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**“Sing along with the common people”:  
politics, postcolonialism, and other figures**

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**ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING D: SOCIETY AND SPACE 1997**

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**Abstract.** Recent interest amongst critical human geographers in postcolonial theory has been framed by a concern for the relationship between 'politics' and 'theory'. This paper addresses debates in the field of colonial discourse analysis in order to explore the connections between particular conceptions of language and particular models of politics to which oppositional academics consider themselves responsible. The rhetorical representation of empowerment and disempowerment through figures of 'speech' and 'silence' respectively is critically examined in order to expose the limits of this representation of power-relations. Through a reading of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's account of the dilemmas of subaltern representation, contrasted with that of Benita Parry, and staged via an account of their different interpretations of the exemplary postcolonial fictions of J. M. Coetzee, it is argued that the deconstruction of the conventional metaphors of speech and silence calls into view the irreducible textuality of the work of representation. This implies that questions about institutional positionality and academic authority be kept squarely in sight when discussing the problems of representing the struggles and agency of marginalised social groups. It is suggested that the continuing suspicion of literary and cultural theory amongst social scientists for being insufficiently 'materialist' and/or 'political' may serve to reproduce certain forms of institutionally sanctioned disciplinary authority.

## **Politics and theory**

The trajectory of theoretical curiosity in human geography has recently crossed paths with postcolonial theory. This interest offers new insights on a series of thematic issues, including the construction of cultural identity and representations of difference, the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, and not least, the contested production of space and spatiality (e.g. Blunt, 1994; Blunt and Rose, 1994; Crush, 1995; Gregory, 1995a, 1995b; Radcliffe, 1994; Rose, 1995; Watts, 1993). The widespread, if not uncontested, currency of the 'postcolonial' motif is in no small part due to the recent hegemony of literary theory within wider fields of social and cultural theory.<sup>1</sup> And in so far as this is the case, the sudden ubiquity of 'postcolonialism' has only added impetus to the more or less fierce denunciations coming from certain directions on the left of a calamitous 'descent into discourse', and the implied charge that too close or too lingering an attention to language, rhetoric, or textuality indicates a retreat from politically engaged, relevant research (e.g. Chouinard, 1994). Even amongst those most sympathetic to the relevance of postcolonial theory in human geography there is "a growing anxiety about the role of literary theory in writings on postcolonialism." (Driver, 1996:100). Postcolonial theory is thus being subjected to a very specific sort of interdisciplinary appropriation by human geographers, one that finds it attractive at the thematic level but which takes its critical distance by arguing that this sort of literary theory needs to be augmented by greater attention to material practices, actual spaces, and real politics (e.g. Smith, 1994; Sparke, 1994; Jackson and Jacobs, 1996).<sup>2</sup> What is in danger of falling from view in this sort of appropriation are the specific avenues of institutional questioning which might be opened up by the range of work now circulating as postcolonial theory. These are occluded by the continued suspicion of those matters which still seem to cause critical human geographers so much concern - matters to do with textuality, discourse, and language (Brosseau, 1994).

In this paper, I want to circumvent the usual form in which discussions of 'politics' and 'theory' are arranged. In the routine conjunction of these two terms in

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<sup>1</sup> On the problematic status of 'postcolonialism', see McClintock (1992) and Hall (1996).

<sup>2</sup> See Bartolovich (1995) for further critical consideration of this mode of inter-disciplinarity.

academic discourse, the meaning of 'politics' is left unquestioned so that different versions of 'theory' might be interrogated by this treasured term (Robbins, 1988; Young, 1988). It is not my intention to scrutinise the political credentials of postcolonial literary theory. Rather, I want to critically address certain debates in the specific area of colonial discourse theory, in order to explore the intimate relationship between particular conceptions of 'politics' and particular understandings of language, discourse, and the work of reading.

Colonial discourse theory departs from previous critiques of Western imperialism by simultaneously undertaking a critique of forms of social power *and* a critique of the continued investment by existing traditions of left-critical thought in the logics of Western historicism and exceptionalism (e.g. Viswanathan, 1991, 1996). That such a critical perspective is necessary is revealed by MacKenzie's (1993) response to Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). MacKenzie chastises Said for failing to understand that European imperialism and racism were first of all matters of national disputes amongst different Continental powers. In this move, imperialism and colonialism are re-centred upon the internal dynamics of European societies, and the engagement with non-European peoples and territories is relegated to the status of a secondary phenomena. This represents a calculated blindness to the decentering force of colonial discourse and postcolonial theoretical work. And in so far as MacKenzie's critique of Said rests upon the suggestion that Said has overextended the practices of "lit.crit." and illegitimately overstepped the boundaries of disciplinary specialisation (cf. Driver, 1996), his simultaneous invocation of proper disciplinary standards and re-centering of imperialism draw into focus what is most significant about colonial discourse theory's interventions in the contemporary academy - addressing colonialism and imperialism as discursive formations is at the same time to address the very foundations of contemporary disciplinarity.

### **Paradigms and projections**

The problematic qualities of discussions of postcolonialism can be traced to the unresolved tensions in theorisations of colonial discourse (Slemon, 1994). What may at first appear to be strictly methodological questions in this field about reading

historical archives turn out, on closer inspection, to bear upon more general issues. In particular, I want to argue, disputes over how far agency is possible when discursive formations are understood to construct subjectivities, and over how such agency is registered in the textual record, are informed by different models of intellectual political commitment.

The 'standard model' of colonial discourse takes the form of "an allegorical Freudianism" (Robbins, 1992:213), in which colonialist knowledge is understood to have been projected onto colonised subjects which are essentially passive in relation to its production. This conceptualisation can be traced to Said's (1978) seminal formulation of Orientalism as a mode of imaginative geography through which Western territorial expansion was discursively prefigured at the level of culture. On this understanding, the accumulated store of ideas through which the Orient was staged for the West for centuries were, from the late-eighteenth century onwards, drawn upon to direct the actual course of imperial expansion and appropriation. It is from this predominant understanding that the dilemmas of theorising agency in colonial discourse theory are derived.

Resistance is only imaginable in this projection scenario by positing a pristine space which subsists wholly outside of and untouched by colonial relations of contact and confrontation. Thus, Williams and Chrisman (1993:16) suggest the problem with recent debates on 'native agency' is the tendency to present the colonialist and/or imperialist subject as having discursive primacy. They argue that what is required is a conception that acknowledges that colonised groups might "have played a constitutive rather than a reflective role in colonial and domestic imperial discourse and subjectivity. Rather than being that other onto which the coloniser projects a previously constituted subjectivity and knowledge, native presences, locations, and political resistance need to be further theorised as having a determining or primary role in colonial discourses, and in the attendant domestic versions of these discourses." This implies a shift away from a strong emphasis on irredeemable manichean conflict towards concepts which focus upon cross-cultural communication, in order to acknowledge the constitutive role of non-Western agency and knowledge in the production of such discourses. This in turn requires rethinking conceptions of

language which sustain our established understandings of identity, agency, and subjectivity.

### **Sound politics**

There is a dual temptation when analysing colonial discourses of appropriating the voice of the dispossessed in order to speak on their behalf, and simultaneously appropriating the omnipotent rhetoric of imperialist discourse itself in order to provide authoritative counter-narratives (Jehlen, 1993:691-2). The corollary of questioning the complete authority of the coloniser in the colonial encounter is, then, that the interpretative authority of the contemporary scholar must also be acknowledged as having its own limits. The privileging of 'speech' or 'voice' as the signifiers of empowerment, and the concomitant representation of oppression and disempowerment as 'silence', is a routine feature of a variety of oppositional political discourses. This rhetorical schema secretes a particular set of values and understandings of representation, which in turn inform particular determinations of 'politics'. In this respect, colonial discourse theory is of interest because in interrogating the practices of representation which were instrumental in the historical denial of the 'voice' of subjugated groups, it simultaneously opens up to questioning the metaphysics of 'speech' and 'silence' through which this epistemic violence is usually represented.

Models of culture and language in which values of unified and essential identity are foundational, supporting and supported by a conventional rhetoric of speech and silence which represents culture as a medium for expressing one's 'voice', have been pivotal to discourses of resistance in a variety of socio-historical situations. Hall reminds us that such strategies of representation have been "a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalised peoples" (1990:223), and insists that the importance of such strategies should not be underestimated nor lightly dismissed. Nonetheless, he identifies the emergence of alternative models of cultural representation, in which the mimetic conceptions characteristic of previous models of identity are supplanted by conceptions which understand representation as having a constitutive role in social

relations. These new approaches are indebted to the rethinking of identity and culture via language and textuality, a rethinking that introduces a necessary consideration of displacement, deferral, and delay into any conceptualisation of culture, representation, and identity (Bhabha, 1984; Hall, 1988). If expressing and sustaining an identity requires establishing a coherent narrative of the self, telling one's story as one's own, then it must now be acknowledged that such practices of representation always have to negotiate the divided field of enunciation: the subject who speaks and the subject represented in its narrative never quite coincide. This post-structuralist axiom can only be considered a politically irresponsible denial of identity and agency if one fails to recognise that the enunciative split between subjects of enunciation and subjects of statements calls into view the problem of the *institutionalisation* of meaning-effects. The 'struggle for the historical right to signify' (Bhabha, 1992:49) by a series of subaltern groups thus has a double significance. It has not simply altered the content of representations of different cultures, challenging stereotypes and prejudices, but has also fundamentally transformed our understandings of how processes of representation themselves work (West, 1987:194).

Miller observes that "the voice remains our central metaphor for agency and power." (1990:248). Metaphors of 'voice' are frequently used to represent a self-identical consciousness able to unequivocally apprehend reality, the model of subjectivity often considered essential for viable oppositional politics. The corollary of this conception is that notions of the divided and conflictual constitution of identity are considered a threat to the very possibility of 'politics' as such. This representation of speech and silence rests upon culturally specific evaluations which are in need of reconsideration. For example, Cheung (1993:169) argues that much "verbally assertive First World feminism" unreflectively valorises speech, and consequently considers silence only negatively as an absence, as the mark of disempowerment. On this model, speech is equated with self-expression, and silence with passivity, exclusion, and marginality. Likewise, Miller (1990) argues that the continued representation of silence as the mark of disempowerment fails to register the ways in which coming to speech might not always be identical to an acquisition of power, as well as the ways in which the mobilisation of silence might be a means of articulating



agency. There is a tendency implicit in the conventional metaphors of speech and silence to elide “the issues of silencing and being silent” (Cheung, 1993:3), a conflation which threatens to effect its own ‘silencing’ by failing to give credence to the ways in which action and resistance can take forms other than those which are routinely represented by figures of full-voice.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it fails to acknowledge how the rhetorical mobilisation of silence and ellipsis can function as a means by which any expression of self can simultaneously affirm the value of diversity by marking its own partiality and contingency. This requires rethinking the relation between identity, difference, and language. Thus, Johnson (1987:164) argues that the articulation of a sense of self depends not on the expression of a fundamental identity, but upon maintaining the constitutive relation between identity and difference, ‘speech’ and ‘silence’: “The sign of an authentic voice is thus not self-identity but self-difference.”

Cheung and Miller call attention to the ways in which the established rhetoric of speech and silence might be informed by a specifically ethnocentric set of values. This serves as a reminder of the historical significance of representations of orality, writing, and silence in Western discourses about non-Western societies. There has been a persistent understanding that the absence of writing is an indication of the failure of a society to develop the means by which to represent itself to itself, understood as the very condition of historicity itself. The supposed absence of writing is considered significant because writing is conceived as the empirical container in which the workings of the mind are stored and from which they can be recovered intact. The privilege accorded to writing thus depends upon understandings of textuality which work to denigrate empirically oral cultures in the name of values which are consistently represented in terms of ‘voice’ and ‘speech’. Miller (1990:248) notes the resulting paradox whereby the conceptual privileging of the voice as the vehicle of consciousness takes place within the medium of writing, so that, as he puts it, in the course of colonialism the West “imposed literacy while dreaming of orality.”

These observations are not meant to denigrate as naively logocentric the value ascribed to metaphors of ‘voice’, but to draw attention to the different modalities

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<sup>3</sup> See Jaworski (1993) for further discussion of the ‘power of silence’.

of speech and silence and their irreducibility to a singular political evaluation universally applicable to every context (Johnson, 1995). Acknowledging the contingent political significance of the received metaphors of speech and silence promises a rethinking of emancipatory political action outside of a series of inherited tragi-heroic narratives in which domination and resistance are represented as mutually exclusive terms, an understanding supported by the conventional evaluation of speech as a measure of empowerment and full self-expression.<sup>4</sup> Such binary determinations, positing a manichean stand-off between good-guys and bad-guys, do not allow for more messy, complicated, ambiguous relations to structures of power. As Rose (1986:14) suggests, the purpose of questioning binary conceptions by developing a theoretical language which stresses the differential constitution of subjectivity is to allow the acknowledgement of “our own part in intolerable structures.”

The problem of the inscription of resistance and the possibilities of recovering traces of agency from the imperial archive is formative of the field of colonial discourse theory. In the disputes characteristic of this field, the constellation of meanings that accrue to ‘speech’, ‘voice’, and ‘silence’ is a central issue. The conceptualisation of the relations between writing, speech, and silence is thus crucial not only to the workings of colonial ideologies but also to the work of critically analysing the archives of colonialism and imperialism. What needs to be underscored at this point is that what is at stake in these disputes is the political significance of the deployment of particular tropes.

### **Discerning subalternity**

Any given example of discourse presupposes “a horizon of competing, contrary utterances against which it asserts its own energies.” (Terdiman, 1985:36). It is the

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<sup>4</sup> The demand that the subaltern must be represented as having a ‘voice’ works to privilege a masculine form of heroic rebellion (O’Hanlon, 1988:214-5). This is evident from ongoing feminist discussions of the significance of discourses about widow immolation in colonial India, discourses in which the widow serves as the site upon which debates about the status of tradition and modernity are staged (Mani, 1987). This has become the exemplary model of the epistemic violence of imperialism. Mani (1990:36) argues that many discussions of *sati* remain locked within a binary opposition of coercion or consent which forecloses wider conceptions of agency and resistance (cf. Loomba, 1993; Nair, 1994). That discussions of subaltern agency have been pursued through treatments of *sati* indicates that the task of re-theorising agency

elaboration of these 'counter-discourses' with which theories of agency in colonial discourse analysis are concerned. This effort might be best described, following Jameson (1981), as an attempt at the 'redialogisation' of colonial discourses. His notion that hegemonic cultural works perpetuate only a limited range of the positions from the historical dramas which produced them, and that the critical task is therefore to re-write them into their relational place within a polemical and contested dialogical field, neatly captures the outlines of the project of analysing colonial discourses in order to recover traces of subaltern agency and resistance. The recovery of 'mute inscriptions' from dominant discourses requires "the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in their turn by the hegemonic culture." (85). This strategy for reading cultural works calls attention to the erasure or re-encoding of subordinated meanings by dominant discursive systems. There is, however, a certain ambivalence about Jameson's formulation of "the restoration or artificial reconstruction" of these voices, and Berubé (1992:223) suggests that this 'cageyness' enables him to dodge the central question of "how do we know which one we're doing?" I suggest that we might usefully consider disputes over the conceptualisation of agency in colonial discourse theory to turn upon this very same theoretico-methodological ambivalence between the restoration of the silenced voices of subaltern consciousness, or the transformative re-writing of them.

Gates (1991:462) argues that the 'colonialist paradigm' in cultural theory has reached an impasse over the question of agency: "You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonised, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialism." In order to elaborate on the form of this impasse, I want to stage my discussion by constructing the outlines of an oblique debate between the work of Benita Parry and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,

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involves the displacement of an implicitly gendered set of understandings which posit an opposition between volition and subjugation, and represent them with signifiers of speech and silence respectively.

who will serve here as figures for two broadly identifiable positions on how to theorise and represent 'native' or 'subaltern' agency.

The theoretical notion of 'subaltern' is derived from Gramsci, whose original discussion of subaltern classes is framed in specifically historiographical terms: an integral part of counter-hegemonic intellectual practice lies in retrieving from the apparently spontaneous actions of subaltern classes the marks of independent initiative (1971:52-55). The subalternity of these groups, the apparent lack of a teleology towards universality in their actions, is itself a written effect. The problem is that those elements of active class-consciousness that such groups may have exercised in the past "cannot be checked, have left no reliable document." (196). Still tied closely to their particular interests and the influence of dominant groups, it "consequently never occurs to them that their history might have some possible importance, that there might be some value in leaving documentary evidence of it." (*ibid.*). The subaltern status of these classes is thus simultaneously manifested and confirmed by a textual absence, by the fact that they did not articulate themselves in writing, understood as the container for self-consciousness. If the full significance of the practices of subaltern groups can only be revealed retrospectively, then historical interpretation is easily constituted as a continuation and fulfilment of those historical struggles. The conceptual field opened around the term 'subaltern' thus contains within it from the start a space for the installation of the work of interpretation as an essential moment of any oppositional political practice. This positing of an identity of interests between subaltern groups and intellectuals depends upon the continued reduction of writing to a logocentric economy of interpretation. Recent reinscriptions of 'subaltern' complicate this presumed identity of interests by refusing to elide the irreducible textuality of representation.

The widespread circulation of 'subaltern' as a theoretical category in the Anglo-American academy is indebted to readings of Spivak's deployment of the term, which stands in relation to a wider field of discussions in South Asian historiography (Chatterjee, 1986; Guha, 1982, Guha and Spivak, 1988). Spivak addresses the potential pitfalls and complicities of conceptualisations which continue to define resistance in terms of unified, self-identical consciousness. She calls to account the

fact that any subaltern 'voice' that is heard in colonialist texts has already been appropriated and re-articulated by the dominant discourse, and that it is uttered by subjects admitted into those formations under particular circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, any subaltern consciousness represented in hegemonic discourses is a disfigured representation, a point made most directly when Spivak observes (1992b:44-5) that what continues to go most unnoticed in readings of the seminal essay, '*Can the subaltern speak?*', is the account of the suicide with which this essay concludes. This episode illustrates the existence of an arena of agency which was not allowed to communicate with the dominant culture of imperialism. The woman whose story is reconstructed in this essay had tried to communicate, and to do so through the most non-masculine of networks, but had nonetheless failed (1988a:294-308). It is this that leads to the much disputed declaration that 'the subaltern cannot speak': "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." (1992b:46). A cultural sphere represented as a space of speaking subjects is one which necessarily requires the conditions for dialogue, call and response, and the establishment of such a sphere as part of the process of cultural domination under imperialism rested on the elision of some subject-positions. Subalternity is defined as such by being located in a space of difference outside of hegemonic networks.

While Spivak warns that the project of restoring the colonised as subjects of their own histories might share in the nativist reversal of binary representations of cultural difference, Parry (1994) argues that the models of resistance which underwrite recuperative strategies are more complex and nuanced than a simple restoration of essentialised identity. Parry takes issue with Spivak for what she regards as her failure to recognise the full extent and existence of anti-colonial resistance to colonial discursive apparatuses.<sup>6</sup> She accuses Spivak's account of

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida's (1978:34-35) questioning of Foucault's project to write an "archaeology of silence" anticipates the terms of Spivak's position.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the conflicting versions of 'politics' that I am tracing here are ones which underwrite ongoing debates internal to the literary humanities. These disputes do not, as is often the case with the posture of social scientists towards literary-cultural theory, revolve around claims to be in closer touch with 'real' rather than merely 'discursive' practices. Rather, they revolve around the differential evaluations given to nationalist discourse and the nation as templates for political projects (cf. Appiah 1988, 1991a; Lazarus, 1993). This is the central issue defining different positions taken-up towards postcolonial theory, as is revealed by Aijaz Ahmad's polemical intervention and the responses to it (Ahmad, 1992; Parry, 1993a; Kaviraj, 1993; Brennan, 1994; *Public Culture*, 1993)

subalternity of a “deliberated deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard” (1987:39), and of implying that the master discourses of imperialism and colonialism pre-empt all forms of resistance. On this reading, Spivak’s apparent refusal to countenance the existence of subaltern agency is an act of professional self-aggrandisement. Parry’s reading has taken on a certain authority in defining what discussions of the subaltern are all about, and not least in sanctioning the strong misreading of Spivak’s theorisation as amounting to a denial of the possibility of resistance or oppositional agency *per se*. The strictly rhetorical question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ thus gets drawn into a network of debates in which the overriding concern guiding theoretical exegeses and textual interpretation is to establish that, whatever Spivak might say, the subaltern certainly *can* speak after all.

Sharpe (1989) argues that Parry’s demand for the articulation of the ‘native voice’ homogenises the heterogeneity of colonised subject-positions, of which the conflation of Spivak’s and Bhabha’s work in Parry’s original commentary is indicative. Bhabha’s account of colonial ambivalence does not belong to the same theoretical problematic as Spivak’s account of subalternity: “the tropes of ‘mimicry’, ‘sly civility’, and ‘hybridity’ that Bhabha deploys to stage the ambivalence of colonial discourse are all derived from discourses aimed at the colonial production of an educated class of native.” (138). Parry’s eagerness to have the native speak from out of the colonial archive risks effacing the subaltern as such, since “the colonised subject who can answer back is the product of the same vast ideological machinery that silences the subaltern.” (143). This underscores Spivak’s insistence that ‘speaking’ requires a space of response to which access under colonialism and imperialism was tightly policed. The potential for the appropriation of the ambivalent enunciatory address of colonial discourse is not available to all. If Bhabha’s account of colonial ambivalence identifies the potential agency of resistance in those Caliban-like figures who are ascribed a limited degree of subject-status in the discourses of colonialism, then Spivak’s subaltern subjects are perhaps best thought of as ‘Caliban’s women’, all those who are silenced by the very same apparatus through which he was taught language and learnt how to curse back at the usurping Prospero (Zabus, 1994).

### **Allegorising theory**

The full significance which I want to draw from Spivak's account of subalternity can be best illustrated by considering the use she has made of J. M. Coetzee's re-writing of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, in *Foe* (1986), as the "didactic occasion" for explicating her theoretical concerns. Coetzee's fiction thematizes the dynamics of colonial inscription and silencing, and offers a critique of the unquestioned desire to ventriloquize the voices of the oppressed. It is this concern with speech and silence which is most frequently alighted upon by those for whom his is an exemplary form of postcolonial literature. *Foe* makes an emblematic deconstructive gesture by dissolving *Robinson Crusoe*, a story of origins, into a generalised intertextuality where it no longer becomes possible to identify the precise sources of the story told, either in time, space, or with respect to any particular authorial figure. The most significant departure from Defoe's novel is the inclusion of a woman, Susan Barton, as the main narrative voice.

In Defoe's novel, Crusoe teaches Friday to speak. In *Foe*, Friday has no tongue. Susan's desire to tell her own story thus runs up against the doubled absence of Friday's tongue: how it came to be cut out is the truth that eludes her and which keeps her story of her time spent on Cruso's island from being completed, yet Friday cannot tell her that truth:

"To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue than can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost"  
(Coetzee, 1986:67).

Susan decides to teach Friday to write, so that the full truth of the circumstances of his mutilation might be known. She holds to a conception of writing as the mere transcription of speech, and speech as the register of identity and medium of self-consciousness. She draws a house on a slate, and then writes the letters 'h-o-u-s' underneath it. But the promise of writing as the bearer of consciousness and truth, as the substitute for Friday's voice, is immediately recognised as problematic. When Friday repeats the inscription, Susan is forced to admit that he might simply have been copying without conceptually understanding.

Following this first attempt to teach Friday writing, Susan and Daniel Foe fall into conversation:

“While Foe and I spoke, Friday had settled himself on his mat with the slate. Glancing over his shoulder, I saw he was filling it with a design of, as it seemed, leaves and flowers. But when I came closer I saw the leaves were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes.

I reached out to take the slate, to show it to Foe, but Friday held tight to it. ‘Give! Give me the slate, Friday!’ I commanded. Whereupon, instead of obeying me, Friday put three fingers in his mouth and wet them with spittle and rubbed the slate clean.”  
(*ibid.*:147).

Spivak re-writes this episode as a lesson about identity: “Friday, the slave whose tongue has been cut off, actually writes something on his slate, “on his own”, when the metropolitan anticolonial white woman wants to teach him writing. And when she, very anxious, wants to see it, he withholds it, he withholds it by rubbing it off, *idamāda* as erasure.” (Spivak, 1992a:793). This remark refers to Spivak’s exploration of the Bengali *idamāda* as “a weird translation for identity”, one which foregrounds identity as an indicative or enclitic phenomenon, always situated in relation to the proximity of a particular self (773-4). Here, identity as an iterable effect that exceeds any representation which simply privileges ‘speech’ or ‘voice’ as figures for the expression of a self-identical subjectivity, is the lesson for which Spivak turns to Coetzee’s novel for support.

To construct texts as having ‘voices’ hidden within them which await re-articulation through the medium of the critic, is to inscribe colonial textuality within a quite conventional economy of sense which ascribes to ‘voice’ and ‘speech’ the values of expressivity, self-presence, and consciousness, and understands the absence of such signs as ‘silence’, as an intolerable absence of ‘voice’, and therefore as the mark of disempowerment. This conception continues to underwrite Parry’s



recent critical commentaries on Coetzee's work.<sup>7</sup> While for Spivak, Friday's silence exemplifies the mute interrogation and displacement of the discursive power of colonialism, Parry reads the representation of silence across the range of Coetzee's fiction as symbolising a transcendental liberation from subjectivity which re-enacts the appropriation of narrative authority by the white imperial subject. She acknowledges that the typically taciturn figures in Coetzee's fiction may be read as withholding speech as a form of resistance, but prefers to charge that they might also be read as "victims of textual strategies that disempower them by situating them outside the linguistic order." (Parry, 1991:199). Parry wonders whether this muteness is not indicative of "a narrative disinclination to orchestrate a polyphonic score, because of which the silences remain incommensurable, unknowable and unable to make themselves heard in the sealed linguistic code exercised by the narrative self, and hence incapable of disturbing the dominant discourse." (1993b:5). This recalls her earlier charge that the refusal of the contemporary critic to recover 'voices' compounds effects of colonial silencing. Coetzee's "conjuring and valorizing of a non-verbal signifying system" (6) is thus considered a retreat from a politically responsible writing practice. Parry asks "does not Coetzee's own principled refusal to exercise the power of the dominant culture by speaking for the other itself paradoxically perform the discursive process of silencing?" (1991:199). The implication that the only proper political gesture is to speak for the margin within hegemonic sites disallows the sort of reading provided by Attridge (1992), for whom Friday marks the point of closure upon which cultural formations are constituted and depend, and which in turn renders them always open to transformation. On this reading, Friday's erasure is seen as Coetzee's staging of the refusal "to endorse any simple call for the granting of a voice within the existing sociocultural discourses." (228). Parry's impatience with such readings of Coetzee's fiction suggests that the delineation of 'politics' in her own reading remains premised on an established economy of value with respect to speech and silence.

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<sup>7</sup> While Parry's reading differs from Spivak's in placing Coetzee's fiction more concretely in relation to the field of South African literary and cultural politics, it would be mistaken to consider the differences of interpretation to turn simply on Spivak's apparent disregard for this 'context' when compared to Parry. The post-structuralist inflections of Coetzee's metafiction are open to contested interpretation and evaluation *within* this particular national context (cf. Parry, 1989; Atwell, 1993).

Spivak reads Friday's stubborn act of erasure as an allegory for the deconstructive principle that speech and silence might always be inscribed within a different economy of value. The design inscribed by Friday, by virtue of being an inscription, imposes a limit on the project of interpretation: "Are those walking eyes rebuses, hieroglyphs, ideograms, or is there secret that they hold no secret at all? Each scrupulous effort at decoding or deciphering will bring its own rewards; but there is a structural possibility that they are nothing." (Spivak, 1991:171-2). Spivak uses this episode to raise the possibility that 'silence', as an act of withholding, might be a mark of agency: "For every territorial space that is value coded by colonialism *and* every command of metropolitan anti-colonialism for the native to yield his 'voice', there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that may or may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked. 'The native', whatever that might mean, is not only a victim, he or she is also an agent." (172). In a twist which upsets much contemporary theoretical wisdom, Spivak raises the possibility that to presume to represent 'silence' as if it were potential 'speech' might, in principle, be to misrepresent what is already a mark of agency registered in the very absence of the conventional signifiers of 'voice'. The writing lesson concludes with Susan watching Friday as he produces "writing of a kind, rows upon rows of the letter *o* tightly packed together." (Coetzee, 1986:152). Coetzee (1992:404) holds that "[t]he O, the circle, the hole are symbols of that which male authoritarian language cannot appropriate", suggesting that Friday's inscription might be read as the mark of an alternative system of signifying practices which cannot be appropriated by the phallogocentric order of language, to which Susan has gained access, without a degree of violence.

To the charge that she "will not let the native speak", Spivak characterises Parry's position as that of the anti-colonialist who "longs for the object of a conscientious ethnography" which can recover an autonomous realm where subalternity has inscribed its own traditions, meanings and knowledges (1991:172). In response to this hope and desire, Spivak remarks that "my particular word to Parry is that her efforts (to give voice to the native) as well as mine (to give warning of the attendant problems) are judged by those strange margins of which Friday with his withholding slate is only the mark." (173). Susan resists the attempts of Foe to make

her write the story of how she came to be castaway in the first place and arrive at Crusoe's island, which is the story of the loss of her daughter. She considers the withholding of this story to be an exercise of choice on her own behalf, and as such a confirmation of her own identity (Coetzee, 1986:121-3). Friday's act of erasure makes visible that Susan's notion of identity as propriety over one's own voice requires that the negotiation with the wholly other be finessed. If subaltern agency may reside in withholding, then the demand to project the presence of a voice into textual 'silences' always risks effacing agency in the very gesture of its recovery.

Spivak does not reject wholesale the equation of speech with empowerment and of silence with disempowerment, but makes visible the limits of this economy of meaning. To ignore the possibility that silence marks another space of agency, by demanding that it always be transformed into articulate speech, is to accord with an established metaphysics of speech and silence and its implied conception of 'politics' and to put it beyond question. And this metaphysics installs an interpretation of interpretation in which the question of the institution of meaning is systematically occluded.

### **Institutional traces**

Parry considers Spivak's 'subaltern' to be a direct referent for the disenfranchised subjectivity of the colonised, and thus reads her as theorising about 'native agency'. This significance is routinely attached to the term 'subaltern' in contemporary cultural theory. Spivak has remarked tellingly that "everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie." (1992b:45). She is quite clear about what the term does *not* signify for her: "Please do not confuse it with unorganized labour, women as such, the proletariat, the colonised, the object of ethnography, migrant labour, political refugees, etc." (1995:115). If the subaltern isn't any of these, then what are Spivak's discussions of the subaltern subject concerned with? I think Lazarus (1994:205) captures the precise significance of her deployment of the term: "Spivak's theory of subalternity does not seem to me to be a theory of 'native agency' at all, but a theory of the way in which disenfranchised elements of the 'native population' are *represented* in the discourse

of colonialism. The subaltern is for Spivak not a colonised person but a discursive figure in a battery of more or less integrated dominant cultural texts.” This suggests that the subaltern problematic is not so much about silencing as such, but about the narrative containment by hegemonic discursive formations of disruptive utterances.

Spivak’s ‘subaltern’ is an alternative figure for the Derridean ‘trace’. Derrida describes the trace as “where the relationship with the other is marked” (1976:47). The trace must be *instituted* (46) for there to any be signification and legibility. This necessary closure as the condition of any meaning involves the occultation of the constitutive relation with alterity, yet the other remains to haunt the institution and make visible its potential for transformation. If difference and repetition are constitutive of subjectivity, it is nonetheless necessary to posit the subject by finessing this ‘graphematic’ structure which opens all subjectivity, identity, and meaning (Spivak, 1989b:214). To be the subject of a speech act that can be spoken in one’s own voice, one must dance the deconstructive ‘two-step’: “There is no one who can speak if she does not suppose that there is something at the beginning which is a unit. If you look carefully, you will see that this unit is itself divided from something it seems to repeat.” (Spivak, 1989a:211). This necessary covering over of the differential ‘origin’ of subjectivity leaves a trace. It is always possible to read this mark as a sign of an absent presence, as a silence which can be rearticulated as ‘voice’. In her commentary on the *Subaltern Studies* group, Spivak (1988b:204-5) argues that any such positing of subaltern consciousness as a presence which can be recovered from the imperial archive is “a theoretical fiction to entitle a project of reading” made in “a scrupulously visible political interest.” It is imperative to make visible the status of this decision *as a decision* made in the light of certain specifiable interests, and to thereby underline that it does not exhaust the field of possible approaches to reading. In so far as debates between different academic discourses over the proper treatment of subalternity remain institutionally disciplined modes of knowledge, Spivak insists that it is well for those engaged in such debates to remember that their interests necessarily remain “heterogeneous to, and discontinuous with, subaltern practice.” (208). This recognition of different interests and differential power-relations between spheres of social practice addresses a challenge to any unproblematised claim that

the contemporary academic critic shares identical interests with the subaltern subjects whose insurgency they reconstruct and represent.

### **Representing Agency**

Parry's accusation regarding Spivak's professional self-interest implies that there are professional interests at stake only for those who are suspicious of strategies of recuperation. Yet, as Robbins notes (1993:205), if it is true "that to deny the voice and agency of the native can serve to affirm professional authority", then it is equally true that "to *affirm* the voice and agency of the native can also serve to affirm professional authority." It follows, then, that institutional interests and relations of authority are at work in any given approach to theorising subaltern agency and representing marginality.

Appiah (1991b) argues that the interests served by the discourse of the subject are different from those served by the discourse of structure. The theoretical economy of the subject serves the interest of articulating our activities with those of others (79-80), by projecting a minimal degree of shared rationality onto the traces of alterity found in representations of cultural difference (Appiah, 1992:234-7). Alternatively, the theoretical economy of structure enables the analysis of structures of exploitation (Appiah, 1991b:82). Given the received reading of subalternity as bearing directly upon the theorisation of agency, Spivak's account will necessarily appear to overestimate the degree of determinate effectivity of a discourse upon its subjects, so confirming the apparent inability of post-structuralism to locate the conditions for resistance (e.g. Ortnor, 1995). Discussions of subaltern representation in colonial discourse and postcolonial theory thus continue to be framed by "the agon of structure and agency" (Appiah, 1991b:68). And consequently the reading of Spivak's work is often organised by the ethico-theoretical imperative to re-assert in theory and find in practice traces of oppositional agency.

Appiah suggests that "we should see the relations between structural explanation and the logic of the subject as a competition not for causal space but for narrative space: as different levels of theory, with different constitutive assumptions, whose relations make them neither competitive nor mutually constitutive, but quite

contingently complimentary.” (74). Different accounts should not be judged according to their apparent explanatory power, but first of all in relation to what interests they serve to sustain or subvert in the contingencies of their deployment. On this view, the taken for granted assumption that traces of resistance have to be found for a reading to carry any critical force is called into question. Gestures of recuperating native ‘voices’ which obscure the paradox that any such voice is found only in texts written from within specific institutions harbour a ‘professional conceit’, whereby the strategy of recovery actually serves not only “to turn the silence of the subaltern into speech, but to make their words address our own concerns, and to render their figures in our self-image.” (O’Hanlon, 1988:211). The incomplete character of the historical archive tends to elevate each fragment to a symbolic status whereby it stands in for a lost totality which might be reconfigured through this same fragment. It is incumbent upon us not to fall prey to the temptation to construct an imaginary totalised past, peopled by shadowy figures resembling our own representations of ourselves: “The only thing we know is that “be like me, be my image” can never be on the agenda.” (Spivak, 1993a:28).

The unproblematised use of rhetorical figures of ‘voice’ secures the posited identity of interests between the contemporary critic and the historical agents to whom they direct their attention. This is simultaneously a disavowal of institutional location and of the interests which accrue from this. Finding traces of agency is as much the work of particular professional situations as is accentuating the force of determinant structures of power, and following Appiah, the value of either emphasis cannot be determined without considering the institutional contingencies out of which it is made. As Robbins (1993:187) suggests, “[i]t is arguable that, as a critical procedure or paradigm, the formulaic recovery of inspirational agency may foster political quiescence, while a more politicized criticism might in fact result from a focus on vaster, less anthropomorphic, less hortatory structures.” In response to his question “why *do* we all value agency so highly?” (*ibid.*), one might suggest that the value that is accorded to agency in contemporary critical theory needs to be openly acknowledged as one which serves the interests of oppositional academics in their institutional situations. Strategies aimed at the recovery of subaltern agency need to

be thought of not as projects which directly align academics with the struggles of those subaltern subjects, but is a project undertaken “in order to envisage a realm of freedom in which we ourselves might speak.” (O’Hanlon, 1988:219). Finding traces of subaltern resistance provides oppositional academics with a lever with which to challenge and displace the totalising, coherent, and linear narratives which characterise hegemonic disciplinary discourses. The professional interest involved in any and all strategies of recuperation, once recognised as such, should lead to the admission that there are quite legitimate interests which oppositional academics have as academics and not in spite of their institutional placement, and that these should not be disavowed in a guilty and anxious eagerness to claim an immediate identity of political interest with the struggles going on in other social arenas.

In response to the claim that Spivak’s account of subaltern representation is an act of professional self-aggrandisement, we can only note that she considers it a prerequisite for the radical academic to “attend to the nature of the institution that is their contractual space” and not to make one’s “institutional commitment invisible” (1993b:294). Her account is thus directed at maintaining a “vigilance precisely against too great a claim for transparency” (1988a:393) when undertaking the work of producing knowledge and representations. The subaltern has finally to be considered as both “irreducible and yet ultimately irretrievable.” (Sharpe, 1989:152). This is not a call to consider the subaltern as a metaphysical symbol of timeless alterity, nor is it an abdication of the responsibility to represent. It marks the point at which a commitment is made not to efface the institutional locations out of which all representations emerge, and it underwrites the conviction that “the fact of our institutional occupations must inhabit any attempt to address strategic silences through counter-discourses and alternative narratives.” (139). Such an acknowledgement, we might suppose, is the first step towards accurately discerning just where oppositional academic practices might be articulated with wider networks for social change.

**‘This may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice’<sup>8</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Kant, 1970.

Appiah's account of the interests of theory has led us towards a different reading of the insistence found in the work of Spivak and others on the irreducible alterity of subaltern subjects. It is the *making visible of the question of institutional interests* which is at stake in this insistence. Spivak's discussions of the dilemmas of subaltern representation do not amount to a denial of subaltern agency. Rather, they register a refusal to accept as given the adequacy of the dimensions of discursive space as presently constituted. The 'silence' of marginalised groups is the effect of institutionalised organisations of social discourse, in which certain utterances fall outside of what is recognisable and legitimised as audible 'speech' (Crowley, 1996:174-178). Any presumption to rearticulate the excluded within the boundaries of this discursive space can only do so at the risk of reducing the element of alterity of those excluded elements - this is the lesson of Friday's erasure. At the same time, a self-righteous refusal to speak for others also risks effacing the institutional dimensions which enable this very renunciation, and threatens to reproduce the denial of audible utterance to subaltern subjects: "It is not often noticed that the critic who refrains from speaking on behalf of those whom she can never "know" presumes that having spoken she would have said it all and that the other will be moved neither to challenge nor to supplement her." (Varadharajan, 1992:3). We appear, then, to be returned to Gates' impasse - to represent or not to represent? - a tension which forms a space of decision, and one no doubt not open to any theoretical resolution.

This dilemma is ultimately underwritten by the tacit shared assumption that the value of oppositional academic practice must be found in the realm of 'politics', whatever that might mean. The injunction to identify and advertise some more or less grand political significance for academic work might just be what continues to discipline work which otherwise appears to have slipped the constraints of traditional forms of disciplinarity. In this paper, I have followed Young's (1990:173-5) suggestion that colonial discourse analysis is of more than parochial interest to specific research fields, but bears directly upon general questions about structures of disciplinarity and the institutionalisation of academic authority, and impinges upon some of our most cherished categories of thought. Thus, I have pursued a work of reading of this particular theoretical field in order to expose the delineations which often remain



invisible in shaping the political imaginary of the academic left in the social sciences and humanities. By focusing attention upon the representation of empowerment and disempowerment through figures of speech and silence, I have argued that the textuality of practices of representation is routinely effaced in the standard discourse of academic political commitment. This effacement is tantamount to putting beyond question particular forms of intellectual authority and the institutional structures that support them. The critique of this figurative schema points up how the representation of political responsibility in these terms involves the dissembling of unequal relations of authority and power between different social spheres at the very moment that the urgent need for their articulation is proclaimed.

As I suggested at the outset, postcolonial literary theory has been liable to a particular, and characteristic, mode of interdisciplinary appropriation by human geographers. The authority of work from literary disciplines has been invoked as a set of theoretical tenets and substantive theses (about the instability of contingently constructed meanings and the mutability of relationally constituted identities), which then serve as the templates for further readings of social or historical phenomena. Yet a certain distance has been maintained by insisting that such work needs to be supplemented by a greater consideration of 'material' social processes, where the authority for talking about these latter is still assumed to lie squarely with the social sciences. This particular interdisciplinary staging of postcolonial literary theory as *too* theoretical, that is, as detached from worldly considerations by virtue of its immersion in the complex operations of texts and discourses and representations, serves to sustain and protect certain notions of disciplinary authority in the name of particular understandings of 'politics'.<sup>9</sup> This ruse works most consistently through the claim that what might be a theoretically persuasive account of decentred, differentiated identity-formation and unstable, contingent meaning-effects is nonetheless at odds with the requirements of political mobilisation and action, for which, it is supposed, good-old fashioned models of singular and fixed identity and expressive models of representation remain essential. Thus, we arrive at the intellectual conceit of

formulations such as 'strategic essentialism', whereby what we admit to be true in theory is declared largely irrelevant when it comes to the practical exigencies of oppositional politics. Notions of the relational and differential constitution of identities disrupt the binary dichotomies and sharp, categorical demarcations upon which so much left thinking premises its understandings of political identity and action.

However, it might well be argued that 'politics' is not so reliant on these cherished notions of fixed, stable identities and reliable representation after all, but that even in its most mundane forms involves processes for which new theoretical ideas about the function of absence and deferral in constituting representations and identities are potentially helpful guides (Low, 1996). In so far as this is the case, the continuing suspicion amongst social scientists of literary and cultural theories of identity and representation could actually hinder attempts to think 'politics' differently. One of the most likely effects of any such rethinking would be the disruption of the idealist inside/outside binaries which so often frame the rhetoric of radical academic commitment. The recognition of the construction of identities across a range of contradictory subject-positions requires the rethinking of the stable, flat, two-dimensional topologies through which radical academic discourse routinely represents power, politics, and responsibility. Resisting the premature bracketing of questions of language brings into view the need to critically address the multi-layered nature of academic institutions, understood as inextricably woven into real economies of representation, structured by the social relations of cultural production, and involved in the reproduction of uneven rights to cultural literacy. Rather than rehearse the old standards about 'activism', 'engagement', or 'pedagogy', perhaps it's time to reconsider from the bottom-up the inherited imperative of 'politics' itself, and to question whether radical academic work can even be a potential source of opposition or resistance in the ways we would often like to think (Shiach, 1993). I could, no doubt, finally dignify this suggestion by claiming that re-thinking the limits of 'politics' is 'political' in some deeper, still more fundamental sense. But I prefer to think that it's

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<sup>9</sup> It is also fails to register the ways in which postcolonial literary theory is distinguished from generic anti-realist postmodernism in its foregrounding of the referential purchase of representations and textualities, a 'materialist' insistence on the subject-constituting effects of discursive formations (cf. Slemon, 1991).

just about clearing away some obstructions which keep getting in the way of thinking seriously about what my job is, and how best to do it.

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