“It’s not just a matter of speaking…”: the vicissitudes of cross-cultural interviewing

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Abstract

Purpose – In “Can the subaltern speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes the important distinction between representation as “Vertretung” and “Darstellung.” She also produces a strong version of whom she regards as a subaltern woman. Thirty years on both the distinction between “Vertretung” and “Darstellung” and the question of who the subaltern woman is, remain extremely important, not least in methodological considerations in cross-cultural contexts. A number of questions may be asked in relation to representation, such as: how distinct are its two meanings in the interviewing context? And how do they relate to the notion of the co-production of knowledge which has gained such traction in the past three decades? The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper, I draw on cross-cultural interviewing experiences. Starting from the silence of illiterate rural women in a study conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India, in 2011 (Mohanraj), this paper draws on the research experiences of the author and a number of projects reported on in Cross-Cultural Interviewing (Griffin, 2016) to elucidate how one might re-think both representation and subalternity in the contemporary globalized context.

Findings – The experiences of cross-cultural interviewing I draw on in this paper show that in the contemporary context subalternity may be more productively understood in terms of a continuum rather than as the radical state of unreachable, unspeaking alterity that Spivak proposes.

Originality/value – The paper contributes new perspectives on Spivak’s notion of the unspeaking alterity of the subaltern in light of globalized developments over the past 30 years and specific experiences of cross-cultural interviewing, as these comment on Spivak’s insights.

Keywords Representation, Cross-cultural, Feminist methodology, Co-production of knowledge, Cross-cultural interviewing, Gayatri Spivak, Subalternity

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In her complex and hugely influential essay “Can the subaltern speak?”[1] (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak deals, inter alia, with three issues that I want to revisit in this paper: the notion of the subaltern woman as subject; the idea of representation as “Darstellung” and as “Vertretung”; and the position and obligations of the investigating subject. Thirty years on, the issue of the subaltern woman’s subject position, the distinction between “Vertretung” and “Darstellung,” and the position of the investigating subject in relation to these remains extremely important, not least in methodological considerations in cross-cultural contexts. A number of questions, however, may still be asked, such as: who is the subaltern woman? And in relation to representation: how distinct are its two meanings, “Vertretung” and “Darstellung,” in the interviewing context? And how do they relate to the notion of the co-production of knowledge, which has gained such traction in the past three decades? We might also ask, finally, but imbricated in these questions, how does the investigating subject stand in relation to the subaltern woman, to “Darstellung” and “Vertretung”? And, do those questions leave us with the conclusions drawn by Spivak 30 years ago: “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (p. 104).

Starting from the seeming silence of illiterate rural women in a study conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India, in 2008 (Mohanraj, 2010), this paper also draws on the research
experiences and projects reported on in Cross-Cultural Interviewing (Griffin, 2016a) to elucidate how one might re-think both subalternity and representation, as well as tackle the positionality of the researcher, in the contemporary globalized context.

The subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation [...] (Spivak, p. 84)

In 2008, a PhD student of mine, Pranati Mohanraj, who was working on “Understanding Girls’ Absence from School in Madhya Pradesh, India” (2010), went back to her country for three months to conduct fieldwork in three villages in the form of interviews with out-of-school girls and their mothers, among others. Her purpose was to investigate why girls of school age were not actually in school. As an Indian, as a woman of similar age to half of her respondents (the mothers), as a mother (she took her young son on her fieldwork trip with her), and as someone who had worked as an education officer in the area where she was conducting her research, she was, as she herself describes it, something of an insider.

Nonetheless she found the research process quite fraught. When she began her interviews with the mothers, full of good intent, she found that “The most common answer I got was, ‘What do I know,’ ‘I don’t know,’ ‘how can I say anything about it’ or ‘I am illiterate, what do I know’. The common response of women [as opposed to men whom she also interviewed] was, ‘I am a woman, what do I know about this?’” (Mohanraj, 2010, p. 86). Mohanraj found that she “really had to coax them, encourage them and support them to speak out” (p. 86). As she later wrote:

The questions which involved a “why”, were always difficult for my participants to answer. For example, the instant answer to my question “why do grown-up girls not go to school?” was, “it is like that, they don’t go” (p. 86).

Baffled by the mothers’ answers, Mohanraj contacted me by e-mail asking for advice since she was finding it hard to get any responses that she thought would be illuminating in relation to her research concerns. I suggested that the particularities of her respondents’ answers were in themselves a finding, telling her something about these women’s lives and experiences, which was highly relevant to her research. Mohanraj’s participants’ answers were frequently short, referencing their gendered status as women as an explanation for why they had little to say (“I am a woman, what do I know about this”). They also made reference to their husbands by way of explaining their relative silence: “I do not know anything, you were talking to their father [her husband] the other day, so what else I will say. He must have said everything.” (p. 87). Mohanraj (2010) interpreted this as suggesting that “certain issues are so much embedded in the villagers’ lives and their day-to-day practice that they have become completely naturalized and cannot be imagined otherwise. I [...] felt strongly in other instances that my participants were not used to answering questions that involve ‘why’ and engage in an analysis of the issue, situation or condition” (p. 86).

Several issues surface here. One is the question of the subaltern woman – who is she? In Spivak’s account, there is a version of the subaltern woman where this woman constitutes such alterity – since she is fashioned in “colonialist historiography” (Spivak, 1988, p. 82) – that she is beyond reach: “[she] cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation.” In this, Spivak’s analysis is close to other feminist analyses from the 1970s and 1980s that posited women – for a variety of reasons – as wholly other (from men, from descriptions of “woman” or “women,” from each other, etc.). For instance, certain strands of lesbian theorizing suggested that lesbians were not women (or beyond the category woman), as this term was occupied by patriarchal notions of femaleness (Wittig, 1992; Frye, 1992)[2]. The difficulty with this position is that it creates a complete impasse – how does one in any way begin to engage when all engagement is deemed impossible?
Spivak’s (1988) “Can the subaltern speak?” is of course itself an answer to this and an engagement. And: one of the effects of the past 30 years of decolonization, postcoloniality, history-from-below, etc., has been to show that, to re-phrase Spivak, “the subaltern has [a] history and can [...] speak” (p. 83). If we think of subaltern women as in various ways radically disenfranchised (materially, politically, educationally, socio-culturally, etc.), it does not follow that they cannot speak or that they do not know. Mohanraj’s adult female respondents were not beyond reach. They were certainly disenfranchised economically, educationally, socio-culturally and politically, and largely had what I would describe as “a relational sense of agency,” meaning that they saw their agency as enacted by their male relatives (husbands, fathers). But they could speak and their responses produced a sense of their histories and self-understandings so that the issue in thinking about their answers was not a matter of them knowing and saying nothing, but of trying to understand what to make of what they were saying.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) discuss the psychoanalytic notion of “the defended subject” in relation to their research of fear of crime on so-called rough estates in the UK as presented by those who left those estates vs those who stayed. They start their volume with the question: “What do you, the researcher, assume about a person’s capacity to know, remember and tell about themselves?” (p. 1), and later show how the narratives people produce are partly inflected by their desire to positively reinforce the decisions they made. So those who left these rough estates highlighted the problematic of crime, whilst those who stayed played it down. In other words, people defend themselves and their stance through their narratives. Hollway and Jefferson’s question (quoted above) might be seen as a variant of the issues Spivak raises in her text, showing how colonialism – as a function of the assumptions underlying this project – constructs subjects, including the subaltern woman, as the one/s who does not know and cannot speak.

Hollway and Jefferson’s work was partly an analysis of their own assumptions as the investigating researchers, regarding what people from rough estates might say about crime. Mohanraj’s respondents were not like the subaltern woman of the colonial historiographies Spivak discusses; they did speak and did know – they told, as the quotes above make clear, of their sense of place in the speaking order and in the knowledge order, about the imbrication of that place in the gender order, and about their proxy agency, executed through their male relatives. Within the speaking order, they had to be approached after Mohanraj (2010) had talked to male elders and male relatives – a fact that one might describe, with Spivak, as “the problem of ‘the permission to narrate’” (p. 79). That permission – the permission that a woman, Mohanraj, might speak to another woman, her respondent – was conditional upon the gender order in which women clearly came second (relative to men).

Permission must here be thought of as distinct from capability – the competence to articulate one’s situation. In the knowledge order Mohanraj’s respondents (were) presumed not to know and reproduced that presumption: “What do I know?” Mohanraj (2010) herself read this as ‘my women participants devalue[d] themselves and [thought] that they did not know anything because they [were] women. In three instances, I had to abandon the interview with women (though I did not terminate the interview at the half way) as all my efforts to encourage them to speak proved to be ineffective. It was not that they did not want to speak, but I think, as they were not used to articulating themselves, they were unable to express themselves and I attribute this to their upbringing. One of my participants went to the extent of almost refusing to talk to me as she thought she had no knowledge of anything and could not be worthy of interviewing’ (p. 87).

Having only conditional permission to narrate, Mohanraj’s respondents articulated themselves through referencing their place in the socio-cultural order. This provided the explanatory force of their statements, their sense of permission to speak and their view of themselves in the knowledge order. In that way they were not defended subjects in Hollway and Jefferson’s sense. They were also not what Adler and Adler (2003) have described as
“reluctant respondents,” either secretive or sensitive. Rather, one might think of them as what I would term “declarative respondents,” people who told of their place in various intersecting orders, and in declaring those positions also explained their response.

Given Mohanraj’s (2010) initially despairing reaction to the women’s way of answering her questions, it would have been possible for these women to become “wholly other” in her account of her fieldwork, either erased or thought of as non-communicating or as needing to be spoken for. But this did not happen. For, as Spivak states, “For the ‘figure’ of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge” (p. 82). Mohanraj did plot the relationship between women and silence as an effect of a series of interlocking orders, of knowledge, gender, agency, etc. Her experience reminded me of a painful aspect of my own familial history where my now dead father was in the habit of saying to my mother, “Don’t talk such nonsense” when she said things he did not want to hear. He would conjoin this phrase with the diminutive version of her first name, as a way of verbally infantilizing her and putting her in her place. Such devaluing and belittling of women and their views was not, and continues not to be, uncommon, including in western middle-class contexts.

Here the heterogeneity of the “Other,” as Spivak puts it, is cut across by a common patriarchal gesture found in many cultures of diminishing and dismissing women and their perspectives. But this heterogeneity may resurface in other contexts, for instance among those who are “othered” in a given culture. In ‘Cross-cultural interviewing with/as minority women’ Beatrice Akua-Sakyiwah (2016), a Ghanaian woman, discusses her experiences of interviewing Somali women refugees in the UK. Interested in their access to services (migration, social, health, education) in Britain, she approached women whom she had helped previously in their interaction with such services when she had been a teacher of their children. Having promised her help with her research, she then found that the women whom she had helped before were unwilling after all to be interviewed. Akua-Sakyiwah was deeply disappointed by this: “Based on my assumption of reciprocity […] I had thought that it would be easy to connect with and to interview them. However, it turned out I was wrong. The parents completely rejected me” (p. 46).

As a consequence, Akua-Sakyiwah felt very frustrated: “I felt a certain frustration, which stemmed from two things: I went to the research field with the mindset that I would have an easy and smooth research process because my participants are people from the same continent who have the same diasporic experiences as myself in the UK” (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2012, pp. 77-78). As she puts it: “Realising that I was being treated as an outsider, I felt a sense of alienation from the research domain and this created a conflict within me that was truly demoralizing” (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2012, p. 77). When one of her interviewees called her “sister” in the interview, she was able to rationalize this as part of intra-African mores in her writing-up of her research, but also expressed her rejection of this appellation because she had felt rejected by this and other interviewees in her turn before (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2016, pp. 57, 59). Thwarted in her desire for recognition and mutuality or reciprocity, Akua-Sakyiwah experienced, and subsequently reflected upon, the incommensurabilities of different kinds of subalternity. Despite the fact that both her Somali participants and she herself had experienced multiple forms of marginalization, this did not result in bonding or reciprocity of support. Heterogeneities of otherness prevented this.

For both Mohanraj and Akua-Sakyiwah, the process of conducting research through interviewing, and interviewing that involved translators as well, raised questions about how to represent what they had found. This is an issue that anybody conducting interviews faces since the processing of that material involves repeated interpretation. Katherine Borland (1991) has movingly written about this in relation to an oral history project she conducted with her grandmother which resulted in her grandmother expressing “strong disagreement with [her] conclusions” (p. 69), particularly the notion that her narrative
represented “a female struggle for autonomy in a hostile environment” (p. 67). That interpretive conflict led Borland to a discussion about the meaning of interpreting others’ narratives. She suggests that “the fieldwork exchange fosters a tendency to downplay differences, as both investigator and source seek to establish a footing with one another and find a common ground from which to proceed with the work of collecting and recording oral materials” (p. 72). This, I would suggest, is certainly and frequently the case from the researcher’s perspective; both Mohanraj and Akua-Sakyiwah proceeded to some extent, and not without reason, from expectations of a certain sameness or common ground as the basis for their interaction with their respondents. At the moment of representation, however, those expectations seemed confounded.

Representation: Are “Darstellung” and “Vertretung” irreducibly discontinuous? (Spivak, 1988, p. 70)

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak (1988) makes the important distinction between representation as “Vertretung” or speaking-for or on behalf of, and as “Darstellung” or description (p. 70). Here representation as “Vertretung” is aligned with the state and the law, and representation as “Darstellung” is associated with “subject-predication,” the rendering of the subject in her description. Spivak argues strongly that the two are “related but irreducibly discontinuous” (p. 70), and that to imagine a “beyond […] where oppressed subjects speak, act and know for themselves, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics” (p. 71). Working with translators, as Mohanraj and Akua-Sakyiwah did, meant mediation. Akua-Sakyiwah vividly describes how she herself felt and was marginalized in interview situations because her participants and the translators spoke the same language that she did not share. Akua-Sakyiwah (2012) interpreted her triangular interview situations (participant-translator-researcher) as entailing power struggles that made her “‘invisible’ in the social world of the interview,” leading to a situation where “To date, I am not sure whether the data I collected reflect a true picture of the lived experiences these women expressed in their stories” (p. 74).

Here then we have the problematic of representation. Interviewing always involves translation, from the spoken encounter, through the re-rendering of narratives from one language into another, to the migration of the oral into written text. Each stage of this process is hermeneutic, involving translation and as such interpretation. Nothing is quite the same across the different stages of this process, due to its mediation at each turn, sometimes several times over. “Darstellung”, here interpreted as the faithful rendering of what one has observed or been told, is always already an interpretation, mediated by what one is able or not able to take in, give meaning to, recognize as meaningful. In the process of “Darstellung” it is, of course, possible to be deliberately misleading or inadvertently mis-representing but the more likely scenario is “unconscious bias” or the mediated presentation of what one has observed, inflected by the researcher’s capacity to process that material, psychologically and socio-culturally.

In this sense, I would argue that there is no “Darstellung” that is not also always already “Vertretung.” To present is to offer a viewpoint, a viewpoint that will be partial. The image that is produced is an image both of the researched and of the researcher. The researcher takes on the representation of the researched simultaneously, as description and as interpretation. As such there is always an element of “Vertretung,” of speaking in someone else’s name and/or place, and thus for them. The radical discontinuity that Spivak posits does not hold. The researcher, in trying to understand what she is told, recognizes, if she is at all reflective, the problematics of “Darstellung” in the first instance. This signals the limitations that any sign system used to present data imposes on that presentation in its socio-cultural and other inflections, and this is before and part of any biases, positive and negative, she herself might impose on the data.

Borland (1991) discusses this phenomenon in terms of the “interpretive respect” (p. 64) one should accord the researched. This is precisely what standpoint theory, which emerged
at the same time as Spivak’s essay, has taught feminists (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1988).
One might, in fact, argue that “Darstellung” and “Vertretung” are radically continuous. The inter-relation between the two, however, does not invalidate representation as such. Rather, it requires recognition that accuracy or faithfulness to what one has observed or been told, for example, does not equal identity or self-sameness. Difference at the same time does not equal incommensurability. Rather, “Darstellung” is always approximation, the imperfect rendition of the partially understood. There are, in Marilyn Strathern’s (2004) phrase, “commons and borderlands.” Sometimes this may result in appropriation, in the taking over of voices made audible through their recording, for specific ideological purposes. This danger is always present.

This is also the case in feminist research which has always made claims of “giving voice” to disenfranchised groups, of seeking change, and of social transformation – hence ideological claims. As Borland (1991) puts it in relation to her work with her grandmother:

On the one hand, we seek to empower the women we work with by revaluing their perspectives, their lives, and their art in a world that has systematically ignored or trivialized women’s culture. On the other, we hold an explicitly political vision of the structural conditions that lead to particular social behaviours, a vision that our field collaborators […] may not recognize as valid (p. 64).

Feminist claims both to facilitating other women’s empowerment and to seeing the structural rather than the individual bases for particular conditions can produce the notion of advocacy as beneficial, not as disempowering or mis-representing. And this may be the case even as, or even if, the field collaborators do not agree with the reading of their situation.

Advocacy has in and of itself a complex history within feminist (methodological) thought. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a strong line of argument amongst disenfranchised groups that only they could speak for and about themselves. Here advocacy was figured as a form of patronage, or matronage, an arrogant arrogation of the privilege of knowing and speaking to the privileged subject. Speaking as speaking for, or on behalf of. Writers such as bell hooks (1982, 1984) rejected this arrogation and saw the need to take voice (rather than to be given voice) as a necessary correlative and corrective to the empowerment for disenfranchised groups. However, not all those in subaltern positions have the possibility to take voice.

A case Spivak does not consider, for example, is that of the subaltern who knows but cannot speak the text of exploitation because she is trapped in a given situation. I encountered a vivid version of this in the reflective work of a Masters student (not at a university where I was working) – let’s call her “Woman W” – who described her history of repeated marginalization and of being invisible, specified by her as “not being able to be seen.” At the heart of her narrative was the notion of “invisibility” and how one represents the invisible. She had the experience of “not being able to be seen” as a child carer for a multiply disabled mother, as a teenage woman who identified as lesbian but was married off against her will and ended up having two children in quick succession one of whom died an unexplained cot death, as a bereaved parent, as someone struggling with domestic abuse and with mental health issues. The same woman also described how she was helped in these various situations by peer groups, by professionals who asked her (instead of presuming to know) what she needed, etc. Her narratives make clear that there are times when advocacy is key to being able to move on, to become empowered and to transform what you know but have not been able to speak, with the help of others.

Such a dialogic relation is not envisaged in Spivak’s text but it is part of the feminist desire to co-produce knowledge and to arrive at change through discussion and negotiation. Borland, for example, suggests that one way forward with her interpretive dilemma regarding her grandmother might have been to re-play the interview recordings to her
grandmother and ask her to elucidate the meanings of what she had said, arguing: “the narrator’s commentary on and interpretation of a story can contribute greatly to the researcher’s understanding of it” (p. 71). Agreed.

In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systematically “unlearns” female privilege” (Spivak, p. 91)

There is a question about what “speaking to” in Spivak’s parlance actually means. In the case of Woman W, becoming able to be seen involved being asked what she needed and that need then being acted upon. In the case of Mohanraj’s research participants, becoming seen involved seeking to understand what the mothers she interviewed had told her. There is a “speaking to” which is a “speaking about,” referencing a hermeneutic process of interpreting what one has heard or observed, and doing so faithfully, that is with the aim of remaining true to what one has heard or observed. However, this requires a prior process of knowledge exchange. And exchange is the right word here. For as all the contributors to Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Feminist Experiences and Reflections (Griffin, 2016a) clearly outline, interviewing operates in a field of shifting power and knowledge relations, where the supposed power and knowledge differentials and asymmetries between researcher and researched are more appropriately read as in constant negotiation. This, however, is not to deny that there are forms of radical disenfranchisement that put subjects beyond reach (one might think of the detainees at Guantanamo Bay as one such group, or the women who were detained in Britain’s mental asylums under the banner of “moral turpitude”), meaning into positions where their power of negotiation is reduced to zero or near zero. But in many contemporary research situations disenfranchisement is not as radical as that.

When a South Korean student of mine interviewed gays and lesbians in Seoul, her respondents were not economically or educationally disenfranchised but in terms of living their sexuality openly. Some experienced this disenfranchisement as socially very crippling – they had to hide their relationships everywhere except possibly among other gays and lesbians. Living in the closet was a painful process for many of them. Hwajeong Kim-Yoo writes about how “interview location matter[ed]” (2016, pp. 138-139) in this context, as respondents were afraid to be overheard talking about their sexual identity. These interviewees’ subalternality was of a particular kind, highly contextual and specific to an aspect of self that was potentially concealable. This, of course, does not detract from the difficulty of being subalternized because of one’s sexuality, but it suggests that subalternality exists on a continuum, from those utterly beyond reach to those subalternized in subtle but deeply impactful ways for not fitting certain social norms and categories.

The researcher, too, can experience disenfranchisement if, for example, she is rendered helpless in an interview situation to support the participant in the way in which she thinks (and it is only ever that, i.e. her thinking, since there is no hearing without reception), this might be necessary or desirable. And here I am not speaking of the equivalent of Spivak’s (1988) “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (p. 92) – the so-called savior complex. Here I am talking of the researcher’s response to an appeal for help from an informant. I have written elsewhere of such an experience and my difficulties in dealing with that situation (Griffin, 2016b). Saving may not always be possible or exactly what is required, and unlearning female privilege may mean recognizing the limitations of what one can do or understand. It may also, for example, mean learning to understand that differences may not be as absolute as one imagines them to be.

Marianne Liliequist’s (2016) experiences of interviewing settlers in the Swedish mountain region where she grew up and Iranians in exile in Sweden taught her that the differences she had assumed between these two groups of people were not as great as she had assumed. In particular they shared “the art of waiting,” of “not hurrying,” of valuing silence and
measured speech (pp. 70-71). Her experiences in the field taught her to re-think her sense of alienation. As an anthropologist her aim was to get away from “culturalizing” her informants by presenting them in a “folksy” manner, which renders ways of doing things specific to given individuals or groups. That problematic is in some ways particular to anthropological research, possibly more so where an outsider enters a particular geo-social space to observe its inhabitants and record their habits. It has also the effect of distancing the researcher.

Going into the field as a relative outsider is only one kind of research. Another involves those who go to another country to do a PhD and then conduct fieldwork in their home country. This has become quite a common phenomenon in the UK. One of the ways in which things have changed in many European countries since 1988 is that there are many more migrants from diverse countries in Europe – as workers, as refugees, as students. In the Centre for Women’s Studies at the University of York, UK, where I worked until 2016, around 75 percent or so of PhD students were from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Russia, China, Taiwan, Jordan, Oman, Thailand, Ghana, Japan, South Korea – in other words, from all over the world. These women were often hugely privileged compared to other women in their home countries, since going to the UK to study involved large amounts of money as well as know-how, perseverance in the light of visa difficulties, etc. They themselves might in many ways be described as “postcolonial intellectuals” and they were certainly not subaltern, in the sense of being radically disenfranchised. But as is common in academe, studying for them could mean studying “down” rather than studying “up,”[3] engaging with questions of disenfranchised groups, mostly women, sometimes sexual or ethnic minorities, within their own countries. And, within their own countries, as much as elsewhere, they might still be regarded as second-class citizens compared to men.

These PhD students almost always found themselves having to unlearn female privilege, their own privilege relative to that of other social groups in their country, but also having to negotiate differently privileged or unprivileged statuses in their own countries, relative to the host communities to which they had moved. This was often a fraught and complex process. And, indeed, I too had to unlearn female privilege in supervising them, since the things I could take for granted regarding the conduct of research, for example, they frequently could not. Written consent forms that could be signed were not, for example, a practicable way of ensuring consent when working with illiterate women in a rural area of India where giving one’s signature or thumb print was regarded with suspicion, since one might be signing away land or rights.

Unlearning privilege, then, needs to happen in many ways. Speaking to the muted subject of the subaltern woman, in whatever guise she comes, requires the recognition that neither the investigator position nor the position of the subaltern woman is given or determinate. Rather, it is about negotiation, seeking to understand in such a way that “the informants [can] recognize themselves in the final result” (Liliequist, 2016. p. 66). This does not detract from “the researcher’s ultimate responsibility for the academic text” (Liliequist, 2016, p. 66), but that responsibility comes with obligations to the respondents.

So, can the subaltern speak? Some conclusions
Spivak’s provocative question was in part addressed to the largely male Subaltern Studies Group which arose in the 1980s and of which postcolonial scholars/intellectuals such as Eric Thomas Stokes, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, Ranajit Guha and a number of others were members. Their erasure of the subaltern woman, “doubly in the shadow” (Spivak, p. 84), was challenged by Spivak’s text and analysis both of these postcolonial intellectuals’ work and of the historiographies of disenfranchised women. It has become further and increasingly challenged by the newer histories-from-below, by standpoint theory and its implications for the conduct of research, by the arrival, albeit in very small
numbers, of people from social, sexual, ethnic and economic minorities in establishment institutions (Ahmed, 2012).

The subaltern woman can and does speak – Mohanraj’s respondents made that clear. It is another matter, though, whether she is heard or not. Ahmed (2012) describes how being “given permission” to speak, so to speak, can become a way of silencing. That danger exists in many contexts. To countermand this, Ahmed (2017) has produced a clarion call to action intended to dispel the notion that license to speak equals hearing and responding to what is said rather than its containment. Ahmed’s (2012) text on diversity policies makes clear that representation, here understood as “Darstellung” and as “Vertretung,” does not in and of itself change anything. And change is what feminism is still about.

So it is important to recognize, in the first instance, that “Darstellung” and “Vertretung” are not radically discontinuous but are in fact continuous. Second, the attempt to be faithful to what one has been told and to what one has seen, to enable the informants to recognize themselves in what is said about them, is the researcher’s moral obligation; but that in itself, as Ahmed’s work on diversity shows, and as every woman knows from the fact that whilst most countries have equality legislation few practice it in actuality (one only needs to consider the pay gap across the world), does not change the status of the subaltern woman or the conditions of her life. Unlearning privilege might help here but actions do continue to speak louder than words, and to change the conditions of subaltern women’s lives requires more than speaking.

Notes
1. For a detailed discussion of the meaning of the term “subaltern” in Antonio Gramsci’s work from which Spivak in part derives her notion of the subaltern see Green (2002).
2. These texts contain essays written in the 1970s and 1980s.
3. See Puwar (2004, pp. 34-35) for a commentary on the experience of studying “up”.

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