CAN THE SUBALTERN
REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA
SPEAK?

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This book is indebted to many people. It emerged from a conference bearing the same title as the book, which was generously supported by Columbia University's Office of the Provost, then occupied by Jonathan Cole. That conference was hosted by Columbia's Institute for Research on Women and Gender, whose staff members, Page Jackson and Amalia Zarřanz, worked tirelessly to make my ambitions a reality (I was then its director). Many colleagues and intellectual fellow travelers attended the conference, and their questions informed the final versions of many of the essays here as well as the volume as a whole. I am grateful to all of them.

rest in the Philippines and severely strained diplomatic relations between Singapore and Manila.

56 See Fu and Singam, “The Culture of Exploitation and Abuse.”
60 Price and, Lim, “Reliance on Maids.”
61 “Worker Treatment Reflects on Singapore.”
62 See Foucault, “The Birth of Biopolitics,” p. 75: “The idea of society enables a technology of government to be developed based on the principle that it itself is already ‘too much,’ ‘in excess.’ . . . Instead of making the distinction between state and civil society into a historical universal that allows us to examine all the concrete systems, we can try to see it as a form of schematization characteristic of a particular technology of government.”
64 Ibid.

MOVING ON FROM SUBALTERNITY

INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN GUATEMALA AND MEXICO

In 2003, Gayatri Spivak was invited by the Latin American Studies Association to give a keynote address at its conference. It is unusual for a non-Latin American specialist who is not a secretary of state or a Washington presence to be invited. Among members of the audience was the Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú, around whom millions of words have been uttered, and a number of academics who had helped form a Latin American subaltern studies group, founded on the model of the Indian subaltern studies. The initiative had founndered on disagreements and on the incongruity of ostentatiously not representing the subaltern within the U.S. academy.

Spivak did not speak about Latin America but about the Iraq war, and a public discussion with Rigoberta Menchú did not take place, although her question, “Can the subaltern speak?” could not but have resonances in Latin America where writers and other intellectuals, as members of the literate class, had long claimed to speak for and represent the illiterate. As recently as the sixties and seventies there were countless conferences that debated the responsibility of the intellectual not to mention liberation theology’s commitment to the poor and the challenge of active engagement posed by guerrilla movements that gave armed struggle precedence over intellectual work. Yet in none of the debates and discussions were there addressed the questions raised by Spivak’s essay.

Where “Can the Subaltern Speak?” had most impact, however, was among Latin Americanists in the United States and especially in the controversies and arguments around one particular “subaltern,” Rigoberta Menchú, whose interview and testimony, transcribed by Elizabeth Burgos-
Debray, was, soon after its publication in English in 1984, a year after it had appeared Spanish, celebrated and debated. The book was dragged into the Lynn Cheney–inspired debates over the Western canon after it appeared on a Stanford University syllabus; it was invoked as a source of inspiration by guilt-tripped academics and claimed as a teaching tool in an effort to increase U.S. student awareness of other cultures, as an ethical example, and as a challenge to literary studies that had suppressed orality. Menchú was also, with much publicity, condemned on the grounds that, for political reasons, she had spun her own biased version of Guatemalan insurgency. Following on the anthropologist David Stoll's claim that her testimonial was not always factually correct, hostile reporters immediately termed her a liar. Yet the testimonial is also what made the subaltern Menchú a public intellectual and gave her an influence that cannot be limited to her published testimony of 1983. There are over 30,000 entries in Google under Rigoberta Menchú, she is director of a foundation, she receives delegations, participates in international forums, and wrote a public letter to President Vicente Fox of Mexico, urging him not to support the security council resolution supporting war against Iraq, and she has published a second book, Rigoberta: La nieta de los Mayas, describing the difficulties she has encountered in the public arena. In other words, she is more of a political activist than a subaltern. She has become the name attached to all kinds of speculations around race, gender, and subalternity both here in the U.S. and in Guatemala where an estimated 160,000 members of the indigenous population were massacred in the eighties and more than 450 Maya villages destroyed. In the context of this genocide, Rigoberta Menchú's survival is of some significance, and not only her survival, but the testimony that launched her from subalternity to becoming a public intellectual.

Since the discussion with Spivak did not take place, I would like to imagine it as a conversation in which both participants move beyond the positions into which some commentators would like to petrify them. In Spivak's case, that means taking into consideration some recent texts and, more important, the revisionary version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that appeared in the "History" chapter of A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. It is a rich and complex chapter that ranges over archival material of the East Indian Company, in search of the Rani of Sirmur, while appropriating insights from many fields and in the process developing her critique of Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault among others. Both the earlier and later essay are acerbic criticisms of the "transparency" of those intellectuals who "report on the nonrepresented subject" and "the foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production." She also explores the erasures of the imperial historical record of the Rani, who was certainly not a subaltern. The history chapter also provides new definitions of subalternity within nation building, a topic also brilliantly handled in the essay "Draupadi" by Mahasweta Devi in In Other Worlds, and of the "new subaltern" brought into being by the financialization of the globe and the denial of consumption to sectors of the exploited population, particularly women. In the course of this wide-ranging discussion, Spivak describes her visits to Jaipur where she comes upon women gathering leaves and vegetation for their animals and comments, "these are the rural subaltern historically distanced from the relay between princely state and nation state." She continues, "They were the rural subaltern, the real constituency of feminism, accepting their lot as the norm, quite different both from urban female subproletariat in crisis and resistance." This "unorganized landless female labor," she goes on to note, "is one of the targets of super-exploitation where local, national, and international capital intersect. By that route of super-exploitation these women are brought into capital logic, into the possibility of crisis and resistance" (242–243), although, she argues, they cannot be placed in some general category such as "third world women's resistance." In the same chapter she mentions the emergence of the new subaltern in the New World Order: "This new subaltern under postfordism and international subcontracting becomes the mainstay of globalization" and is "rather different from the nationalist example" (276/42).

Thus, a distinction has now been made between subalternities and between the rural subaltern and urban subproletariat, for whom "the denial and withholding of consumerism and the structure of exploitation is compounded by patriarchal social relations" (277/43). Although I find somewhat enigmatic the proposal that "to confront this group is not only to represent them globally in the absence of infrastructural support, but also to learn to represent ourselves" (276/42), and would like her to expand on the suggestion, the conclusion of the chapter points forward. Weighing some responses to the essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak comments on a multi-authored article that appeared in the Socialist Review under the heading "Can the Subaltern Vote?" Agreeing with the authors that there is a fruitful way of extending the reading of subaltern speech into a collective arena, she writes, "Access to "citizenship" (civil society) by becoming a voter (in the nation) is indeed the symbolic circuit of the mobilizing of subalternity into hegemony." To which she adds a parenthesis, "(Unless we want to be romantic purists or primitivists about 'preserving subalternity'—a contradiction in terms—this is absolutely to be desired)" (309–310). It is this point that I now want to follow up with reference not only to Rigoberta Menchú's
own "mobilization into hegemony" but also to some contemporary indigenous women's movements in Latin America.

Spirak referred to Rigoberta Menchú's testimony in two footnotes to the "History" chapter of A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. In both instances what strikes her is the final sentences of the testimony in which Menchú declares that she has withheld some information from the transcriptionist and editor, Elizabeth Burgos-Debruy, as well as from the reader:

Of course, I'd need a lot of time to tell you about my people, because it's not easy to understand just like that. And I think I've given some idea of that in my account. Nevertheless I am still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.

The first footnote is embedded in a discussion of her own position as "gadfly" and of those women who are in step with the model of production narrative, "as participants/resisters/victims" (244-245/21, 66n1). The footnote recommends reading Menchú "against the grain of her necessarily identity-political idiom, borrowing from a much older collective tactic (namely secrecy) against colonial conquest." Commenting on the closing words of the testimony, Spivak writes, "The text is not in books and the secret keeps us, not the other way round" (245/66n1), by which I understand it "keeps us" in our place as the perpetually curious but experientially different metropolitan retriever of information.

A second footnote discusses Tony Morrison's Beloved in the context of maternal sacrifice as "on the cusp of the violent change from animism to de-hegemonized Christianity." This is a story that, somewhat like Rigoberta's true indigenous identity, cannot be passed on. Spivak comments, "In spite of the Latin American Indian (what a multiple errant history in the naming) topos of claiming secrecy in the face of the conquistador, I remain somewhat persuaded by Doris Sommer's placing of the theme of secrecy in Morrison and Menchú together" (305/78n98). The Sommers article argues that "to read women's testimonials, curiously, is to mitigate the tension between a First World 'self' and a Third World 'other.' I do not mean this as a license to deny the differences, but as a suggestion that the testimonial subject may be a model for respectful, non-totalizing politics." Of course, this is an unexceptional position in the U.S. academic context and certainly preferable to arrogance based on ignorance. Several academic critics in the U.S. have similarly made the shift from first world arrogance in order to sidestep the transparency that Spivak detects in Foucault and Deleuze, although their refusal to sin in the same way does not always convince, nor does it alter their own institutional embedding much less the ambiguities surrounding the "secrets." For those of us who are institutionally embedded, the hope is to exercise responsibility along the guidelines that Rigoberta suggests—that is, dissemination of information about atrocities that need to be publicized and reserved when it comes to people's private lives, which, in the case of the indigenous, are communal lives. The secret that is not to be passed on, is, in fact Rigoberta Menchú's indigenous identity, which binds her to a community that in this case forbids her to speak her true name.

There are two points to be made about this, first, the unacknowledged conflict between secrecy and the impulse to speak. The very genre of testimony has roots in the Christian public declaration of faith. In this respect, it is worth noting that Rigoberta's political consciousness was sparked by the base communities and the catechistic discussions of liberation theology that transmitted an anticapitalist ethos dating back to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century missionaries. The Spanish title of the testimony, "Me llamó Rigoberta Menchú y así nací mi conciencia" (My name is Rigoberta Menchú and thus my consciousness was born or this is how my consciousness was born), clearly associates the identity of Menchú, her personhood, with the acquisition of consciousness. The obligation to give testimony, however, does not apply to the secret identity given to her by the indigenous community even as that community is decimated and scattered by civil war. Secrecy binds a threatened community and was certainly learned from the long experience of defeat and appropriation as well from the exigencies of guerrilla warfare that thrust the woman subaltern into militancy. There are competing imperatives in Menchú's story between testifying and concealing that can only be illuminated by more recent developments.

Secrecy is a strategy of defense of community customs that seeks to make them invulnerable to outside scrutiny. Certainly, as long as that scrutiny is directed from the metropolis in the cause of some supposed universal it must fall under suspicion. But, in the years since the publication of Rigoberta's testimony, those customs have now been scrutinized in the name of rights by indigenous women who have undertaken their own way out of subalternity and into citizenship. This is a long road and has to be followed along its historical trajectory.

The "capture" of the settled population of the indigenous was a long process that in Mexico and the Andean region encouraged the notion of a primordial community, notwithstanding the fact that over four centuries communities were made and remade. After the conquest, the indigenes were reorganized first into Indian republics (the conquerors often used in-
digenous nobility to govern them), then later organized into Indian villages with limited powers but with communal lands. “While this fictional cultural autonomy,” in the words of June Nash, “masked an exploitative relationship that tapped the communities for labor power and products in an unequal exchange that benefited the state and ladino-dominated towns, it nonetheless allows Indians to exercise distinctive cultural practices within their own communities.”

Consider the case of Mexico. In the nineteenth century liberal reform policy destroyed the legal basis for communal lands, many of which were seized by landowners. Only in the aftermath of the 1910–1917 Revolution were there a radical change in attitudes toward the indigenous, who now were promised land and access to nationhood and reimagined as part of the postrevolutionary nation. Article 4 of the 1917 constitution stated that “the Law will protect and promote the growth of their (indigenous) language, cultures, uses, customs, resources and specific forms of social organization and will guarantee to its members effective access to the jurisdiction of the states.” The Indian pueblos were thus “rescued and reconstituted as communities under the guardianship of the state.”

Anthropologists and others often depicted indigenous communities as closed and resistant to change, and, for this reason, they were either idealized as anticapitalist enclaves or seen as impediments to modernization, an ambivalence reflected in fluctuating language policies that vacillated between teaching literacy in indigenous languages or in Spanish. During its long domination, from 1929 to 2000, the institutional party of Mexico, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), used corporatist strategies for maintaining the loyalty of indigenous communities. Community leaders were incorporated into the government party, and their inclusion perpetuated the fiction of a nation that would eventually become the amalgam of different races—a mestizo state. Even so, the primordial indigenous community remained a useful fiction of the state, even when it pursued development programs and assimilationist policies through literacy campaigns. The organization of indigenous groups into regions of refuge, into self-regulating municipalities, was, in fact, an effective method of paternalist control and neglect, especially when poverty forced the indigenous to do seasonal labor while remaining marginal to the state.

During the height of developmentalist policies in the 1980s, there were sporadic attempts to distribute land and make peasant farmers into something more than subsistence farmers by encouraging crops for export. In the 1990s this situation radically changed. Neoliberal economic reforms in the wake of a debt crisis and during the very corrupt government of Salinas de Corti (1988–94) modified the agrarian reform program initiated by the Revolution and allowed the privatization of communal lands. Meanwhile the NAFTA (free trade agreement) which allowed cheap foreign imports of food and other staples destroyed the agrarian base of subsistence economies. The crisis was particularly acute in Chiapas where a boom in oil in the 1970s led to an accelerated demand for indigenous labor or at least male labor to work on dam construction and agricultural development programs. Some indigenous men worked part-time in the oil industry, learned Spanish in the process, and left women behind to look after the villages. The indigenous were hit particularly hard in 1982 when oil prices fell and precipitated a debt crisis leading to devastating structural adjustments—for instance, the drying up of credit for poor farmers, which coincided with the decline in prices of coffee on the international market. There is no better illustration of this than Spivak’s forceful description of the “third-world woman” disappearing “into a violent shuffling. . . . caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development.”

Nevertheless, other circumstances came into play in Chiapas where the government’s freeing of land in the Lacandon forest for cultivation and its colonization by landless peasants fortuitously altered the position of women. A complexity of factors brought together a few remaining leftist militants and a migrant indigenous peasantry and it was here, in the Lacandon forest, that the EZLN (Bjército de Liberación Nacional) was born and the gendered subaltern found her way out of subalternity.

Indigenous women, when isolated within their communities, usually spoke only their tribal tongue—tojolal, chamula, chole, zoque, tzeltal, tzotil—a reminder of the divisive effects of colonialism. Thrown together during the colonization of the forest, no longer separated from other groups, they were also less subject to community practices. Some of the women joined the Zapatista army, where they were taught to wear arms, and it was these women who began to challenge the customs that had impeded their participation in community politics and prevented their education and their welfare. They insisted that the feminine article be used before the noun insurgente when referring to a woman rather than the “universal” masculine article, describing themselves as insurgentes. The second decisive action they took was to draw up a declaration of women’s rights that specifically challenged “bad customs” in the name of rights that included, among other demands, the right to choose their husband, the right to decide on the number of children they could have, the right to medical attention and education, and the right to participate in community decisions. When the Zapatistas emerged from the forest in January 1994 and proclaimed “the
first rebellion against neoliberalism,” women participated in the capture of municipalities. They are now estimated to number about 40 percent of the Zapatista army.20

The declaration of rights (Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres del EZLN)21 became the basis for discussion of women’s rights at the National Indigenous Women’s meetings and was also publicized by Comandante Esther in an appearance before the Mexican Congress. Reference to women’s right to participate in communities on an equal basis was included in the San Andrés Accords, which is the major policy platform of the Zapatistas and was agreed upon by government representatives, though never officially ratified. The accords also affirmed the autonomy of the indigenous communities.22

Spivak has warned us that appeals for human rights on an international level can be a first world political strategy of control. In her essay “Righting Wrongs,” she advocates education from below as a training in rights so that they are not simply a response to pressure from the hegemonic powers. “If one engages in such empowerment at the lowest level, it is in the hope that the need for international/domestic-elite pressure on the state will not remain primary forever,” she writes.23

In light of this, it is interesting to note that the Mexican government attempted a new kind of capture of indigenous women’s rights by using them to undermine the autonomy of indigenous communities on the grounds that they subjugated women. The congress passed a new law that was intended to put the communities under the supervision of the unreformed state, a law that was indignantly rejected by most indigenous peoples and by Rigoberta Menchú and several prominent intellectuals.24 The Zapatistas sent their members all over Mexico to address civil society on the question of indigenous rights and the projected law. In an inspired move, they sent a woman commandant, Esther, to address the national congress. In one of the most striking and unusual moments in Mexican history, Comandante Esther, wearing the trademark Zapatista ski mask to hide her face and speaking in Spanish, noted that it was not a military commander who had come to address congress but an indigenous woman and went on to say, “My name is Esther but that is not important now. I am a Zapatista but that is not important at this time. I am an indigenous woman and that is what matters now.”25 It was a bold move that at one and the same time looked forward to a country that respected differences, a country in which it was possible to be indigenous and Mexican. While she acknowledged the traditional subordination of women in indigenous communities and spoke of their oppression, she also asserted the rights of indigenous communities over their culture and of women’s rights within those communities, thus implicitly rejecting the government’s attempt to bring them under paternalistic state control.

Esther’s performance was a spectacular example of the subaltern’s passage into hegemony.

Nevertheless, one problem that surfaces in indigenous women’s organizations is how to balance rights with the demands for autonomy so strongly supported by the EZLN.26 This is a complex and intensely debated issue, but, however interpreted, the autonomy of indigenous communities in which men have always taken on political leadership would seem to conflict with individual rights.27

Margarita Gutiérrez, an indigenous intellectual of the Hñau people of Hidalgo who advised the Zapatistas on the San Andrés Accords, and the Colombian activist Nellys Palomo have argued that the demands of the indigenous women posited a different relationship between individual and community, the private and the public. They quote the San Andrés Accords, which state, “Autonomy begins in the home, at work, in the community and region. Equality between men and women must be guaranteed in the decision-making organs, seeing forms of organization and participation,” in order to add the comment that democratization of the state “goes hand in hand with a democratization of the home which, from a feminist viewpoint affects private life, so that the public changes will have resonance within the scope of the intimate sphere, the family, love, accompanied by processes of change at the level of the individual.”28 They then go on to argue that “the individual is able, in one form or another, to act, to be free and independent within the context of her social life, based on freedom and responsibility. This is the autonomy which indigenous women are fighting for.”29 What is interesting about this statement is that it does not dismiss individuality as a mere neoliberal concept, nor does it set individuality in opposition to community. A resignification of the individual has taken place as these women enter into citizenship on their own conditions.

What it means to be a subaltern in Spivak’s terms encompasses “those removed from lines of social mobility,” although she is emphatic in rejecting the suggestion that women be “left alone to flourish in some pristine tribality.” In her essay on “Righting Wrongs,” she notes that, while global culture permeates the world, there is a lack of communication between and among the immense heterogeneity of the subaltern cultures of the world. Cultural borders are easily crossed from the superficial cultural relativism of metropolitan countries, whereas, going the other way, the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers. The frontiers of subaltern cultures, which developed no generative public role, have no channels of inter-penetration. Here, too, the problem is not solved in a lasting way by...
the inclusion of exceptional subalterns in South-based global movements with leadership drawn from the descendants of colonial subjects, even as these networks network. These figures are no longer representative of the subaltern stratum in general.10

But if the actions of the Chiapas indigenous women tell us anything, it is that there are many ways of developing a "generative public role."

What Spivak advocates is a kind of secular education from below, radically different from the suspect benevolence of international organization and NGOs. In passing, she mentions Paulo Freire and his celebrated Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which she notes was written during the period of guerrilla warfare, but (as she does not note) has now been taken up by organizations in many parts of the world.11 Indeed, there are many different forms of education from below—in the case of the Zapatista women, there is education through war (secular), through learning Spanish and applying it in public meetings, and, in the case of Rigoberta Menchú, an education through Catholic base communities.12

Spivak once described herself as a "radical"—and it is not a bad description.13 Not only does she warn us against our own misguided benevolence, but she keeps us on the alert for those "disappearances" from history. In an inspired passage she refers to those anthropologists who see tribes as belonging to a "closely-knit social texture," to which she counters, "I am asking readers to shift their perception from the anthropological to the historico-political and see "the same knit textile as a torn cultural fabric, in terms of its removal from the dominant loom in a historical moment."14 Let me complement this with another metaphor that suggests the repairing of that torn fabric. Every year on Women's Day, Sub-comandante Marcos celebrates the Zapatista women. This is what he said in 1996 (the year of the Beijing International Conference on Women, organized by the United Nations), invoking an anonymous woman, on the twelfth anniversary of the formation of the EZLN: "She begins to knit in silence and without pay, side by side and with other men and women, that complex dream which some call hope. Everything for everyone, nothing for ourselves. She meets March 8th with her face erased, and her name hidden." I don't think that Spivak would quarrel with this, nor with the ending of his speech: "To the rebels and uncomfortable Mexican women who are now bent over, underlying (sic) that history which, without them, is nothing more than a badly-made fable.

TOMORROW
If there is to be one, it will be made with the women, and above all, by them.15

NOTES
1irst, I, Rigoberta Menchú, and the "Culture Wars." Also included in the book is an essay by Arias, "Rigoberta Menchú's History," as well as documents and responses. See also Gugelberger, The Real Thing.
2 Stoll, Rigoberta Menchú. See also Palmieri, "Les by the Nobel Prize Winner" and ""The Pitiful Lies of Rigoberta Menchú," which appeared respectively in El Periódico de Guatemala and in the Spanish newspaper El País, reprinted in Arias, The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy.
3 Menchú, La nieta de los Mayas. For a discussion of this text, see Rodriguez, Liberalism at Its Limits.
4 Arias, "Rigoberta Menchú's History," pp. 4-5.
7 Spivak, "Draupadi."
11 See especially Mignolo's attempt to establish an in-between position in Local Histories.
12 See Dussel, "Cuestión étnica."
13 Nash, Mayan Visions, p. 44.
14 Quoted by Nash, Mayan Visions, p. 49
15 Heath, Telling Tongues.
16 Portillo Saldana, The Revolutionary Imagination, pp. 214-215. See also Collier, with Quarantiello, Bastal and Nash, Mayan Visions.
18 "Marcos to the Insurgentes: Insurgentes! (The Sea in March " on the EZLN Web page, "Writings of Sub-comandante Marcos of the EZLN (March 12, 2000). All the writings of Marcos are listed on this page. He is the spokesperson for the Zapatistas. Above him are the "commanders" who work with civil society. Marcos issues comunicados, gives speeches, and tells stories.
20 Rovira, Mujeres de Maiz, p. 112.
21 Gutierrez and Palomo, "A Woman's Eye View." Whilst the EZLN has supported indigenous autonomy, they have also formed pluriethnic communities.
22 Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," see especially p. 173.
23 Con el voto," It should also be noted that this law was passed when the Zapatistas were under siege by the Mexican army, a siege that continues to the time of writing.
24 "Mensaje Central."
25 "Mexican Central."
26 The EZLN has also organized pluriethnic communities in Chiapas.