continues to thrive largely because it has succeeded in asserting its character as a neutral and technical science impervious to culture or ideology. At the same time, one implication of poststructuralist approaches to development is that projects to improve access to drinking water, for instance, are not the same everywhere, and that sometimes the costs of bringing water may be too high. Several recent critics have taken up the challenge of evaluating policy and the empirical effects of development in terms that emphasize the local and situated responses of people struggling at “making a living and making it meaningful” (Bebbington 2000, 498; see also Fagan 1999). Ideologies of gender and representations of women are also situated and, I believe, as constitutive of local responses to development as they are of other aspects of development discourse.

A number of postcolonial feminist critics have suggested the importance of being comfortable (or tolerating discomfort) with difference and its ambiguities in attempting to develop new strategies that actively resist privilege from both sides. “I do not intend to speak about,” says Trinh (1992, 96) of *Reassemblage*, her film on Senegal, “just speak near by.” Tsing (1993, xi) describes a similar approach to feminist ethnography in terms of “an alertness.” Ong (1988, 87) points to the “need to keep a respectful distance.” Since we are all enmeshed in ideologies demanding the control or erasure of difference, this is no easy task, as Spivak (1996, 293) argues: “It seems to me that finding the subaltern is not so hard, but actually entering into a responsibility structure with the subaltern, with responses flowing both ways: learning to learn without this quick-fix frenzy of doing good with an implicit assumption of cultural supremacy which is legitimized by unexamined romanticization, that’s the hard part.”

This approach is almost certainly impossible in the context of development, which by definition is not bound simply to understand, but to “help.” Going away is not an option allowed by or for the academics and practitioners dependent on the institutions and ideologies of development. Even a good conversation is not sufficient to make third world women “equal participants in development” (Chowdhry 1995, 39). However, conversation that encourages difference is part of the process of



transforming development into something better or dispensing with it altogether.

### Notes

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1. See Escobar 1995 for an excellent analysis of the rise of development as a discourse.
2. See Schech and Haggis 2000, 85–117, for a sophisticated overview of the history of feminist engagements with development, from Women in Development (WID) through Gender and Development (GAD) and postcolonial and post-structuralist critiques of these approaches. Their presentation of the debate on the political implications of postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist analyses of development (109–13) is particularly interesting and should bring new insight to discussions stimulated by Parpart and Marchand 1995.
3. See Seers 1979, Meier 1984, and Escobar 1995 on the origins of development theory and practice.
4. Dismissing the essentialized character of the third-world-woman-as-victim creates a vacuum in the paradigm if there is no other transformation of how development “works.” Having created a system dependent on a homogeneous third world woman, such a figure is difficult to do without, though it may change character.
5. While acknowledging the validity of criticisms addressing the power of the interviewer in the production of life histories, Marchand asserts that the failure to give attention to the decision to offer a testimony and the power of the interviewee to guide the interview denies subject status to Latin American women. Marchand (1995, 57) also argues that in emphasizing the power of colonial discourses created and perpetuated by Western scholars, Mohanty herself “implicitly denies subject agency” to third world women. This is a difficult trap to avoid in any analysis of development discourse, and Marchand’s point deserves exploration. However, as I argue below, the constraints on agency in the context of such an interview are profound.
6. The first world instigation of speech by “previously silenced voices” could be seen in terms of the “female ventriloquist complicity” suggested by Spivak (1999, 287).

7. I use the first name advisedly here. Beverley (1999, 67) asks, “Why does it seem proper to refer, as we habitually do, to Rigoberta Menchú as Rigoberta? The use of the first name is appropriate to address, on the one hand, a friend or significant other, or, on the other, a servant, child, or domestic animal—that is, a subaltern. But is it that we are addressing Rigoberta Menchú as a friend or familiar in the work we do on her testimonio?” I find a similar dynamic at work in responses to Stoll’s book and what it suggests about Menchú’s testimonio and Menchú herself.
8. I make no attempt in this essay to analyze Stoll’s book itself, but instead explore a certain set of reactions to the controversy initiated by the book in the United States. At least in casual conversation, an amazing number of progressive academics seemed content to base their initial reaction (disappointment with our Rigoberta) on rumor and articles appearing in the *New York Times*. Since then, a number of excellent analyses of Stoll’s book, the controversy, and the complexities of truth-telling have appeared (see Arias 2001). While I believe that the issue is deepening discussion of Menchú’s work and our consumption of it in very positive ways, the damage the book did and continues to do to struggles for peace with justice in Guatemala are difficult to reconcile with Stoll’s claims to solidarity—its publication one month before the release of the Guatemalan truth commission report maximized this damage as much as it did sales and notoriety (see Grandin 2000, 391).
9. These texts reveal similar “tensions between ‘native informants’ and expert knowledge . . . , particularly as regards women’s role in the development process” (Suzanne Bergeron, personal communication). According to the World Bank, one of its recent publications, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan et al. 2000), gathers “the voices of over 40,000 poor women and men in 50 countries from the World Bank’s participatory poverty assessment” (World Bank 2000, 4). It is difficult to see how forty thousand voices can be presented in one document as anything but a chorus, that is, as all singing the same song (because they are homogeneous).
10. It is revealing that the majority of testimonios which have been translated into English are women’s.
11. Schech and Haggis (2000, 111) point to the necessity of “retheorizing the universal in postcolonial ways,” a process that may help lead beyond feminist deconstructions of development to a new conceptual framework “capable of embracing a global politics of social justice in ways which avoid the ‘colonizing move’” (113). Spivak’s (1999) *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* is certainly a major contribution to this very difficult project.

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