**For speaking against silence: Spivak’s subaltern ethics in the field**

… the image of the other as self, produced by imagination supplementing knowledge or its absence, is a figure that marks the impossibility of fully realising the ethical (Spivak 2000, 105)

The most sustained debate on representing “postcolonial Others” centres on Gayatri Spivak’s now-famous question: “can the subaltern speak?” (1985; 1988; 1999 e.g.: Kapoor 2004; Merrifield 1995; Morris 2010; Nagar & Ali 2003). Drawing on the practice of *sati* [widow sacrifice] and the suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, Spivak chronicles the duplicitous work of indigenous and colonial patriarchies in the silencing of women’s voices, arguing that ‘there is no space from where the sexed subaltern subject can speak’ (1988, 307). Such insistence on the ‘irretrievability’ of oppressed voices intervenes in two prepositional speaking possibilities: ‘speaking for’ in the sense of political representation, and ‘speaking about’, in the sense of portrayal, or re-presentation (1988, 275-277). In the debate, prominent figures such as Benita Parry and Ania Loomba have sought to nuance the apparently absolute terms of Spivak’s original thesis, cautioning against ‘deliberate deafness to the native voice where it can be heard’ (Parry 1987, 39) and ‘too absolute a theory of subaltern silence’ (Loomba 2005, 197). Indeed, Spivak’s subsequent revisions brought a notable qualification: ‘in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark’ (1999, 308). These by turns unequivocal and qualified responses (see Chari 2012; Chaturvedi 2000) found the debate on the ethics and politics of speaking for or about those whose experiences are profoundly removed from the privileged speaker with the ‘permission to narrate’ (Said 1984). In this way, the voices of both subaltern and ‘investigating subject’ are brought into sharp focus in a discussion towards more ethical exchanges between subjects with varying, sometimes diametric relations to historical and contemporary cleavages.

In geography, the ethics and politics of subalternity have become central to debates on postcolonial responsibility (Jazeel & McFarlane 2010; Noxolo et al. 2012), researcher positionality (Griffiths 2017; Jazeel 2007; 2014; Kapoor 2004; Sidaway 1992) and the representation of women in development (McEwan 2001; Radcliffe 1994; 2006; Robinson 1994). A complementary focus has fallen on a move away from speaking *for* or *about*, towards feminist-influenced and more ethical approaches of ‘talking up’ (Moreton-Robinson 2000), ‘talking back’ (hooks 1989) and airing ‘multiple voices’ (Gibson 2006), thus following Spivak in refusing a fast and recountable essence to “native” experience. To this end, for instance, John Briggs and Joanne Sharpe have called for an anti-essentialist ‘wariness of glib uses of concepts of indigenous knowledge in development discourse’, stressing that ‘indigenous knowledges [present] an ever‐changing array of other ways of knowing and doing’ (2004, 673). Colin McFarlane, to give another example, has advocated for geographers’ ‘attention to ethical considerations around learning, which involves an attempt to listen and to (un)learn … through interactions with subalterns’ (2006, 45). For these geographers, ethical engagement with subalternity follows Spivak in acknowledging something of the ‘irretrievably heterogeneous’ (1999, 270) experience of subalternity while also looking inwards to the privilege that affords voice to the geographers and development actors who might wish to speak for and about postcolonial subalterns. The literature is broad and forms an important part of the ongoing project towards a de- or postcolonial praxis for geography (McEwan 2003; Robinson 2003; Sidaway 2000). There remains, however, conspicuously little work that brings together the field and subalternity with critical theory on speaking and representation (see Sylvester 1999).

Building on these literatures, in this article I seek to address the gap between accounts of subalternity in the field and theoretical positions on ethics we find in the writing of Gayatri Spivak. I present data from fieldwork with development workers in rural Madhya Pradesh, India who were engaged in gender education initiatives, funded by the UK DfID (Department for International Development) ICS (International Citizen Service) programme and run by an NGO based in New Delhi in partnership with a small NGO in the town where the project was based. The interviews revealed accounts of everyday gender-based discrimination, alongside one particularly harrowing case of serious violence: the rape, silencing and suicide of a young woman in the town where the interviews took place. This raises, I argue, two ethical issues. First, to do with the ethics of intervention on the ground and the ways that development actors engage ethically with Otherness, and second, to do with the ethics of representation in research and the ways that a geographer addresses accounts of grave injustice in the “postcolonial South”. Drawing on Spivak’s writing on ethics, I discuss both of these issues here with the objective of exploring a more ethical praxis in development work and development research. This is undertaken under the heavy corrective weight of the woman’s life cannot be a thought experiment but, following Spivak, a move to ‘open ourselves to an other’s ethic’ (1993, 177).

The article proceeds in five sections. A short first section provides some background to the research and the methods used. The second section presents participants’ accounts of gender relations in the town in Madhya Pradesh. The accounts are drawn from field notes and interviews with NGO staff and detail gender-based discrimination and violence, including the case of rape and suicide. The paper’s third section then turns to Spivak’s writing on subalternity and ethics - namely her original thesis, subsequent revisions, and more recent considerations of intervention and ‘radical alterity’ (1988; 1990; 1999; 2000) - to explicate three recurrent ethical injunctions connected to: i) an anti-foundationalist approach to subalternity; ii) ‘hyper-self-reflexivity’ of an investigating subject (Kapoor 2004; Spivak 1988); iii) the imperative to name subalternity. Of these, I argue, the third is the least acknowledged, but must nonetheless be understood as an important ethical imperative to speak. In the fourth section, focus falls on the data and this article (as representation) to consider how both development workers and researchers might engage ethically with subalternity and injustice. To conclude, a fifth and final section articulates the article’s main argument: Spivak’s work is not intended to implore us to further silencing, rather we must apply her work on the ground towards an ethical engagement with subalternity that rests on a mode of speaking for and about in an anti-foundationalist and hyper-self-reflexive manner.

### **Context and methods for the research**

The research was facilitated by a small NGO in R---, Madhya Pradesh that employs three full-time staff and draws on a large network of young in-community volunteers who take part in local activities. These activities are supported by a larger, Delhi-based NGO and its staff, comprising three facilitators and Indian (5) and British volunteers (10). The project is funded through the UK DfID (Department for International Development) ICS (International Citizen Service) programme that brings together volunteers from UK and host countries to work on development projects led by established in-country development actors (see Griffiths 2015). On this particular project the group of 18 staff was tasked with expanding the reach of the local NGO in its work to improve gender education and equality in the town. In the data presentation and discussion that follows I refer to the group “Delhi NGO staff” and “development workers”, in part for brevity but also for the important fact that this is the way that the NGO itself positions its facilitators and volunteers: they represent the NGO in Delhi, which focuses expressly on development, as members of staff.

The data I collected during my stay is made up of interviews with the Delhi NGO staff along with fieldnotes that I made during the activities I was invited to observe. I spent one week on the project as part of wider, long-term research into NGOs, volunteering and development (e.g. Griffiths 2016). The staff, both the Indians and Brits, stayed for the duration of their placements at homestays, meaning each of them slept, ate and worked with different members of the community/ies: both tribal and Hindu families hosted (all of which identified as upper or middle caste). Both the NGOs and town remain anonymous throughout; all 18 NGO staff are presented using pseudonyms; and all were interviewed at least once. The majority (16 of 18) were college-educated - a fact notable if only for its significance in an area where education beyond elementary school is an exception, and more so for girls. The voices presented here, then, are those of people who have arrived from outside the context at hand, either from Delhi or from various parts of UK. While further research might well seek to document local perspectives, this would require a quite different consideration of researcher positionality, or Spivak’s practice of hyper-self-reflexivity (see Kapoor 2004) that I discuss below. I am a white, male, British academic and would quite probably effect and experience a good deal of discomfort were I to arrive as an outsider to ask people in this (or any) context questions around gender and discrimination. My attempt at hyper-self-reflexivity in this piece, as I set out above, has to do with the ethics of representation in research and the ways that a geographer might or should document accounts of grave injustice in a postcolonial context. In Spivak’s terms, this more clearly relates to *vertreten,* or the ‘re-presentation’ in ‘speaking about’ subalternity, whereas the representation within the data relates more coherently to *darstellen*, or ‘“speaking for”, as in politics’ (1999, 256-7). At the heart of the discussion that follows is this practice of hyper-self-reflexivity on the part of both the researcher and research participants, and the ethical act of representation both politically (by the NGO staff) and as portrayal (as a piece of writing). The concluding section to the article returns to these themes as a move against the transparency of ‘investigating subjects’ that Spivak critiques (1987; 1988).

The data thus depicts gender relations in the town through the eyes of development actors whose lives – at least for that temporary period of placement – were quite intimately tied with those of the various community members with whom they lived and worked. My interest – therefore - is not in presenting an account of gender relations in R---, which would involve a different set of data centred on people from the town, but rather an account of how development actors approach gender relations ethically. It is to this end that I organise the presentation of the data into three prominent themes: i) the approach of “gentle interventions” taken by the NGO staff; ii) the account of rape and suicide; iii) the reflexive use of “home” when talking about gender.

### **Madhya Pradesh, November 2015**

For my stay in R--- I was based in the local NGO’s office where I was kindly provided a mattress and a place to store my things. Caste and tribal identities are strongly prevalent in the town and its environs and the NGO engages in the struggle against indentured labour and gender discrimination, organising activities across the town focused on youth participation and the empowerment of women and girls. It runs classes on women’s health, especially on menstrual hygiene in a region where most women are banished from their houses - or parts of their houses - for four days in 28; girls’ participation in sport, where many girls are discouraged from spending leisure time outside of the home; and women’s political empowerment, where men dominate panchayats (local governments).

The town is home to 3,000 people. After dusk the streets and market are marked by an absence of women. There is a curfew and no woman is to be seen in public after 6pm. In fact, the hour doesn’t really make a difference; women aren’t so commonly seen in the town’s public spaces. Apparently, the curfew is to protect women from harassment. We talked about this on my first day in the town, during a walk to visit the Sarpanch of the Panchayat (the highest village senior) to ask for cooperation on a community day. Using terms like “unfair” and “ridiculous”, the curfew and almost-invisibility of women in public drew a large amount of criticism from the staff: “it violates their right to move and be part of life here” (Ceri). Dan told me it would be felt in the meeting with the Sarpanch, too: “they will listen, but only if it suits them”, with Laura adding “we have to play it so the boys speak and we [women] stay quiet, it’s just the way it is [here]”. When we arrived we were sat in a room with seven men who showed little interest in the event and in the end made some excuse about the asked-for space being unavailable. As we left I caught site of a woman and a young girl, they were washing the cups from which we’d just drunk chai. On the way back to the NGO office, Deeksha was unsurprised: “it’s always like that, they just have to work in the background … [it’s] ridiculous, *absolutely obscene* … [women] are just the ‘serving sex’, the men are the ones that are doing the living”. At this point Emma joined the conversation: “it’s really pernicious and I feel very frustrated by it, the fact that they [the women in the town] don’t go out and if they do, they get harassed”.

At dinner, the evening after the visit to the Panchayat, the staff got to talking about their host families. Rebecca spoke of her host “mum” (they each referred to their hosts as family): “she cooks and waits for him to eat with the brother, then she eats after with Anjana [host sister] before washing everything”. Emma told of her host “father”: “our mum eats alone, and he [“dad”] will sit and just demand, it’s a joke … he’ll smoke in the room and then just throw it on the floor for someone else to pick up”. I asked what they do when they witness these gender divisions. Helena spoke and the other six staff at in the room agreed: “so we ask ‘why?’ as opposed to just being ‘this is awful’”, Ash picked up the thread: “so we try to make “gentle” interventions”.

Rebecca described one such “gentle intervention”: “when we first arrived it was ‘girls aren’t allowed to do this, aren’t allowed to do that’ … we didn’t want to be disrespectful and [at first] our family said ‘no, you live under our roof’… but we spoke to them, I think we’ve shaken things up”. I asked for details:

the mum does everything in the house, the brother does nothing at all, he’s 27. We asked ‘why?’ and when mum was so tired one day we said ‘he can do it himself’. Two minutes later he walked in and said ‘*chana*’ [food], and I was like ‘what?!’ His mum went to get up and I said ‘no way, sit down! … it’s been cooked, your mum’s not going to do this’… ‘Yes she is!’

Rebecca continued: “so we then sent him to the kitchen and made him do it himself. Mum came up to me and said ‘thanks so much’”. She stressed at the end of the account: “he [also] works for an NGO that promotes gender equality! He totally doesn’t get it!” Hannah offered another example with the caveat: “we try to be sensitive to differences in culture, but we can’t let some things pass”. She gave the following example of her host father:

he made a joke about hitting Auntie [host mother] ... I said to him that if he makes humour from that it will perpetuate it in society and it takes away from the seriousness of it ... he didn’t say anything, he just finished his food …

I followed up, asking Hannah what the effects might be: “I think it’s important to challenge things ... because when I voice them, maybe it encourages Auntie ... she tells us she’s been scolded and was visibly upset ... now she feels she has a voice”. Towards the end of the conversation, as we drank chai, Emma summed up a collective feeling that had run through these accounts: “you just want to shake the men who think it’s ok to treat women this way”

As I got to know the staff a little more over the following days there came more confidence to our exchanges. In a turning point in the research, they began to talk about “what happened to that poor girl last week” (Rebecca). The “poor girl” and “what happened” had come up in interviews and conversations from the start. Revisiting the interview tapes, I now find context for a then-vague comment on gentle interventions two days previously by Deeksha: “we can’t think about these things without thinking about *her*”. It turns out that Deeksha was referring the harrowing experience of a 16-year-old woman who had been raped the week before the project had begun, two weeks before I arrived. Apparently, “everyone knew” the culprit, a 45-50 year old tutor who had raped before. After the rape, I was told, the young woman wanted to speak out, but her father “had political ambition” and didn’t want to jeopardise his position among the village seniors. Ceri told me “they say they know who it was but the family don’t want the shame”, and Rohit added “[they’re] letting things slide for the greater common good … [they’re] letting things run smoothly rather than making them heard ... for justice”. Two days after the rape, the young woman jumped from a water tower on the edge of the town and died. Laura gave a stark summary of the tragic death:

… there’s so much silence… a 16-year-old girl was raped by her tutor, she told her father and her father didn’t want her talking about it because it would cause a bad image… because obviously once that’s happened, you’re not good to get married and so then she jumped off a water tower and killed herself ... she’s the *third* girl that’s happened to, she was the *third* girl that that guy’s raped, and the *third* girl that’s killed herself, so he’s essentially murdered *three* girls if you want to say it in that way ...

Sitting next to Laura, Helena added “there’s no knowing how awful that must’ve been … I can’t even begin to imagine”. No-one in the room then spoke for what felt like a long time. Emma, when she recounted the same story on a separate occasion, was visibly moved, telling me “my host sister knew who she and was very upset by it … and kept repeating to me ‘Emma she was a good girl, a good girl … a good girl!’” She continued, saying that some in the community think “that women *cause* that, like they’re not *even* victims”.

Towards the end of my visit, alongside the stories of gentle interventions and shock at extreme violence, conversation moved to focus on aspects of the staff’s own cultures. Rachel, for instance, when talking of dining arrangements, told me “we can’t approach it as ‘we’re from the west, we know better’”, instead she says: “we have to be aware of the ‘imperial factor’ and not come here and tell people what to do… because these things are really culturally significant ... it can’t be that *we’re* right and *you’re* wrong”. It was the first time I’d heard this nuance to their work in the town, and it led to an animated discussion. Laura, while talking of her host family, complained “our [host] Dad has never spoken to us”, before adding: “to be fair, though, I have people in the UK like that, my boyfriend’s brother has never acknowledged me, not even once ... in two years!”. To this Joanna added “I had a boss [in London] who never spoke to any of the women in the office… we were completely out of it”. The topic escalated, especially among the women in the group: Helena began to talk about “unilads and sexism” and the “pressures all around to be thin”; Rachel targeted “Edward Heath and all those MPs”, “disgusting Yewtree” and, notably, “rape culture where some blame is always on the girl”, and Ash commented pointedly: “we need to look back home when people kill themselves because they’re getting bullied at school ... and so that brings it back to home … we have to think about how suicide happens in our country and that actually suicide is a global issue”.

The following day, the last of my visit, the NGO staff and volunteers made these contexts a central theme of final interviews and focus groups. In one, Alice made the point that “we’re not living a “liberated” life in the UK, there are people who are completely disregarded as human beings, women, for example, and fear of FGM [Female Genital Mutilation], honour killings, objectification, [these are] British problems”. Sana comments too that “this isn’t a rural thing either, we know this happens also in Delhi, if you’re rich or poor … it happens anyway”. Billy, in a final group interview, noted “it’s one guy and he’s raped three women and they haven’t had any support networks or any avenues to go down and each one of them has taken that same course of action to me it’s like a systemic cultural and also global problem ... we should remember that this happens in the UK”. Hannah, sitting next to him adds: “all this injustice is still happening at our back door, we’re numb to it, but we’ve actually woken up to it here”, and Alice closes with a neat synthesis: “people say ‘I’d rather be a woman in UK than in India’, that’s rubbish! We have to stand together with these women [both] here and back home!”.

### Spivak’s subaltern ethics: three injunctions

To the end of bringing the data into contact with Spivak’s ethics and politics of representation, in this section I provide a reading of her work on subalternity and ethics to draw out three areas of focus to do with anti-foundationalism, reflexivity and the often overlooked emphasis (perhaps counterintuitive to many commentators on Spivak) to ‘name’ subalternity.

“Can the Subaltern Speak?” began Spivak’s deconstruction of subalternity through a powerful critique of both the Subaltern Studies Group (in particular Ranajit Guha) and Western theorists (in particular Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault). Directed at the former – who from the early 1980s sought to write history ‘from below’, ‘let[ting] the oppressed speak for themselves’ (1988, 292) - Spivak contends that subalternity is marked by a historical effacement of voice-consciousness and its project to ‘identify and measure’ recuperates subalterns into an ‘essentialist and taxonomic’ textuality (1988, 284). With the latter, she engages in a ‘friendly exchange’, taking exception to Deleuze’s and Foucault’s ‘ventriloquism’ of the ‘masses’ (1999, 255) and their application of ‘transparent’ theory, warning of ‘the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow’ (1988, 280). Though Spivak makes the point that her criticisms of both are discrete, her contention is consistent: the Subaltern Group defines subalternity primarily as ‘difference from the elite’, and Western theorists ‘represent themselves as transparent’, thus both assume the subjectivities of oppressed people a coherent category open for representation. It is against this assumption that Spivak is at her most unequivocal: ‘[we must] insist that the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous’ (1988, 284).

Since the original publication of the essay (1985; 1988), and via the extended exchange it elicited (prominently: Morris 2010; Medovoi et al. 1990; Busia 1989), Spivak’s writing on subalternity has sought to explore the (im)possibility of (more) ethical relations with an anti-foundationalist conceptualisation of postcolonial others (1993; 1995; 2000; 2004). While we might situate her work in this area (as she does herself) within a broader scepticism of post-war modernity’s promise of universal human rights (prominently: Bauman 1993; Levinas 1993; Derrida 2000), Spivak’s focus on non-Western Others sets her apart from other theorists of post-structural ethics (e.g. Emmanuel Levinas, see Popke 2007, 513-514). In this context, her deconstruction of normative ethical codes towards ‘irretrievable heterogeneity’ seeks a remove from the uniform ethical codes of Western moral philosophy – that is, predicated on “sameness” - to ‘just the opposite’, to ‘unknowable and illegible subjects’ (Spivak 1993, 176-177). This is not to replace the problematic “sameness” with the problematic “difference”, rather the ‘unknowable’ sits oppositional to the ‘transcoded anthropological subject/object’ (1993, 177) as ethics shifts from an issue of knowledge to one of relation. From here, there are no presuppositions, for it is the encounter with an other that holds all inter-relational possibilities.

Spivak conceives this encounter as the ‘Call of the Ethical’, where proximity to the ‘radical alterity’ of an other brings one alongside the ‘quite-other’ that ‘by definition we cannot – no self can – reach’ (2000, 99). It is in ‘supplementing’ this ‘founding gap’ – a gap that signals both bounded limits and boundless possibilities – where Spivak situates the (im)possibility of ethical relations:

If ethics are grasped as a problem of relation rather than a problem of knowledge … *It is necessary to imagine this woman as an other as well as a self*. This is, strictly speaking, impossible. Imagination is structurally unverifiable. Thus, the image of the other as self produced by imagination supplementing knowledge or its absence is a figure that marks the impossibility of fully realising the ethical. (2000, 105, my emphasis)

Thus Spivak insists on the irreducible unknowability of ethical relations – ‘the ghost of the undecidable in every decision’ (Spivak 2000, 105) – where the figure of the autonomous rational self gives way to an emergent inter-subjectivity that demands we ‘weigh alternatives, make judgements and intervene in contexts whose complexity will always exceed predetermined formulations’ (Popke 2003, 311). This destabilising of ontological certainties speaks back to Spivak’s original concern with the “disappearance” of subaltern voice-consciousness, providing something of a guide in the constitutive space marked by ‘silence and nonexistence, a violent aporia between subject and object status’ (1988, 306). This aporia - or gap - is a site of unstable meanings, where the self and other compel and repel to bring new alternatives to be negotiated without the sure foundations laid by (for instance) categories of identity. This is an important aspect of Spivak’s ethics: an anti-foundational conceptualisation of subalternity that precludes hard-and-fast markers of difference – and therefore, importantly, of sameness.

A second aspect of Spivak’s ethics derives from her critique of Deleuze and Foucault and a career-long concern with an interrogation of ‘positionality as investigating subject’. Focusing on this subject position, Spivak turns the ethical imperative inwards, pushed by a concern that analytical attempts to let ‘the oppressed speak for themselves’ evidence a ‘first world analyst’ ‘masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter’ (1988, 292). On this, Spivak is unforgiving, contending that ‘[s]ome of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject’ (1988, 271) and criticising directly ‘the banality of leftist intellectuals’ lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns … representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent’ (1988, 275). The underlying charge is that theoretical transparency sets aside the colonial histories that effect spaces of encounter, re-turning the South into a ‘resource’, a ‘repository of an ethnographic “cultural difference”’ (1999, 388), thus aligning intellectual production with western imperialism (1999, 388). The power of her ‘friendly’ critique lies in her drawing Western theoretical perspectives, even those that proclaim primary solidarity with subalternity (see Alcoff 1991; Katz 1996, 494), together in a complicitous relationship with the reproduction of inequality and subalternity.

Spivak is equally critical when she turns the lens in on herself and other “postcolonial” writers, whose ‘insider knowledge’ is owed to an ‘accident-of-birth facility’ (1999, 267), arguing that they must also remain cognisant of their ‘contaminated’ positions of privilege and complicity (1988, 291). She insists that she and other writers of similar positionality ‘must say ‘no’ to the ‘moral luck’ of the culture of imperialism while recognising that she must inhabit it, indeed invest it, to criticise it’ (1993, 228). This insistence on ‘inhabiting’ one’s privilege carries with it an obligation to embark on a project of heightened reflexivity, or ‘hyper self-reflexivity’ (Kapoor 2004). For all potential speaking subjects – ‘First World’ and ‘accident-of-birth’ critics included – Spivak posits the (un)learning of privilege, and ‘vigilant self-implication’ (Kapoor 2004, 644) as a dissonant but vital process towards ethical engagement.

It is from here that we can move onto to the third coherent ethical theme in Spivak’s work: ‘naming’ subalternity. For some, Spivak’s original thesis brought criticisms of ‘deliberate deafness’ (Parry 1987, 38) and a further silencing of already-marginalised groups: ‘while Spivak is excellent on the “itinerary of silencing” endured by the subaltern, particularly historically, there is little attention to the process by which the subaltern’s “coming to voice” might be achieved’ (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 106). More silence, however, was never Spivak’s objective or itinerary. Rather, as Linda Alcoff argued in her commentary, Spivak is clear that ‘ignoring the subaltern’s or oppressed person’s speech is “to continue the imperialist project”’ (1991, 23) and therefore ‘the practice of speaking for others remains the best possibility in some existing situations. An absolute retreat weakens political effectivity, is based on a metaphysical illusion, and often effects only an obscuring of the intellectual’s power’ (1991, 24). Spivak’s interrogation of ‘the intellectual’s power’ does not relent but nor does it seek retreat, instead she has always shown intent to explore ‘the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject *without paralysing him*, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility’ (1987, 201, my emphasis). Against a potential paralysis of the investigating subject, Spivak emphasises the importance of ‘homework’ – ‘the anti-foundationalist refusal of ‘chromatism’ and ‘genitalism’, and a hyper-self-reflexive ‘historical critique of [one’s] own position’ (1990, 62) – in ‘earn[ing] the right to criticise’ and makes a direct address: ‘to refuse to represent a cultural Other is salving your conscience, and allowing you *not* to do any homework’ (1990, 62, original emphasis). Spivak goes on to give the hypothetical example of ‘a young, white, male student, politically-correct’ who says ‘“I am only a bourgeois white male, I can’t speak.”’, calling this accident-of-birth effect ‘a much more pernicious position’ than ‘tak[ing] a risk to criticise, of criticising something which is Other’ (1990, 62-63). For Spivak, the risk is to be taken, for the promise of speaking is great:

The subaltern is all that is not elite, but the trouble with those kinds of names is that if you have any kind of political interest you name it in the hope that the name will disappear. That’s what class consciousness is in the interest of: the class disappearing. What politically we want to see is that the name would not be possible. So what I’m interested in is seeing ourselves as namers of the subaltern. If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more. (Spivak 1990, 158)

There is no “itinerary of silencing”, rather a careful and promising process of orientating oneself away from ‘salving one’s [own] conscience’ and towards the unreachable conscience of another for whom silence must not be sustained. In this moment, the gaining of voice marks the passage from subalternity in the ‘political movement into the hegemony’ (Spivak 1999, 269), a status that for Spivak, following and qualifying Gramsci, represents ‘a limit, a space at once outside and autonomous from hegemony, but simultaneously inside as its condition of possibility’ (Birla 2010, 92).

### Representing: Spivak’s ethics in the field

Returning to the data here I discuss the staff’s representations of subaltern women in their work in Madhya Pradesh to suggest ways they, when brought into proximity with the radical alterity of Otherness and violence, supplement the gap described by Spivak while seeking to (un)learn privilege in their efforts to ‘name’ subalternity.

When Hannah admonishes her host father for making a joke about domestic violence – “if you make humour … it will perpetuate it in society” – and when Liz explains “we can’t see these things now without thinking of her”, the staff explicate a notably relational view of gender-based discrimination and violence. This is present throughout where the interventions in the everyday could not be separated from the obviously profound effect brought by the more violent stories they had heard. For the staff, then, the difference between, say, discriminatory dining norms and rape is not of quality but of degree. On the scalar relations of gender-based violence, quoting the documentarian Raoul Peck, Christine Sylvester has written of ‘Third World’ violence as a ‘monster slowly conjured into being’:

you look aside the first time when someone is slapped in public. You don’t say anything. The next day, they kill him in front of you and you don’t say anything. Then, on the third day, they can come and take your wife and rape your wife. And then it’s too late for you to do anything. That is how the monster arrives. *It starts with little things* (Sylvester 2006, 74-75, my emphasis).

Similarly, Gilda Rodriguez has written on gender-based violence as related ‘to everyday acts of misogyny that contribute to the creation of a culture of sexism and devalorisation of women and their lives’ (2010, 17). These *little things* are, Rodriguez continues, ‘often ignored or minimised in such a way that their connection to large-scale forms of violence against women is obscured’ (2010, 17). With clear contingencies with second-wave feminism’s critique of ‘rape culture’ (prominently: Brownmiller 1975; Connell & Wilson 1974) or ‘rape-supportive culture’ (Donat & d’Emilio 1992), both Sylvester and Rodriquez make connections between routine and gross acts of violence where curfews and cooking are part of the ordering of relations towards physical and sexual abuse. Acceptance of these connections presents an ethical dilemma that Sylvester highlights via Giorgio Agamben: ‘a resigned consent of silence bows to the sovereign exception of violent politics and bare life’ (2006, 74), or in other words: to turn one’s cheek is to consent to the violent junction of letting live or letting die.

In this formulation there is a definite sense that to stand by constitutes an *un*ethical act of complicity with the ‘monster’. That the staff took it upon themselves to continually intervene – even claiming “[Auntie] feels she has a voice” (Helena) – might from here set them alongside Sylvester (and Agamben), but suggests also a position contra Spivak in the ethical imperative to act against all discrimination in every case, *everywhere* - and therefore carrying with it a conspicuously universalist mode of intervention. The temptation from there might be to situate the staff’s representations as recourse to the ‘minimal universalisms’ advocated by prominent geographers in the early 1990s (for example Corbridge 1993; 1998; Harvey 1993). Stuart Corbridge’s well known critique of a poststructuralist approach to postcolonial ethics, for example, equates an insistence on particularity and heterogeneity with an apolitical and unethical – even nihilistic - stance premised on ‘backing off’ (1993, 464-466). He argues ‘[I am] not willing to deconstruct further certain minimally universalist claims, of the type that involuntary death from hunger, or involuntary malnutrition, or involuntary homelessness, or slavery, or torture are bad things which must be struggled against’ (1993, 466). The obvious counter to such a position is that coupled with a relational understanding of gender-based discrimination and violence, once one begins at the extreme of rape, then the move through the scales brings the troubling spectre of intervention in even the most nuanced of cultural differences. Thus codifying ethics, even on such minimal and indisputable principles, brings the always-harmful risk of sweeping away important difference, either displacing it for another, more harmful kind (“Otherness”), or simply (re)imposing the cultural mores of the powerful onto the less so.

Though the staff’s association of “gentle interventions” with the ineffable violence of rape would seem to follow this quite problematic trajectory, what keeps them closer to Spivak is a perceptible struggle to imagine the experience of the young woman while making no claims to knowledge of what she went through. Repeatedly, the staff would reflect: “who could know what it was like?” (Hannah); “we can’t know …” (Deeksha); “… I dunno … it’s so difficult to think” (Dan). These are tentative and felt reactions that carry faint echoes of Spivak’s ethical orientation: ‘on the other side is the indefinite’ (Spivak 1993, 177) to which they angle themselves, undertaking their engagement with gender discrimination “for her”, “for her sake” (Deeksha, Billy, Helena, Tom).

Drawing them closer to Spivak still, the staff’s orientation towards the young woman they never knew and whose experience had come second- and third-hand was strong. Hannah remarked: “we have no idea how she felt, but at the same time I feel *something* … towards her” while Johanna considered the episode “haunting”. I would argue that this is a specifically relational ethic that comes into emergence in the field; the young woman is not called to mind as a subject of developmental intervention (à la Corbridge), nor as a “powerless” Third World Woman (à la liberal Western feminism) (cf. Mohanty 1984), but as an affective unknown, simultaneously ‘an other as well as the self’ (Spivak 2000, 105). The staff thus seem to enter the intimate, unsettling – “haunting” – ‘founding gap’, the point Spivak considers ‘closest to the ethical’ (Spivak 2000, 99). As I outline above, Spivak tasks us with ‘supplementing’ the gap between self and other through imagination, that ‘imagine[s] this woman as an other as well as a self’ (2000, 105). The struggle to imagine the experience of the rape moves part way towards this, a second part comes when the staff’s intimate encounter with subalternity provokes quite profound moments of introspection. Pushed into (re)considering “home”, gender discrimination was not delimited to categories of rural, poor or India, but was related instead to urban Delhi: “if you’re rich or poor … it happens anyway” (Sana) and references to Jimmy Savile, Lad Culture and gender discrimination in a British context. These clear connections between the experience of women in different parts of India and UK both deny a foundational essence to subalternity and dislodge universal mores as an orientating logic.

There are two factors to the staff’s introspection that strengthen an argument that Spivak’s ‘founding gap’ is supplemented in this way. First, eating separately, to take an example, is not dismissed in and of itself, it is critiqued only where men are perceived to directly impose on the women, and related to similar gender divisions in dissimilar places. As such, we are not brought to witness “Indian rural culture” “on trial”, but more to the ways that men dominate, and the struggles for women to negotiate and express agency, in a similar vein to the work of prominent feminist geographers on veils (Secor 2002), arranged marriage (Pande 2015) and cosmetic surgery (Holliday & Sanchez Taylor 2006). By contextualising gender relations in this way, there is a marked move away from the colonial-era ‘assumption of women as an always-already constituted group … labelled “powerless”, “exploited”, “sexually harassed”, etc’ (Mohanty 1984, 338). The second factor builds from Helena’s “it makes us see our culture different[ly]” towards Rebecca’s ordering of such comparisons: “it’s not the same … but it matters”. Set this way, the formulation of cross-cultural examples does not imply a struggle *everywhere* is consonant with notions of “sameness”, and recourse to urban contexts, Savile and Lad Culture is not to draw direct comparisons, for direct comparisons would necessitate a surer knowledge of an other’s experience. There is no presumption here of equivalence, or no choice – neither assumed nor taken – between a universalist imperative to intervene and an anti-foundationalist or relativist corrective towards “backing off”. Instead, they bear witness to a particularity that does not allow difference to inscribe itself as a marker of spatially defined conditions of gender.

To complement Spivak, we might see this as part of Donna Haraway’s anti-colonial resistance to the ‘closed narratives’ of identities, resistance of ‘appropriation of another’s (never innocent) experience’ towards ‘just-barely-possible affinities, the just-barely-possible connections that might actually make a difference in local and global histories’ (1991, 113). Or more relevant still we might look to Carolyn Pedwell’s extraction of relationality from commonality and a concomitant resistance of the ‘temptation to substitute problematic ‘difference’ with problematic ‘sameness’’ (2008, 94). Taking the commonalities drawn from different cultural contexts (such as ‘African’ FGC and ‘Western’ cosmetic surgery) by some feminist thinkers (Gunning 1991; Jeffreys 2005), Pedwell advocates a move away from ‘assertions of similarity’ towards a relational approach that theorises ‘social, historical and cultural links *along with disjunctures* without reifying essential distinctions *or* disavowing the possibility of common ground’ (2008, 91, original emphasis). Like Spivak, Pedwell’s concern is with deconstructing the binaries that are reproduced even through a sensibility towards ‘sameness’. And like Spivak and Pedwell, the staff move away from both the reiteration and reification of foundationalist cultural differences and also the flattening out of significant particularities: they struggle to imagine and they liken without equivalence.

This reading of the ethnography can be drawn out further through Sara Ahmed’s writing on feminist ethics and otherness. Ahmed, like Spivak (2000; 2004), draws on Levinas to argue an ethical engagement with postcolonial others is not about ‘presence’ but the felt imaginations of ‘other speech acts, scars and traumas, that remain unspoken, unvoiced or not fully spoken or voiced’ (2002, 564). To illustrate, Ahmed reads Spivak’s translation of Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Douloti the Beautiful’, describing how she is moved – brought to tears even – by the account, the harrowing tale of ‘a peasant woman [Douloti] sold into prostitution’, and how the woman is ‘presented to [her], and yet absent, a little sketch, hard to read behind, beneath …’ (2002, 566), concluding: ‘my tears not hers wet the pages’ (2002, 566). Through this reading, Ahmed builds to the critical question and conclusion:

But if [Douloti] does not speak her resistance, then how can we hear her? Does her body speak resistance for her? No – her body is not a transparent medium through which we can read a message and find our resolution. Her body ceases to be contained as body; it cannot be transformed from object to voice. (2002, 566)

In response, Ahmed switches to a direct address, seemingly of both the reader of her text and also of Douloti herself:

I cannot touch your body *as* the body of the other … your skin weeps, not as you remember the violence, but as it remembers; it remembers it for you, a remembering that leaks beyond you, and into the flesh of the world … in getting closer, I feel our skin touch, not as a coming together of two bodies, but as an insertion into a sociality in which we are not together, but we are close enough. My skin gets wet; it trembles with love. (2002, 567 original emphasis)

Ahmed here evokes a feeling of intimacy which only in proximity reveals distance. Calling on Chandra Mohanty’s seminal intervention (1984), Ahmed follows Spivak in arguing that ‘a response to universalism should not be a retreat into the passivity of cultural relativism’ (2002, 568). Rather, an ethical encounter that ‘involves getting closer to others in order to occupy or inhabit the distance between us’ (2002, 569), or in Spivak’s words ‘a collective struggle *supplemented* by the impossibility of full ethical engagement’ (Spivak 1995, xxv original emphasis).

### Concluding comments

The debate in geography around representing postcolonial Others has for the most part taken place without attempts to integrate subaltern experience. Implicitly, therefore, a negative response to Spivak’s question is performed: the subaltern cannot speak, or rather does not speak. She does not speak because representation has a violent history where silence is an accomplice of colonial and patriarchal domination, and for many geographers a ‘postcolonial politics of *not* speaking for the other … [now] override[s] an alternative postcolonial politics of listening to the other’ (Jacobs 2001, 731, my emphasis). In the case here, such a postcolonial politics of *not* speaking might well override: the staff’s and my position in relation to those ‘named’ elicits unsatisfactory answers to the obvious rejoinder to the arguments made: “who gets to name?” A (partial) pre-emptive response is that this is not a perfect model of speaking for or about, but it is an attempt to recognise fully that further silence was never Spivak’s proposition and that conversely, via the arduous labour of imagination, homework and hyper-self-reflexivity, her injunction is to work hard to be “namers of the subaltern” – that is, to speak. In the data presented here, this hard work is undertaken by the development workers in Madhya Pradesh. The rape and suicide of the young woman impacted the staff greatly, how could it not? Their interventions at every-day levels could not be separated from that extreme violence, yet there was no recourse to universalist mores: it was never about how Others compare to a paradigmatic centre; rather this is an account of how encounters unsettle, giving rise to an unlearning of one’s privilege. The understanding of everyday discrimination and gross violence as mutually constitutive, the imagination-straining violence of rape and suicide, and the relational ground of geographically diverse contexts are important themes in the data that at each turn disavow a foundational essence to subalternity, and deny any purchase to the imposition of cultural standards across space. Instead, the staff sense the unsettling nature of what Spivak terms the ethical ‘founding gap’ in which proximity between subjects reveals distance, or alterity, from where ethics entail profound introspection; apparently supplementing this gap, one of the staff put it starkly: “I’ve no idea … but it is haunting” (Johanna).

To close, I want briefly to propose what might be offered by this case study and the reading of the data. Primarily, this paper attempts to address the gap between accounts of subalternity in the field and theoretical positions on speaking and representation. This is still an important concern a full seventeen years after Christine Sylvester noted pithily ‘postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating’ (1999, 703). If for all geographers an imperative is to bring theory into contact with the lived lives and injustices we find in the field, attempts such as that made here might move towards less silence and attempt to disrupt cycles of oppression. It is incumbent on researchers in geography and cognate disciplines engaged in postcolonial contexts not to distance theory from practice, but, as Tariq Jazeel and Colin McFarlane (2010) have argued, to realise the value of abstraction in its social, political and geographical context in the field. What this means is refusing the equivalence of abstraction with ‘withdrawal’ and instead ‘thinking through the politics of abstraction … about the representational mechanics of intellectual work’ so that ‘when we write about a place/people/community we are never ‘withdrawn’ from accountability to that context’ (Jazeel & McFarlane 2010, 112). Such accountability in this case is politically prudent, especially towards challenging the dominant western discourses that portray ‘Indian society as a failed democracy where progressive gender politics cannot gain traction’ (Durham 2015, 185). “Indian culture” is continually homogenised, demonised and othered as one that ‘shields and sanctions sexual violence’ (Durham 2015, 185), as if that were not the case - to greater and lesser degrees - everywhere. Attending simultaneously to both particularity and relationality, an imperative for postcolonial geographies, allows for the possibility of remaining sensitive to specific contexts while relating them to struggles and injustice elsewhere and everywhere.

For feminist geographies, too, this account of subalternity and ethics articulates with writing on ‘talking back’ (hooks 1989), ‘being-with’ (Probyn 2010) and ‘talking up’ (Moreton-Robinson 2000), and thus contends with a central issue: ‘the question of how to combine [the] acknowledgement of different contexts with the political project of identifying a (non-essentialised and racially heterogeneous) subject of feminism’ (Radcliffe 2006, 526). This political project must take place in the complicated and complicating context of a feminist engagement with the quotidian as a condition for the extreme, where domestic servitude ties to violent sexual subordination. As discussed above, towards such a non-essentialised and racially heterogeneous subject, this context presents the problematic corollary that discrimination, even in the nuances of cultural dining norms, warrants intervention. Intervention then risks a universalistic form that (re)imposes an essence or homogeneity through a heavy-handed assumption of either difference or sameness (see Pedwell 2008, 94-96). Instead, in putting the case here into dialogue with a range of feminist theorists, we learn that ‘relationality rather than commonality’ (Pedwell 2008, 88) and ‘just-barely-possible affinities’ (Haraway 1991, 113) can predicate an intense orientation to present yet unreachable others (Ahmed 2002). Importantly, then, while it is quite certainly the case that subalternity has long been identified as a ‘subject of feminism’, this has struggled to translate from theory to praxis. The argument here for speaking covers ground in relating theory to praxis, providing an ethical frame for representing women for whom silence is central to oppression. Only in this way can a theoretical subject of feminism translate into one whose gritty realities are engaged with rather than set aside in a ‘postcolonial politics of *not* speaking’.

What I hope is offered by this work, then, is a sensitive handling of an account of unspeakable violence whose recourse to the writing of Gayatri Spivak might contribute to an ethical framework for further research and engagement that does not reproduce silence. I argue that we must recognise that Spivak’s work is not intended to implore us to further silencing, and that we must apply her work on the ground towards an ethical engagement with subalternity that rests on a mode of speaking for and about in an anti-foundationalist and hyper-self-reflexive manner. The stakes are too great to ignore: if voice effects (even in part) a dissolution of subaltern status then even a trace of emancipatory promise in hegemony or voice-consciousness must be explored. This is no simple task and, perhaps as Spivak intends, there remains no hard-and-fast response to the possibilities of subaltern voice or voice-consciousness. In the extreme case detailed here, the young woman remains irretrievable, arriving through second- and third-hand testimony. But in some way she is heard, and this, I re-emphasise in conclusion, is the ethical act of representation, both politically (by the NGO staff) and as portrayal (as a piece of writing). This is not a task taken lightly, and it intends to fall short of self-satisfaction while also resisting reduction to thought experiment. Instead, articulation here understands that yet more silence can only act in complicity with the violent effects of colonialism and patriarchy, and to name is a thoughtful and tentative process that must be understood as an integral aspect of ethics and representation.

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