

Chapter 32

Subalternities that Matter in Times of Crisis

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Most South Africans celebrate Freedom Day . . . Some are told that they are free and get excited because they trust those who tell them that they are free . . . But . . . freedom is also dependent on having money or it is dependent on a state or community that can provide the things that people need – things like safe houses, transport, electricity, health care, education, lights on the streets and so on . . . [T]he reality is that only the rich, including those in government, are free . . . We as the poor, whether we are in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Brazil or Italy, we have to support each other and give courage to each other so that we can strengthen the freedom that is in us all. We need to strengthen this freedom so that we can use it to struggle for a free society. (Figlan 2009)

[I]f yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but a historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was not responsible, because “resisting” a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative . . . In fact, however, some part of even a subaltern mass is always directive and responsible, and the philosophy of the part always precedes the philosophy of the whole, not only as its theoretical anticipation but as a necessity of real life. (Gramsci 1971: 337)

At times of crisis, the irrationality of capitalism becomes plain for all to see. Surplus capital and surplus labor exist side by side with seemingly no way to put them back together in the midst of immense human suffering and unmet needs. In midsummer of 2009, 1/3 of the capital equipment in the United States stood idle, while some 17 percent of the workforce was either unemployed, enforced part-timers or ‘discouraged’ workers. What could be more irrational than that? (Harvey 2010: 215)

Forgotten places are not outside history. Rather, they are places that have experienced the abandonment characteristic of contemporary capitalist and neoliberal state reorganization. Given the enormous disorder that “organized abandonment” (Harvey 1989: 303) both creates and exploits, how can people who inhabit forgotten places scale up their activism from intensely localized struggles to something less atomized and therefore possessed of a significant capacity for self-determination? How do they set and fulfill agendas for life-affirming social change – whether by seizing control of the social wage or by other means? (Gilmore 2008: 31)

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Crisis, Subalternity, and Forgotten Places

Not *this* freedom, insists Lindela Figlan, security guard and office-holder of Abahlali base Mjondolo (ABM), the shack-dweller's movement that has challenged many facets of suffering in South Africa's informal settlements. Abahlali has organized against routine eviction, harassment, neglect, and organized violence, and has invested in virtual space to formulate critique in the face of multifaceted crisis. Despite a series of attacks on shack settlements in the city of Durban in 2009, ABM members have debated and discussed what they call a "living politics," a collective will to struggle for life-affirming social change, in Ruth Gilmore's terms (Figlan *et al.* 2009). I begin with the constitution of a collective will because it is central to Antonio Gramsci's concept of subalternity not as a pregiven thing but as an activation of critique that might be directive in re-shaping the terrain of struggle.

The activist-intellectuals I begin with intersect in a powerful call to think of crises of livelihood as also crises of rationality, representation, and spatial (dis)connection. Contemporary studies of "subalternity" have focused largely on problems of reason and representation, drawing on the insight of postcolonial studies that we live in a world of multiple coeval rationalities. Indeed, it may appear curious that none of the statements I begin with are drawn from scholars who use the concept "subalternity" explicitly. As should become clear, a subaltern perspective does not hinge on using the term as a label but on a far more ambitious way of using theory. My key arguments are that subalternity and crisis ought to be considered relational concepts whose content is bound to vary considerably. I suggest that "subaltern" be considered a meta-concept that tells us how to use concepts while building solidarities through, rather than despite, social and spatial difference. Finally, systemic irrationality becomes apparent in times of crisis (*pace* Harvey), and if this should prompt people to "scale" struggles to wider arenas (*pace* Gilmore), we need to understand spatially connective processes of critique in a differentiated world. Such a connective approach to subalternity is resolutely un-parochial, ontologically multiple, and ripe for critical geographical enquiry.

The next section, "What's in a word?" detours through the postcolonial revision of Gramsci's concept, focusing on key works in geography. Postcolonial scholars who use the concept best, in my view, call for intellectual forbearance in imputing subaltern consciousness and agency, as well as attentiveness to the ways in which subjects evade interpellation by broader social processes. These are vital concerns that ought to alter how economic geographers, broadly conceived, attempt to think beyond an intersectionality of class / gender / "race" / caste / etc., to a reminder that all universal categories are historical and contradictory. I conclude that scholars who use the term subalternity to express radical doubt within the dynamics of capital and empire ought to situate this doubt in concrete, contradictory landscapes in our crisis-ridden present.

In the subsequent "Subaltern Solidarities in the Face of Crisis," I argue that geographers might and indeed do draw on postcolonial theory without using the concept "subalternity" explicitly, as subalternity is more properly a meta-concept that tells us how to use concepts. I review the work of some geographers whose work provides insights on thinking of subaltern rationalities in the face of crisis. For economic geography, such an understanding might fruitfully extend the question of how people actually contend with situations of prolonged uncertainty that some heterodox political economists call the "precarity" endemic to contemporary societies.

Finally, in "Subalternity and Space" I turn to the question of how attention to spatial dialectics and multiple rationalities leads us to a practice of building solidarities through

ongoing comparison and connection. There can be no question of romanticizing autonomous subaltern space or authentic voice in this project. Rather, in the ruins of dominant forms of valuation, and without the false comfort of teleological thinking, we are forced to confront subalternity in real and imagined practices of social and spatial solidarity.

Figlan's epigraph to this chapter sets out in counterpoint a dominant notion of freedom built on privilege against an emergent conception borne of popular struggle. He calls attention to the praxis of solidarity across geographical difference as a resource for poor people to maintain the will to fight. What is at work here, I will attempt to demonstrate, is precisely the meta-concept of subalternity as emerging from a situation of multifaceted crisis in one of many places that refuse to be forgotten.

What's in a Word? A Postcolonial Detour

Subalternity is less an identity than what we might call a predicament, but this is true in a very odd sense. For, in Spivak's definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed. To the extent that anyone escapes the muting of subalternity, she ceases being a subaltern. (Morris 2010: 8)

Brought into social theory by the revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, the subaltern concept received a new lease on life through the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective of historians of India, reconstituted through the US academy into an influential branch of postcolonial studies. The category has had varied utility in different parts of the world. Rather than rehearsing its genealogy, a task carried out with commendable precision in Gidwani (2009), I would like to draw out two key moments in the career of this concept (see also Chari 2009; Clayton 2010).

First, several thinkers, including Gramsci, have used the term to mean a subordinated social group. While Gramsci may have used a neologism for the proletariat to evade censorship while imprisoned by Mussolini, it also provided him a language to re-think several things. As a vanguardist, it allowed him to ask how peasants ought to be educated in the virtues of proletarian revolution. However, it also allowed him to pose the emergence of revolutionary critique in the lived consciousness of the oppressed. This possibility spurred the historians of the Subaltern Studies Collective to push beyond British Marxist social history in rethinking what Michel Foucault (1980: 80–2) called disqualified knowledges (for instance, in Guha and Spivak 1988). Subaltern Studies held to an inconsistent notion of the subaltern and was roundly critiqued from insiders/outside for presuming a realm of subaltern autonomy (Chaturvedi 2000, Ludden 2001). These debates were enormously productive for a generation of scholarship attentive to substantially different and yet hybrid traditions and practices (for instance, Skaria 1999; Chakrabarty 2000; Mahmood 2005; Glover 2008).

Secondly, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) iconic essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" critiqued the presumption of the implicitly masculinist subaltern who could be spoken for and who could enter political discourse. Rather than "subaltern" as a set of subjugated subjects, Spivak reframed the ethico-political problematic as one she pithily called "disclosure through effacement" (cited in Morris 2010: 6). In a crucial section of all versions of her classic essay, Spivak reads the record of a clandestine participant in anti-colonial armed struggle who took her own life at the same time as her menstruation. Rather than disclosing her political involvement, Bhubaneswari foreclosed the possibility that her suicide could be read as a crime of

passion following an illicit pregnancy. She inscribed this reading on her body, albeit in dominant patriarchal terms: this was her “disclosure through effacement.” When Spivak’s elite interlocutor could not comprehend this reading, Spivak pronounced that Bhubaneswari could not speak. In the face of multiple misreadings, Spivak (2010) returns to sharpen the stakes in claiming subaltern political voice. Can the subaltern speak through knowledge production in far-off universities? Can the subaltern speak when postcolonial social and class domination persists? Her answer remains “no,” but her demand, nonetheless, is for an ethic of skeptical commitment to the problem of representing the oppressed. I have taken this postcolonial detour because this commitment ought to engage the crisis conditions that make subaltern self-representation necessary *and* fraught.

Several geographers have reviewed the notion of subalternity as part of a postcolonial perspective (for instance, Blunt and Wills 2000). Wright (2006), Wainwright (2008), and Gidwani (2008) have made the case concretely and eloquently in careful monographs. My work takes a slightly different tack, as Chari (2004) uses the concept but shies from engaging its implications fully. I think with these texts to see how they attend differently to the problem of subalternity in geography.

While not using the concept explicitly, a point I address in the following section, Melissa Wright’s (2006) research on the circulation of myths of “disposable women” in northern Mexico and southern China is centrally about effacement through discourse, and she shifts Spivak’s problematic in useful ways. Drawing on a feminist geographer’s attention to embodiment and performance, Wright explains the production of working women as disposable subjects, finding a variety of contradictions and challenges across circuits of work and life. In workplace attempts at forging factory discipline, male factory supervisors step into female workers’ bodily practices in desperation, to “correct” the very workers they consider disposable. Through this “prosthetics of supervision,” supervisors forge a hybrid, hermaphroditic body complex that represents the interdependence of capital and labor through relations of power and desire.

Wright’s analysis unmasks capital’s reliance on “disposable women” for the production of value, a dependence forged through a queered cyborg body (*pace* Haraway 1991). In the public sphere, disposability is constructed through endemic exposure to sexual assault and murder, and, as in the factory, subjectivity is produced through circuits that are prone to breakdown. Wright pursues multiple scales at which critique might help break this pernicious circuitry. What is important about her work, although “subalternity” is not a keyword, is that her analysis deploys lessons of the postcolonial detour to return to concrete challenges of representation in times of crisis. Along the lines of Spivak’s skeptical commitment to represent the oppressed, Wright takes on the risks of continuing to speak with “Third World women” in order to call into question the interplay of super-exploited labor and femicide in the US-Mexico borderlands.

There are parallels here with my work on agrarian transition and work politics in Tiruppur, South India. Chari (2004) explains how men of modest Gounder caste and working-class origins forged a particular kind of hegemony over India’s most dynamic industrial district in the late twentieth century. I sought to theorize from Tiruppur, taking seriously its regional geographical and cultural-political dynamics rather than presuming the diffusion of models of industrial organization from North to South.

Moreover, ethnographic research forced me to take seriously why Tiruppur’s “self-made men” represent their class mobility and industrial success as hinging on what they call their “toil.” Rather than a caste attribute, I explain “Gounder toil” as an indexical sign that has

allowed small owners to revive and adapt specific agrarian ways of working and controlling work. Through the practice of “toil,” former workers forged an elaborate form of fraternal hegemony within and across workplaces. Subaltern power / knowledge lay at the heart of my explanation of “fraternal capital.” When fraternal capital was challenged by a dramatic rise in labor union militancy and by the shifting dynamics of the global garment industry in the 1980s, the work regime shifted to a more despotic form involving increasing differentiation and fragmentation of the workforce by job, wage, skill, and exposure to sexual violence. The cultural politics of power and powerless keep shifting through Tiruppur’s past and present.

While I stand by this account of Tiruppur’s transformation through its “self made men,” I did not quite confront the tension between intersectional universalisms (class / gender / caste) and the destabilizing concept of subalternity. I somewhat cheekily asked “can the subaltern accumulate capital?” but did not return to what capital accumulation does to the concept of subalternity. I thought of my account as a rejoinder to Frederick Cooper’s critique (1994: 1516) of postcolonial scholarship for holding onto an abstract, generalized, and binary notion of colonial rationality that did not hold open the possibility of class or social mobility. Yet, is fraternal capital expressive of subalternity, in Spivak’s sense? Can the subaltern accumulate capital, indeed?

Rosalind Morris (2010: 8), quoted at the start of this section, asserts that this cannot be. In my view, however, this only reinstates the romance of an authentic subaltern subject. “Gounder toil” tells us when subalternity can be consequential even of accumulation, for as long as the unequal conditions for accumulation by particular groups actually hold. When Gounders disclose their “toil” in practice – indexical signs work precisely when words fail – this disclosure takes place within a differentiated context, a “politics of production” that allows some men mobility into the ranks of dependent ownership (Burawoy 1985).

By the millennium, most Gounder owners of modest origins continued to work alongside their workers, and they carried on their bodies, in their language, and in their style of clothing the marks of superiority as labor that could become capital. Their subalternity was specifically aestheticized, and performing “toil” was about maintaining fraternal hegemony among Gounder owners of various firm sizes, tied through complex relations of debt and dependence. In sharp contrast, for the fragmented and perpetually insecure footloose proletariat of the 1990s, labor could never signify “toil” that could become capital. In retrospect, Chari (2004) shows how one type of subalternity became directive of hegemony, articulating certain forms of subaltern rationality with capitalist opportunity, leaving other forms in the lurch. In short, subaltern rationalities say little about their material valence, which hinges on their articulation with the shiftless, anarchic dynamics of capital.

There remains a difference of view between scholars like Morris, for whom the main point is to use subalternity to demonstrate irresolution, and those who take on the representational risks in order to forge provisional solidarities. Vinay Gidwani (2009: 69) appears at first to take Morris’ position in the following passage:

[T]he subaltern is that singular figure who, although exploited and marginalized within hegemonic formations, defies dialectical integration. She is the figure of the ‘radically other’ who marks off a cryptic, secret ‘space of withholding’ within the territorialized ambits of modernity, which dreads her precisely because she represents an internal margin that resists coding and, hence, the Enlightenment desire to know in order to control.

The paragraph concludes with an insistence that there is no way but to engage with the politics and ethics of representation, and yet there is much that is suggestive in this idealized joust between “that singular figure” on the one hand, and modernity and “the Enlightenment” on the other. This argument might be read as posing subalternity in binary opposition to “the Enlightenment,” and subaltern space in opposition to modern territory, rather than in changing relations of contradiction worked out through struggle (Jameson 2010). Fredric Jameson ends his critical review of forms of dialectics with dialectical thinking about space that might usefully extend the geographical insights embedded in Gidwani’s formulation. Indeed, postcolonial notions of constant deferral, and of disclosure through effacement, might be reconsidered in this light through dialectical thinking in contemporary critical geography (Sheppard 2008), to reposition subalternity in a field of spatiotemporal struggle.

A grounded engagement with subalternity and capital is evident in Gidwani’s (2008) challenging monograph, which uses meticulous research on past and present Gujarat to ask how capital and development function as an abstract machine, an assemblage of human and non-human elements, but one that is interrupted at various moments. While Gidwani (2009) poses subalternity as a form of resistance to dialectical integration, Gidwani (2008) represents this resistance within the workings of agrarian capitalism through subaltern rationalities that refuse the alleged logic of capital. In one section, Gidwani interprets the apparently relaxed approach to farming by a man he calls Ajibhai. While others see Ajibhai as someone who shirks work in order to brew and drink liquor, Gidwani sees him exemplifying what Antonio Negri calls a politics of “zero work”: “the ontological broadening of (workers’) use value, through the intensification and elevation of their own needs” (p. 231). This, he says, is unintelligible to capital, except presumably as a lack of value, of waste. The question I ask of Gidwani’s argument is, what potentials exist in rural Gujarat for scaling up the farmer’s common sense to a critique of the broader machine?

Like Gidwani, Joel Wainwright uses subalternity to advance an argument about radical doubt or “aporia.” Wainwright (2008) argues that capitalism and development have been historically conflated, and that the conflation has produced radical doubt over development, understood as at once necessary and violent. Given that development “supplements” or corrects capital, in Wainwright’s view, decolonization today must involve breaking this articulation so that development can entail something other than the contradiction of necessity and violence. Wainwright claims he is not out to “correctly represent subaltern Maya resistance” but to show how development as capitalist development generates aporia. However, his historical research shows other things as well. For instance, Wainwright argues that Maya farmers were considered subjects of capitalist development under colonial tutelage, and that this process, which he calls “resubalternization,” reflected colonial anxieties about population and territory (159–160). In practice, colonial power was littered with doubt, as historians of colonialism have long argued.

Wainwright concludes with the question of whether, following the logic he has set out, decolonization can be sought through Mayan “countermapping” – or, “can the subaltern map?” – and not surprisingly, his answer is Spivak’s qualified no but that we must continue to counter-map until the counter-map is not resourceful to capitalism qua development. Wainwright’s work is important for showing how questions of doubt circulate and persist. Yet, I suggest, radical doubt must be grounded in processes that produce and maintain uncertainty. Capitalist and imperial crises are precisely such moments, in which it may be possible to think beyond Spivak’s cautionary “no” to new forms of collective action in which subalternity might become directive of counter-hegemony.

In arguing for the utility of the subaltern concept through these studies, I do not mean to suggest that it is more important than class, gender, race, caste, nation, and other concrete abstractions that have proven indispensable to understanding power and inequality. The virtue of the subaltern concept is that it is at once linked to these concrete abstractions, drawing from their genealogies while marking their limits. Subalternity presumes the complexity that actually exists, and also, *pace* Gramsci, presumes the possibility that everyone can critically renovate their consciousness of everyday relations of oppression. In the following section I return to a point I have raised in passing: If subalternity is more important as a theoretical concept than a label, then it is important to consider thinkers who might have an implicitly subalternist approach in their engagements with popular consciousness and organization in the face of crisis.

Subaltern Solidarities in the Face of Crisis

Several geographers attend to popular critique in relation to wider conditions of crisis without using the term “subaltern.” Their work is consistent with what I call a meta-theoretical commitment to the subalternist challenge of imagining solidarities through rather than despite social and spatial difference. I attend here to a small set of geographers who engage critical rationalities forged in conditions of prolonged political and economic crisis.

Crises, it is worth stressing, are manifold and multiscale spatiotemporal events. We have yet to learn concretely how people live through the extremes of possibility fostered by the “Great Recession” of our time, whether in the protracted suffering for those dispossessed or unlikely to be reemployed in jobless “economic recoveries” or in the protected lives of bankers and regulators. Even the World Bank (2010), no great defender of the subaltern, reports that the global crisis has worsened its poverty projections for 2015 from 14.1 to 15%, forcing an additional 64 million people into extreme poverty by late 2010 (p. 6); and with several medium-term implications for worsening infant and child mortality, malnutrition, access to primary education, safe drinking water and basic nutrition, and gender-differentiated outcomes (pp. 6–7, 54, and *in passim*). The Bank’s analysis is shaped by a normative commitment to markets and to the Millennium Development Goals, which, we are reassured, were on an upward trend before the onset of global crisis. This argument is an example of what Gillian Hart (2002) calls an impact analysis in which people are victims of forces from on high and in which “economic growth” and its “shocks” remain outside critique.

Hart’s provocation has been to think of the ways in which political subjectivities are shaped by historical and geographical trajectories in the face of political and economic turbulence. In the tradition of agrarian studies, Hart (2002) begins with the defense of land and of agrarian institutions as the basis of counter-hegemonic solidarities. However, her study of post-apartheid developments concludes with a powerful call to rethink emergent articulations of land and livelihood, particularly in struggles over the social wage eroded in neoliberal times. Hart’s argument echoes Karl Polanyi’s powerful warning in 1944 that “the discarding of the market utopia brings us face to face with the reality of society. It is the dividing line between liberalism on the one hand, fascism and socialism on the other” (Polanyi 1957, 258).

This is not an abstract choice, whether we think of post-Mubarak Egypt or the Tea Party movement in the United States. As Burawoy (2003) argues, Polanyi’s notion of society is an active one, built through concrete endeavors to protect people and nature from the ravages of untrammelled commodification. We live in an age of widespread frustration and protest,

from Latin America to South East Asia, Southern Africa to capitalist China, and to recent upheavals across the Middle East. Conventional means for thinking about protest have been called into question, or at least pluralized. Globally interconnected transformations in work regimes have fragmented experiences of labor, feeding competition between fractions of workers and challenging unions. The withdrawal, absence, or exclusionary extension of state provision of a social wage, justified where necessary through neoliberal ideology, has unevenly undermined popular affiliation with broad-based national development. Recombinations of capitalist development and imperial plunder have revived violent frontier capitalisms (Harvey 2003; Watts 2008). While parts of the world continue to see the measure of their worth through twentieth-century “Western” truths – commodity culture, stable nation-states, the spread of democracy, and humanitarianism from the West to the rest – a variety of forces across the planet do not.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) work on the prison-industrial complex stands out as a powerful argument precisely on the interplay of state racism in crisis-resolution and collective, critical opposition. Gilmore explains the prison-building boom in California as a confluence of four crises of surplus people, capital, land, and state capacity. Building on Harvey’s (1989) work on the spatial fix to capitalist crises, she poses the prison fix as an attempt by various collective agents to re-configure the geography of these four surpluses. Turning from systemic crisis to popular critique, her narrative zooms in on working women, who forged a group called Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (or Mothers ROC) to fight against the incarceration of their male kin. Gilmore is attentive to the way in which these women rearticulate their relationship to “the state’s criminalization and sacrifice of their loved ones dispossessed by deindustrialization” (p.185). In order to forge internal solidarity, these women worked through the politics of recognition in order to transcend notions of fixed differences and interests, to forge an evolving form of politics (p. 191). In other words, they worked through the problems of subaltern representation, forging solidarity through their shared subjection by the broader conditions that support California’s prison boom. While Gilmore does not use these terms, this was nothing less than an activation of subaltern will in the face of crisis.

Another perspective comes from Laura Pulido, who has long argued for attention to subaltern critique within the environmental justice movement in the US. Pulido (1996) draws from early subaltern studies, and writers of US environmental justice, to think carefully about the dynamics of subaltern environmental struggles. Like Gilmore, Pulido is attentive to the problems of organizing, and she deftly de-fetishizes moments at which movements present themselves through various fictions: whether as unitary, theoretically coherent, or as “new” vs “old” social movements. While these fictions are often belied in actual praxis, Pulido is attentive to the importance of articulating an oppositional will in the wake of environmental crisis. Her analysis also explores how opposition is forged through rather than despite the politics of representation. Both Pulido and Gilmore insist on linking the broader dynamics of crisis with the urgent need for collective and directive subaltern praxis, however difficult it might be to build such linkages (also Pulido 2006). While their analysis has benefited from critical “race,” feminist, and postcolonial studies, I suggest that their approach to subalternity – implicit in one case, explicit in the other – has lessons for postcolonial scholars as well.

From a different vantage point, Michael Watts’ work in the Niger Delta considers a context rife with violence and struggle, to explore the ways in which multifaceted social and environmental crisis is productive of uncertainty, frustration, and popular critique (Watts

2004; Watts 2008). While he also does not use the term “subaltern,” his work shares the postcolonial insight of multiple coeval rationalities and a commitment to researching actual expressions of territoriality and politics in the wake of manifold crises. Watts (2004) argues that one cannot understand various forms of popular associations – youth gangs, militarized mafias, insurrectionary groups, environmental movements, ethnic or regional political formations – without thinking of the way in which the neo-colonial alliance of oil corporations and the state have fundamentally transformed political life.

Like Gilmore and Pulido, Watts asks what social forces are activated and enabled in the face of crisis. The politics of oil provides a window into spiraling and manifold crises of the nation, chieftaincy, youth, and ethnicity. Each domain prompts a different kind of associational life, with different stakes and claims to resources and belonging. Subalternity in the Niger Delta is expressed in decentralized violence that eats away at lives, but also in collective action like the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, once led by Ken Saro Wiwa, who was hanged for his attempts to build regional autonomy and self-determination. Watts (2001) interprets the Ogoni struggle as one form of popular critical reclamation within a broader continental process of incomplete and compromised decolonization.

I would like to briefly mention that geographers interested in the explicit or implicit use of subalternity might use a wider range of repertoires in engaging popular critique in the wake of crisis. Some examples are Watts’ (2008) photobook on the crisis of the Niger Delta in collaboration with the photographer Ed Kashi and other writers. Another possibility could be in attending to the aural, to how the subaltern listens, as for instance in Clyde Woods’ (1998) study of the blues as a black radical tradition of opposition to plantation ideology in Mississippi, or Geoff Mann’s (2008) analysis of how country music produces sounds of nostalgia that speak to a besieged sense of whiteness. I mention visuality and aurality as two possible means for drawing attention to the indexical aspects of subalternity crucial to Spivak’s notion of “disclosure through effacement.” Indexical acts like Bhubaneswari’s communication through her body point beyond a narrowly textual notion of discourse, to subtle uses of affect, embodiment, and spatiality in conveying meaning. Critical work on photography and music are just some of a much wider range of possible media that might yet be explored to widen the problematic of subaltern subjectivation and representation. In the final section, I turn to scholars who think of spatial connections and solidarities in ways that are useful for rethinking subalternity from a spatialized perspective.

Subalternity and Space

There are three key points I would like to make in bringing my argument to a close. First, I turn back to Hart’s (2002) insight that the crucial questions of social justice in South Africa hinge on a “re-articulation” of land and space. Hart draws from and extends Stuart Hall’s (1980) notion of “articulation” as a process of linking elements and giving expression to linkage, by calling attention to the spatiality of both aspects of articulation. Hart’s work details spatial articulations in multiple ways: in rural South Africans organizing to defend access to and control of land in the face of racialized dispossession; in varied styles of multiscalar politics with respect to apartheid state and capital; in post-apartheid spatial demarcation and its effects in local development politics; and in the emergence of dispersed and connected livelihood struggles that point to the importance of broader-than-landed claims

for a social wage. What is exciting about Hart's work is that she rethinks Gramsci's attentiveness to the politics of land, nation, and hegemony with respect to the specificities of South Africa's present but with much wider significance. Second, the problem of spatial articulation can build on dialectical thinking within geography both for analytical tools and for rhetorical strategies, as for instance in the Benjaminian montages assembled by the late Allan Pred, as in his tracing the lived world of dockers in late nineteenth-century Stockholm (Pred 1990: 198–245). Third, however, the question of spatial articulation is also a problem of “re-articulation,” as Hart puts it; that is, of re-presenting geographically in order to refuse forms of spatial violence, dissimulation, and abandonment that surround us. I turn to a set of engagements with this question of spatial re-articulation, to clarify how it adds to my proposed approach to subalternity.

Consider, first, James Scott's (2009) “anarchist” history of the vast uplands of “Zomia,” the highlands stretching from northeastern India to Vietnam and including lands in the peripheries of nine states. Scott argues that Zomia has long been stateless, akin to the variety of fugitive or maroon communities that have escaped state-supported domination. While he does not use these terms, Scott effectively presents a spatial re-articulation of highland geographies, linking their peoples in a connected project of resistance to government. For highland populations, crisis is endemic, relations with dominant groups and the state are often strained, and retreat to “Zomia” is an alternative, however threatened.

A second pair of studies draws on the wide-angle lens of oceanic and post-national historiography (for instance, Linebaugh and Rediker 2001, and their inspiration, James 2001 (1938)), to rethink far-flung networks and connections that conserve popular critique, with direct relevance for subalternity and space. Judith Carney's (2001) luminous reworking of the history of African rice cultivation in the Carolinas is written against the spatial assumptions of the trans-oceanic movement of rice written into the historical record by planter orthodoxy. Carney focuses on the key role of African expertise within the constraints of enslavement, and the importance of African women's knowledge in rice farming as a source of innovation even within the incredible constraints of slave-based plantations. Though she does not use the term, subaltern knowledge is central to Carney's revision of our understanding of the global spread of agricultural expertise. In a parallel reinterpretation of spatial networks, Dave Featherstone's (2008) monograph is concerned with subaltern political activism as enabled by eighteenth-century radical political networks and contemporary counter-global networks. Featherstone demonstrates how sites and connections have enabled distanced solidarities and wider-than-local imaginations of radical politics. Both Carney and Featherstone foreground networks through which subaltern knowledge becomes more widely efficacious.

Finally, I turn to Gilmore's (2008) revision of her use of the term “gulag” as perhaps not the most politically enabling spatial representation of incarceration in California. Instead, Gilmore suggests that these landscapes and the people moving through them might better be interpreted through what regional and urban planners of South East Asia call “*desakota*” spaces, which combine elements of the rural and the urban (McGee 1991, see also Hart 2002's notion of “interstitial spaces”). Gilmore suggests this as a useful tool for dispersed people to contest “forgotten places”:

The term *desakota* highlights the structural and lived relationship between marginal people and marginal lands in both urban and rural contexts and raises the urgent question of how to scale up political activity from the level of hyperlocal, atomized organizations to the level of regional

coalitions working for a common purpose, partly because their growing understanding of their sameness trumps their previously developed beliefs in their irreconcilable differences. (Gilmore 2008: 38)

Gilmore goes on to show how such regional coalitional alliances emerge and are sustained, whether through documentation of environmental harm at various sites of production of prisons and prisoners (p. 41), by building languages of technical as well as informal communication (p. 48–9), or through collective planning meetings focused on following circuits of money and power in order to pressure the state to redirect portions of the social wage from incarceration to life-affirming social change (p. 53). This analysis is at some distance from a notion of subalternity as marking an atavistic space of doubt; neither does Gilmore, in this iteration, pose “subaltern space” as a separate spatial domain, like Scott’s Zomia. Rather, her use of the *desakota* concept, like Foucault’s notion of subjugated or disqualified knowledge, poses subalternity as “critically resurgent” in the ruins of the imperial present, as Ann Stoler (2008: 211) puts it. Here, we see attention to popular critique, crisis, and spatiality coming together, in an immanent subalternist critique of dominant spatial relations.

I have considered subalternity in its explicit and implicit uses in contemporary geography. The work of subalternity is necessarily about decolonizing economic geography, to bring a fully global sense of geographical responsibility to all scholarship (Sparke 2005). The range of critical geographers I have reviewed point to the importance of renovating forms of disqualified knowledge and practice within the crisis-ridden partitioned geographies of our present. The point is not to celebrate “the subaltern” but to critique the violent interplay of crisis and subalternity. Geographers have much to contribute in using Gramsci’s concept, working through the multiple rationalities of the postcolonial detour, and returning to concrete situations of crisis, doubt, indeterminacy, suffering and potential solidarity, to find ways to better represent our fractured world in order to change it.



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