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Revisiting “Can the subaltern speak?”: introduction

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a sense of the perspectives that guide the collection of articles.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper provides an introductory essay regarding the contributions and critics associated with Spivak’s work.

Findings – In addition, the contents lay out brief descriptions of the articles included in the collection.

Originality/value – The notion of revisiting “Can the subaltern speak?” provides authors with innovative and provocative ideas to guide their submissions.

Keywords Qualitative research, Postcolonial, Spivak, Subaltern

Paper type Conceptual paper

Thirty years ago, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak penned “Can the subaltern speak?” – first published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg’s (1988) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* – and sent a series of shock waves across the contested terrain of postcolonial, subaltern, and cultural studies, as she boldly problematized popular deconstructive notions of culture, identity, representation, and voice, arguing that these functioned to both reproduce and co-opt elitist imperatives of political domination and exploitation, leading to the wholesale cultural erasure of subaltern sensibilities. Accordingly, Spivak posed challenging questions by way of her forceful criticism of imperialist complicities of male intellectuals on the left, who ignoring their privilege freely advanced themselves as competent to speak for the subaltern, particularly subaltern women. Spivak, moreover, criticized patriarchal elites “prone to project and reproduce these ethnocentric and developmentalist mythologies onto the Third world ‘subalterns’ they are ready to help develop” (Andreotti, 2007, p. 70). Both Foucault and Deleuze’s generalizations of workers, for example, were fodder for Spivak’s disdain for essentializing emancipatory discourses that assumed a non-existent solidarity across wildly diverse populations. Spivak’s critical deconstructions were, indeed, framed amid acknowledgment of capitalist production and Marxist sensibilities, which nevertheless she argued have hung as backdrops to institutionalized subaltern discourses of the east that theorized subalternity through epistemological modes of colonial (or imperial) domination – discourses absent of subaltern voices to affirm, contest, or deny the veracity of claims (Plate 1).

Spivak’s history and lived experience, in addition to her intellectual preparation, informed the passion and commitment of her argument in the article. Her “intrigue with Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, [her] grandmother’s sister, who had hanged herself in 1926, as a result of her inability to follow through on an assassination detail assigned to her by a small anti-imperialist organization” [1] served as a powerful impetus to the development of her own ideas on subalternity, particularly as these related to women in India. At the heart of her powerful contribution is an underlying desire to interrogate critically “the work of producing subaltern intellectuals” (Andreotti, 2007). This concern over the formation of subaltern intellectuals has only deepened over the last three decades, given increasing





Source: www.critical-theory.com/look-photos-bronxs-gramsci-monument/

Plate 1.
Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak speaking
at the Gramsci
monument in the
Bronx, New York,
in 2013

numbers of subaltern students entering the academy and intellectuals writing on questions of subalternity. Yet, what has not changed is the saliency of the questions Spivak first posed and the increasing need for intellectuals who write on matters of subalternity to fiercely interrogate increasing complexities tied to real and imagined conceptions of privilege and how we understand and engage the deepening intersectionalities of oppression in the world today. Accordingly, Spivak (2004) has moved from the earlier notion of “unlearning of privilege” to “learning to learn from below,” which more accurately speaks to the need to abandon “convictions of triumphalist superiority” (p. 551), if subaltern intellectuals of every persuasion are to prevent the reproduction of imperialist susceptibilities in our revolutionary efforts.

Spivak’s political concerns with both the question of “epistemic violence” and her critique of subaltern studies (in this instance, the subaltern studies group led by Ranajit Guha) are deeply reminiscent of Audrey Lorde’s (1984) poignant proclamation: the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. It is, therefore, not surprising that at the heart of Spivak’s critique is also a criticism of subaltern studies’ efforts “to locate and re-establish a ‘voice’ or collective locus of agency in postcolonial India” (McEwan, 2008, p. 60). Here, Spivak registers concerns on two key intellectual fronts. As mentioned earlier, she is highly suspicious of privileged intellectuals from outside the lived subaltern context who weave postcolonial discourses in the name of the subaltern. Similarly (as noted above), she takes to task postcolonial intellectuals (including subaltern intellectuals) whose efforts aim to grant collective voice to the subaltern as a remedy to their oppression. Spivak deems both these exteriorized attempts to contend with subaltern voicelessness hugely problematic, in that such efforts perpetuate a logocentric assumption of cultural identity and solidarity within populations that are overwhelmingly heterogeneous. Similarly, she argues that dependence upon western intellectuals to be the voice of the subaltern – rather than creating conditions

where the subaltern speak and are heard for themselves – results in “the construction of subjectivity at sites of *enforced silence* in the Third World” (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988, p. 11, emphasis added). Furthermore, Spivak (1988) argues, “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is ever more deeply in shadow” (p. 287).

Similarly, the consciousness of the subaltern, the question of reclaiming cultural identity, and the language of alliance politics are prickly constructs in Spivak’s view. Her concerns are overwhelmingly tied to reasonable fears that subaltern populations, given their diversely political and economic quests for collectivized identity, come dangerously close to reinscribing their own subordination, further deepening their social and material repression within the dominant society. As such, Spivak likens notions of subaltern collectivity to a Eurocentric ideation that, wittingly or unwittingly, homogenizes humanity in ways that belie their inextinguishable heterogeneity. In the process, Spivak argues, the subaltern are exposed to further epistemic violence from within, triggered by an essentialized mythology that ignores significant particularities of their humanity and the wide ranging differences that exist even within the colonized body politic.

Over the years, as might be expected, Spivak has faced a series of critiques[2] to the ideas she set forth in “Can the subaltern speak?” Criticisms have spanned from concerns over the obscure quality of her writing to claims that Spivak’s argument only lead us toward an untenable and immitigable closure, where no one – from within or outside – is able to speak with any legitimacy about the conditions of the subaltern (Eagleton, 1999). Similarly, Spivak has been taken to task for presenting a paralyzing analysis of complicity (Varadharajan, 1995); failing to offer valid subaltern interventions (Moore-Gilbert, 1997); a political project of self-reflexive development considered untenable (Kapoor, 2004); and a troubling retreat from an internationalist political project of liberation. However, despite such criticisms, what cannot be overlooked is that Spivak has consistently examined “not just imperialism in the nineteenth-century sense, but as it was displaced into neo-colonialism and the international division of labor” (Spivak, 1985, p. 7). More to the point, the itinerancy, vastness, and deeply fluid quality of her epistemological intervention may hint to sharp encounters with the abyssal divide (Santos, 2007) of traditional forms of western analysis. In turn, this has made the process of bounding and categorizing Spivak’s unruly ideas within a singular sphere of theoretical engagement a rather trying undertaking.

Despite her critics, Spivak nonetheless recognizes that many issues she was contesting 30 years ago remain fundamental questions of engagement within the contemporary politics of subalternity today. About persistent concerns associated with the construction of democratic life, for example, Spivak asserts:

Since democracies depend on body count, and the largest sectors of the electorate everywhere (and especially in the so-called Global South) suffer from class apartheid in education, if we want to look forward to a democratic world, the persistent efforts of the production of subaltern intellectuals need to keep pace with capital’s equally persistent need to subalternize remains as relevant to the regulation of capitalism in other ways (see Footnote 1).

On persistent questions of colonialism, globalization, and postcolonial intellectuals, Spivak adamantly insists:

To locate colonialism in history, to recognize that historical degeneration did not begin with the play of capital and colony, that there were precolonial structures of oppression that have re-emerged in globality. We should distinguish this from the unexamined culturalism or somewhat idealistic radicalism of postcolonial disaporics. Those of us who are visible minorities should not allow the European fetishization of colonialism to interpellate us as such (see Footnote 1).

Hence, with these thoughts in mind, this special issue constitutes a small historical attempt to revisit Spivak’s concerns, through the writings of contemporary intellectuals,

whose ideas are situated within current dialogues and debates within the fields of postcolonial, anti-colonial, decolonizing, feminist, Marxist, and cultural studies. Most importantly, this special issue is produced through a spirit of solidarity – despite any disagreements or dissonances identified in this collection of article – and hope that the powerful ideas of another subaltern feminist scholar will not be erased from the annals of history, but rather continue to provide us with inspiration, challenges, and a radical commitment to undertake our scholarship with integrity, openness, and dedication to the making of a more democratic world.

Summary of articles

As should not be surprising, the contents of this special issue bring together a variety of perspectives and engagements related to Spivak’s seminal work. The collection is comprised of an interview with Spivak, along with ten scholarly contributions, which discuss in a variety of ways how Spivak’s ideas might be engaged within different possibilities of qualitative research. The articles include direct and indirect engagements of Spivak’s ideas in ways that seek to reaffirm, expand, and in some instances, challenge her conclusions. As such, although significantly different in their focus, the analytical dimensions employed by the authors nonetheless illustrate an unmistakable epistemological resonance across these contributions, which echo an unwavering commitment to question, contend with, and reinvent the current limits of qualitative research.

The collection begins with an excerpt from Steve Paulson’s interview with Spivak, conducted in 2016. Through Spivak’s reflection on her own work and practice, she sheds light on some key points that also underpin the contributions made to this special issue. Perhaps most importantly, Spivak rejects the idea of applying theory in intellectual work, insisting that theory and theorizing is something that is internalized in practice, something that is changed through the nuances of practice, and something that changes the practitioner in the process. And so, whether teaching literary studies to PhD candidates at Columbia, or teaching literacy to illiterate rural children in India, theorizing about the world is occurring through this practice in the world, making critical reflection on one’s practice crucial to any project of greater democracy, equality, liberty, and emancipation.

Antonia Darder’s paper opens the interrogation of Spivak’s work and legacy with a comprehensive intervention that highlights the fundamental transformation of the whole idea/project of research and knowledge production, by and alongside subaltern actors, that this critique entails. The paper successfully bridges some of the key ideas advanced in other contributions by coupling the apparent project of critical deconstruction of colonial research, on the one hand, to a normative commitment to emancipation and decolonization, in the fullest sense, on the other. The paradigm advanced by Darder thus powerfully holds on to the dual objectives of responding to the problems of representation, and advancing the project of emancipation and decolonization, through a potentially radical and transformative “decolonizing interpretive research” paradigm that is developed and advocated in the paper.

Gabriele Griffin elaborates a case to view what Spivak presents as discontinuous forms of representation, *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*, as radically continuous, and so holding out the potential for research with the subaltern to contribute to emancipatory transformation. She carefully details the potentials for individuals and groups’ voices to be appropriated as the researcher “speaks for” the researched, but also for the researcher to advocate for and co-produce knowledge with the researched in ways that work against oppression and can contribute to social change. Griffin clearly articulates and maintains her commitments to changing the conditions of subaltern women’s lives through action, and with them the potential contribution of critical research to social transformation, challenging researchers to engage with the tensions of representation in their practice.

Like Griffin, Michelinos Zembylas grounds his contribution on Spivak's critique of intellectuals' representation of the subaltern, and the associated "paradox" of critical researchers' efforts to engage with and transform their research subjects' subalternity, working in practice to maintain or worsen their position. Zembylas develops a program for "opening up" ways of researching that can move beyond this bind and maintain "transformative possibilities for justice," through critical ethnographic and qualitative research that includes explicit engagement with the role of affects and emotions in the research process.

João Paraskeva takes up the challenge of Spivak's work, drawing perhaps on the spirit of May 1968 to make the provocative claim to be realistic and achieve the impossible, articulated in terms of "a general epistemology of the impossibility of a general epistemology," and of decolonizing liberatory responses to subalternity in ways that generate subaltern social consciousness that is not tied to fixed theoretical positions. This ambitious intervention is grounded in postcolonial critiques of singular, western, modernist, theorizing, and corresponding ways of knowing and being, positing Itinerant Curriculum Theory as an approach that pushes beyond these positions and provide an orientation that can bridge a liberatory research project with non-western epistemologies.

Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, Peter McLaren, and Lilia D. Monzó offer a critical appraisal of Spivak's work, and her critique of poststructuralist thinking in particular, arguing that it was insufficiently followed through, such that Spivak's emblematic postcolonial work loses its radical and liberatory power. This contribution is based on a critique of the dominant trends in postcolonial studies, and their depoliticizing potential, caught up in questions of textual representation. Instead the authors develop an argument for a return to the Marxist influences that informed Spivak's intervention, and so for Marxist perspectives on material inequalities as the starting point for not just interrupting or disrupting, but for transforming and moving beyond the very structures of international capitalism and its exploitative operation.

Applying Spivak's critique of the tendency to essentialize subalternity, Anita Nitu Jain, with associate authors Ahide Gutierrez, Grecia Perez, and Lucia Soriano, critically reflects on her own research practice to shed light on the multiple facets of subaltern subjectivity, and the complexities and ambiguities of working with, representing, and interpreting subaltern experiences, in this case the experiences of Latina (mostly Mexican) nannies working in the USA. Through this reflection, and the associated sense of "guilt" about the project and her pre-conceptions about the project's participants, Jain offers an interpretation of some of the interviews with the nannies that generates a fuller sense of the messy relationship between elite and subaltern subjectivities, and the inadequacy of simple binaries brought to the research. As with other papers in this special issue, the result is an affirmation of the need, and indeed the duty, of the politically engaged intellectual/academic to not abandon projects of representation, but to undertake these thoughtfully, in ways that grapple with and work through uncertainty.

Pierre W. Orelus approaches the issue of subalternity and its representation, raised by Spivak, in terms of the need to carefully and consciously, listen to subaltern voices, and to be open to challenges to one's own thinking and ways of knowing and being that this sort of authentic listening requires. Orelus develops this work through reflections on subaltern experiences within the academy, making use of testimonios of participants that highlight the multiplicity of subaltern experiences, and the various ways in which their systemic and interpersonal oppression is manifest through an "elitist, racist, linguistic, and sexist culture" within the academy. As a research methodology, the power of the testimonios to challenge homogenous portrayals of subaltern experience in this particular context is well illustrated in this paper.

Shivali Tukdeo's contribution to the special issue seeks to apply Spivak's insights to an understanding of the historical and ongoing construction of subaltern *Adivasi* communities in India and their relationship with the Indian state. This engaging historical overview of the *Adivasi* experience in India draws attention to the complexities of their responses to oppressive state power and institutions, and the ensuing dialectic of oppression and potential liberation within and against these institutions. In keeping with the focus of the special issue, Tukdeo draws attention to the potential for postcolonial structures and practices to effectively reinscribe the oppression and marginalization created under colonial rule, and hence the diverse *Adivasi* responses to construct a “rooted-yet-mobile, a dissenting-yet aspiring future.”

Kortney Hernandez develops a sharp application of Spivak's critique of colonial representations and silencing of the subaltern to the realms of “photographic colonialism” in research generally, and in service learning in particular. This critical paper comprehensively lays waste to the commonsensical belief in the neutrality of photography, elaborating the “colonizing consequences” of the act of photographing subaltern subjects, which in turn render them invisible. Hernandez reveals the cultural silencing and forgetting that these acts entail, rendering the subaltern as “fundamentally inconsequential,” and so reinforcing in some of the most powerful ways imaginable the very oppression that researchers engaged in fieldwork service learning programs may hope to address. The ethical responsibility of researchers to fully engage with the politics of photography is powerfully made.

In keeping with the theme of this special issue, Mark Vicars' paper is firmly grounded in the radical critique of traditional claims of scientific objectivity in social science research, affirming the problematic nature of what the researcher can be and can know, of themselves and of their research participants, in the research process. His presentation of “deep” or “thick” ethnographic material, working with gay men to explore the relationship between their sexuality and literacy practices, highlights both the potential for the subaltern to be heard and the complexities of such projects, including questions of power, identity, action, and agency that make its potential so necessarily difficult to realize.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue, collectively, offer important insights into the central dilemmas posed by Spivak that social science researchers have wrestled with for 30 years. We are referring here to questions of whether and how research with subaltern populations can avoid the perils of adding to, of reproducing, and reinscribing, forms of negating representation that mean they cannot speak, or cannot be truly seen and heard. Can the power differential between researcher and participants, and the colonial legacies of applying western epistemology to the study of the “other,” be overcome, or at least accounted for, in ways that avoid the pitfalls of absolute relativism and make critical and transformative research possible?

The contributions to this special issue also offer some hope for the possibilities of transformative and liberatory research through a constant, critical, and conscious engagement with the multiple tensions raised by the authors. They affirm that the subaltern can speak, can be felt, and can be heard, provided that constant, critical, and deeply compassionate and grounded forms of reflection, interrogation, and analysis are present. The research approaches followed and put forward are diverse, and are frequently unsettling of dominant paradigms by challenging the very dominance of western epistemological foundations that shape the ideas presented.

Moreover, the articles demonstrate the power of Spivak's contribution in provoking important political questions about identity, voice, and representation. As such, the articles illustrate a variety of moves toward critical, engaged, decolonizing, and transformative

research, rooted in epistemological analyses that embrace both uncertainties and itinerancies in ways that defy universal theories of not only defining subalternity, but also of defining humanity. Nevertheless, what does remain constant are the apparent transformative purposes and commitments to justice that move across the articles in this collection, and in some cases, the explicit call for researchers committed to liberation to keep sight of the systemic and structural conditions of subalternity and their consequences, in our revolutionary efforts. This requires qualitative researchers to not only challenge against existing historical and contemporary forms of oppression, but also to embody in their practice a clear ethical and moral compass toward social transformation, in solidarity with subaltern populations everywhere.

Notes

1. Source is a personal e-mail exchange between Spivak and Darder in 2017, during the process of co-editing this special issue of *QRJ*.
2. See Vanessa Andreotti's (2011) excellent discussion of Spivak's contributions and critics in Chapter 3 of her outstanding book, *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*.

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