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The Southern Journal of Philosophy
Volume 59, Issue 2
June 2021

DECONSTRUCTION AND EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

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Abstract: While theorists of epistemic injustice often refer to Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" as an early articulation of the field's concerns, they have stopped short of engaging deeply with Spivak's deconstructive take on epistemic violence and her suggestion that this consists in an attribution of subjectivity to historically marginalized speakers. In redressing this oversight, this article makes a case for adopting a broader conception of epistemic harm and exclusion than has been acknowledged in the literature: I argue that the presumption that speakers are *subjects* can precipitate silencing. For in determining the other who speaks as a subject, one forecloses hospitality to an alterity not already understood according to the subject/object distinction central to Western metaphysics. This deconstructive intervention thus challenges one of the field's key assumptions, namely, that epistemic harm consists in a *failure* to treat speakers as subjects, and consequently that generating a more inclusive dialogical climate depends on restoring marginalized individuals to subject status. Folding Spivak's deconstructive insight into the remedial project of epistemic justice is therefore far from straightforward; nonetheless, I argue that it is consistent with the literature's demand for a heightened sensitivity vis-à-vis the ways marginalized others are routinely harmed in epistemic practices.

In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Spivak turns to Derridean deconstruction as a corrective to the epistemic violence attendant on intellectual attempts at engagement with marginalized others. Spivak's piece has enjoyed wide uptake, prominently for our purposes in the philosophical literature on epistemic injustice, which increasingly traces its lineage back to Spivak. As Kristie Dotson notes, it is "because of Spivak's work and the work of other philosophers, [that] the reality that members

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of oppressed groups can be silenced by virtue of group membership is widely recognized" (2011, 1). But in spite of this acknowledgement of the significance of Spivak's work, theorists of epistemic injustice have thus far stopped short of taking up her claim that deconstruction contains resources for understanding, criticizing, and resisting epistemic harm.

In what follows, I explore some avenues for redressing this—in my eyes regrettable—oversight, by elucidating and developing Spivak's claim that deconstruction has something to offer the project of engaging responsibly with historically marginalized voices.[1] In staging this encounter between the epistemic injustice literature and deconstruction, I am following parallel efforts to broaden the traditions utilized by theorists of epistemic injustice. In a number of transformative engagements with Miranda Fricker's work, philosophers including Amy Allen (2017), Lisa Guenther (2017), and Andrea Pitts (2017) have brought the epistemic injustice literature into contact with areas such as Foucault studies, phenomenology, and decolonial theory, respectively. Guided by the insight that the gap in the literatures engaged by the field of epistemic injustice is unproductive, these philosophers have galvanized the discourse of epistemic injustice and opened up its problematics and points of resistance. That deconstruction has received no analogous treatment is puzzling, precisely because Spivak's celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is an early articulation of the discourse of epistemic injustice. In this essay, as well as in some of her other writings, Spivak puts deconstruction to work in formulating an incisive criticism of the systemic lack of uptake with which the speech acts of historically marginalized others are often met. A conversation between contemporary theorists of epistemic injustice and philosophers of a deconstructive bent therefore seems long overdue.

One might of course protest that there is nothing to regret in the absence of an encounter between discourses on epistemic injustice and deconstruction: on this view, the methodological gap separating these two literatures is so large as to be ungenerative. Fricker might be interested in fostering a dialogical climate in which the contributions of members of oppressed groups can be taken seriously, but it would surely be too quick to assimilate this to a deconstructive turn to the "other." Indeed, Fricker's (2000) well-known polemic against the pitfalls of "post-modernism" should make us

[1] In staging a conversation between the epistemic injustice literature and deconstruction by way of "Can the Subaltern Speak," I do not mean to suggest that Spivak's piece exhausts possible deconstructive takes on issues of epistemic harm and exclusion. Rather, I take myself to be exploring one avenue of putting these two traditions into contact, and my hope is that in doing so this paper will stimulate further discussion about other possible strategies.

wary of prematurely identifying any meaningful intersections between her work and that associated with deconstruction. Conversely, Derrida displays little if any interest in an "ethics of knowing," and to appropriate his work for these purposes runs the risk of papering over the specificities of his concerns and neutralizing the deconstructive "method."

While I am open to these sorts of objections, my own view is that there is something to be gained in pursuing a conversation between theorists of epistemic injustice and deconstruction not in spite of, but partially *because* of, the methodological gap separating these two literatures. My intention in what follows, then, is not to minimize the significant differences between Fricker's methodological commitments and those of Spivak and Derrida. It is rather to ask, given the apparent convergence of some of their concerns, what is generated in approaching issues of epistemic injustice deconstructively? What are the limits to such an encounter, and how might these limits in fact be productive in pushing the discourse on epistemic injustice beyond its current ambit? And, finally, what might a deconstructive engagement with historically marginalized voices look like?

The central argument of this article, pursued across three sections, is that approaching epistemic harm and exclusion from a deconstructive perspective lights up a previously unacknowledged instantiation of epistemic harm and exclusion: namely, the epistemic violence enacted in the presumption that the speech acts of marginalized individuals or communities necessarily issue from a *subject*. This is strikingly different from the traditional understanding of epistemic injustice. For Fricker and others working in this field, victims of epistemic injustice are harmed precisely inasmuch as they are *not* treated as subjects.

While section one of this paper unpacks Spivak's unique understanding of epistemic violence as the violence of subject-constitution, the second part of this paper moves on to undertake an explicit comparison between Spivak's take on epistemic violence and that articulated in the contemporary discourse on epistemic injustice. I begin this section by foregrounding some significant convergences between the concerns of the epistemic injustice literature and those of deconstruction. However, my ultimate aim here is to elucidate how Spivak's distinctive view of epistemic violence emerges from her methodological commitments to deconstruction, on the one hand, and postcolonial theory, on the other. In treating this methodological divergence and what results from it as a starting point for further conversation, I hope to motivate the perhaps somewhat puzzling idea that it is in treating historically marginalized others as *subjects* that we risk mishearing and misrepresenting—indeed, silencing—the communicative offers issuing from

members of oppressed groups. In order to support the idea that we ought to adopt a broader conception of those instances in which epistemic harm may occur, I briefly consider two specific examples in which the presumption and attribution of subjectivity amounts to epistemic violence. The third and concluding section of the article, finally, delineates a possible avenue for resisting epistemic violence so understood. Against the background of some deconstructive misgivings about the promulgation of a set of rules or a program by which to relate to others, I suggest that the relevance of deconstruction to overcoming epistemic harm and exclusion lies in a radicalization of the epistemic injustice literature's demand for a heightened sensitivity vis-à-vis the ways in which marginalized others are routinely harmed in dialogical practices.

1.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?," first published in 1988, Spivak introduces the expression "epistemic violence" to mark instances of silencing across a variety of theoretical attempts at engagement with historically marginalized others. Spivak famously takes as her target "some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today"—Foucault, Deleuze, variants of international Marxism, and the field of Subaltern Studies—in other words, precisely those theorists who profess an interest in "the voice of the Other" (2010a, 238, 253). For Spivak, the diverse attempts of these discourses to "disclose and know . . . society's Other" ultimately do no more than silence and exclude those it seeks to uplift (2010b, 23). This silencing is an effect of the subject-constitution set in motion by the manner in which these social critics propose to engage the subaltern. In other words, Spivak understands epistemic violence as the violence of *subject-formation*. My aim in this section is to bring out the distinctiveness of this understanding of epistemic violence, and to elucidate how precisely subject-formation might result in silencing.

As Spivak is well aware, the charge that it is precisely radical social criticism that is involved in subject-formation is surprising. For what unites these heterogeneous discourses is a consistent thematization and problematization of the metaphysical subject as it is traditionally understood, that is, as a self-identical, originarily autonomous and self-sufficient "knower" that relates to an external world of objects and others by which it is otherwise unaffected. And yet, according to Spivak, in spite of this persistent critique of subjecthood, these discourses in fact "inaugurat[e] a subject" in their intellectual attempts to engage historically marginalized groups (2010a, 238).

Much of Spivak's essay looks to expose this reinstitution of subjectivity by way of her attention to the double significance of "representation" in various modes of engagement with marginalized others. On the one hand, "representation" has the politically charged sense of the German *vertreten*, of one subject standing in as a "proxy" for another in speaking on their behalf (Spivak 2010b, 28–31). As Linda Martín Alcoff helpfully describes the dynamics at work here, in speaking for others "I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*. I am representing them *as* such and such, or in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject-positions" (1991–1992, 2). A certain subject-formation is at work, then, in the intellectual's arrogation of a position from which they might *speak for* subaltern constituencies. The epistemic violence at work in "speaking for" the other, in becoming a representative of their perspectives, is captured by standpoint epistemology's insistence that a speaker's social position is not epistemically insignificant. For an intellectual to presume to be capable of adequately representing the oppressed other is to ignore the power dynamics at play within an epistemic exchange: it is to discount the possibility that one's own social position has compromised one's receptivity to certain voices (Medina 2017, 249). This then amplifies the dangers of misrepresentation and silencing already attendant on any attempt to speak for others, even those who are similarly situated.[2]

On the other hand, representation has the sense of re-presentation or setting before, presenting in a theatrical sense—hence Spivak's use of the German *darstellen*. It is this second sense of representation that lies at the heart of Spivak's misgivings, for it is not the case that Foucault, Deleuze, or historians of the subaltern are so naïve as to reinstate a subject by attempting to "speak for" the oppressed, by standing in as *proxy*. Nonetheless, in the more nuanced attempts of intellectuals to establish the conditions whereby the marginalized could be empowered to speak for themselves such that the intellectual can "listen to" the subaltern, Spivak identifies a form of epistemic violence: in attempting to set the scene in which the oppressed might represent themselves, this second sense of representation—that is, representation as *presentation*, as "portrait" rather than "proxy"—forces the other into a mode of speaking that depends upon a certain kind of subjectivity. Moreover, in making space for the subaltern to speak for themselves, the critical theorist takes on the role of director, that is, a subject who sets

[2] This point is aptly put by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015, 204–6) in her essay on the inaudibility of women of color.

the terms of the exchange. Let us consider in more detail these two points regarding the *presentation* of the other.

First, to claim as Deleuze does that the responsible critic should make space where the "prisoners themselves would be able to speak" is to betray a stubborn maintenance of the subject as a consciousness which *re-presents* reality and then relays this knowledge to other representing subjects (Spivak 2010b, 27). Operating in the background here is Spivak's attention to the co-implication, in the history of Western philosophy, between re-presentation and the acts of a unified subject: the subject is that thing which represents. And so, the apparently benevolent demand to let the other speak—to set the stage such that the other might present themselves—runs the risk of presuming in advance a unified subaltern subject, be it individual or collective, to which speech acts can be attributed. As Spivak argues, then, "the practical politics of the oppressed speaking for themselves restore[s] the category of the sovereign subject within the theory that seems most to question it" (2010a, 245). And this is because this discourse stops short of interrogating its deployment of the schema of re-presentation in the sense of *darstellen*, and therefore subtly insinuates a subject. Ultimately, the engagement with the other here proceeds on the latent assumption that the other is indeed a *re-presenting subject*: a "pure form of consciousness" that would be "self-proximate" and "self-identical" (Spivak 2010b, 40, 34). For Spivak, then, Deleuze's and Foucault's more nuanced attempts at engagement with subalternity give the lie to the critique of subjectivity sustained when they are in "theoretical full dress," as it were (2010c, 228).[3]

At the same time, by simply *listening to* the speech acts of the subaltern, intellectuals solidify their own position as subjects which re-present, representing first of all the oppressed other by setting the stage for their speech acts. To demand that space be made to let the other speak, then, at once rehearses the long-standing dialectic whereby the "European Subject . . . seeks to produce an Other that would consolidate its own inside, its own subject-status" (Spivak 2010a, 264). The "clandestine restoration" of the subject that Spivak tracks in practices of *listening to* thus turns out to operate

[3] I am not suggesting that this is Spivak's "last word" on Foucault and Deleuze. Spivak indeed takes up a number of positions vis-à-vis both Foucault and Deleuze on this particular issue. With respect to the former, she notes in an interview that her suggestion is *not* that "Foucault himself had not brilliantly tried to represent the oppressed. What I was looking at in the late Foucault was the theorization of that project as letting the oppressed speak for himself. . . . What can intellectuals do toward the texts of the oppressed? Represent them and analyze them, disclosing one's own positionality for communities in power. Foucault has done this. In fact, I can't think of another person, another intellectual, who had done this in our time in the Western context" (Spivak and Gunew 1990, 56).

at multiple levels, both negating the alterity of the other with a determined attribution of subjectivity (the other is heard only insofar as they are presumed to be a representing subject) *and* reinstating the Western intellectual as the knowing, representing subject who sets the stage for the other to portray him or herself.

While it is important that the double meaning of representation be kept in view—that is, the distinction between representation in its political sense and representation in its metaphysical or theatrical sense—it is nonetheless also worth emphasizing that the two meanings of representation cannot be neatly pulled apart. The politics of historical representation consist precisely in this play of representation as proxy and re-presentation as portrait, and it is together that they underwrite the epistemic violence of subject-formation and the concomitant silencing of the subaltern. As Drucilla Cornell succinctly puts this point: "The other that we hear because he or she speaks to us in our language and through our forms of representation [as in *Darstellung*] has already been assimilated, and thus appropriated, by the subject who represents [as in *vertreten*] him or her" (2010, 104). The effort to speak on behalf of the marginalized other proceeds on the condition that this other has already been included within a certain schema of representation. And in becoming a representative of the subaltern, the intellectual solidifies the re-presentation of the subaltern as this or that kind of subject. The difficulty of the problem is not to be understated. As Spivak would later write, "it is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem . . . we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices" (Spivak and Gunew 1990, 63).

I take it that it is against this background that Spivak initially offers a decidedly negative answer to her titular question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?." The subaltern cannot speak, because to presume otherwise, that is, to presume that the subaltern *can* speak and that the responsible critic's task is merely to listen, is already to presuppose a unified re-presenting subaltern subject. Spivak's pessimistic conclusion should not be taken to mean that the subaltern is incapable of making any kind of utterance. It is against this kind of misinterpretation of the 1988 essay that Spivak would later come to describe her claim that the subaltern cannot speak as an "inadvisable remark" (2010b, 63). As Spivak elaborates, her point in claiming that the subaltern cannot speak amounts to saying that the utterance of the subaltern does not "fulfill itself in a speech-act," for a speech act involves the complement of a speaker's utterance by an *uptake* on the part of the

listener (1996, 289). But given that, as Spivak writes in her opening salvo, even the most "radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject," there exists as yet no possibility for the other to be heard as *other*, that is, as not already a certain kind of subject (Spivak 2010a, 238). Efforts to *listen* are caught up in a Western metaphysics of subjectivity in such a way that a genuine uptake of the subaltern speech act is foreclosed. The attempt to speak, then, cannot but fail.

2.

Thus far, I hope to have shown that one of the central concerns of Spivak's paper is to bring to the fore how marginalized individuals and communities may be silenced by relatively more powerful interlocutors in two ways: (i) in the latter's attempt to *speak for* the subaltern and (ii) in the apparently more benevolent demand that those in relevant positions of power simply *listen to* the oppressed. For Spivak, these two dominant modes of engagement with the subaltern involve a surreptitious practice of subject-constitution, which she insightfully locates in discourses that otherwise seem to problematize the subject.

As noted at the outset of this article, while theorists of epistemic injustice increasingly pay homage to Spivak's essay as an early articulation of some of the field's characteristic concerns, the references to "Can the Subaltern Speak?" do not go far beyond this polite acknowledgment. At this juncture, then, I would like to make explicit how the points raised by Spivak do indeed anticipate many of the issues raised in the contemporary discourse of epistemic injustice.

First and perhaps most obvious is Spivak's exposure of the ways in which the silencing of historically marginalized others involves ongoing, systematic exclusion from knowledge-production, in spite of apparent gains in formal equality and the various attempts to incorporate the "perspective" of the oppressed. Miranda Fricker's two notions of epistemic injustice—testimonial and hermeneutic—continue in this vein by showing up how identity-prejudice can serve to negatively impact members of marginalized groups within epistemic practices. Second, and relatedly, Spivak and later theorists of epistemic injustice are united in their concern with the role that power plays in the relay of knowledge between interlocutors, and both exhibit an attention to how this can result in a failure of uptake. As Fricker makes clear, the aim of articulating an account of *epistemic injustice* would be, precisely, to open up a theoretical space "in which to explore questions of . . . power in epistemic practices," and she gives credit to "post-modernism" as

having already identified "reason's entanglements with social power" (2007, 3). This is then related to a third point of intersection, which is an insistence on what Fricker calls the "normality of injustice" (7): for both Spivak and theorists of epistemic injustice, those moments where a dialogical encounter is not already contaminated by the subtle operations of power are few and far between. As Spivak writes, "there has to be a consistent critique of what one is up to" (1990, 63). What is called for, then, is (i) a watchfulness vis-à-vis any facile assumption that a conversation is a transparent exchange of knowledge between a symmetrically situated speaker and hearer, and (ii) a concomitant demand for resistance to epistemic injustice.

A more surprising connection lies in Fricker's attention to the manner in which the power operative in a dialogical exchange can be *productive*, in the sense of constituting the identity of those who are targeted by epistemic injustice. For Fricker, persistent epistemic injustice "helps rigidify what sort of social being [victims of such injustice] are allowed to count as. . . . Epistemic insult is also a moment in a process of social construction that constrains who the person can be" (2007, 56–58). This language is highly reminiscent of Spivak's discussion of epistemic violence as involving the *constitution* of the other. However, it is here that the similarities between Spivak and the work of later theorists of epistemic injustice bottom out.

For Fricker, the issue is certainly not that victims of epistemic injustice are constituted as *subjects*. Quite the opposite: the issue is that those vulnerable to epistemic injustice are understood according to a prejudicial identity-category, and, consequently, *not* treated as full epistemic subjects. As Fricker writes, "the presence of any significantly identity-prejudicial attitudes against the speaker will always undermine their general status as a subject" (135). For Fricker, then, epistemic injustice involves a basic Kantian moral wrong whereby speakers are not treated as subjects (informants) but as objects (sources of information). It can therefore be conceived as analogous to pernicious kinds of sexual objectification inasmuch as it involves an unwanted and often coercive degradation of the person "from subject to object" (133). As Fricker writes, "the intrinsic harm of testimonial injustice [is] *epistemic objectification*: when a hearer undermines a speaker in her capacity as a giver of knowledge, the speaker is epistemically objectified" (133). At this point, the contemporary discourse of epistemic injustice diverges quite dramatically from Spivak's concerns, and it seems we have hit upon a limit to the openings one discursive field might present to the other.

It is this moment—where the prospects for productive dialogue between theorists of epistemic injustice and those of working within deconstruction look rather dim—that I want to take as my departure for the remainder of

this article. I think it is precisely the point at which Spivak's work and that of Fricker could not be further apart that a dialogue is most worth pursuing, since it will help bring out what is at stake in taking a deconstructive approach to issues of epistemic injustice.

Fricker's specification of epistemic harm as a type of objectification is highly intuitive, certainly more so than the Spivakean idea that it is precisely in attributing *subjectivity* to the other that we wrongfully exclude or otherwise disadvantage her in our epistemic practice. Fricker is well aware of this, noting that the sense that there is a wrong committed in demoting a speaker from subject to object is such a deeply rooted part of our moral universe that it requires little in the way of contestation or amendment: "Since it captures such a common ethical idea about what it is to treat fellow human beings as full human beings, I think we can lift this bit of Kant's terminology without dragging the rest of his considerable philosophical apparatus along with it" (134).

It is against this background that I want to briefly offer a defense of Spivak's deconstructive understanding of epistemic violence as involving the constitution of subjectivity at multiple levels, guided by the following questions: What precisely is wrong with instituting subjectivity? What is at stake when speakers/hearers are determined as subjects? And most importantly, why should those concerned with issues of epistemic injustice be worried about this? To begin to answer these questions, I turn to the two major intellectual contexts in which Spivak first articulated her understanding of epistemic violence: deconstruction, on the one hand, and postcolonial theory, on the other.

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy published under the title "Eating Well, or, The Calculation of the Subject," Derrida notes that an attribution of subjectivity is not independent of the metaphysical tradition which has authorized the figure of the "subject" (Derrida 1995). What Derrida means here is that in deploying the notion of "subjectivity"—for example, in the presumption that the other who addresses us is indeed a subject—one should not imagine that one has escaped the cluster of associated concepts by which the notion of the "subject" has been traditionally understood. Or, in Derrida's words, an attribution of subjectivity is at one and the same time an imposition of the "essential predicates of which all subjects are the subject" (273). Derrida goes on: "while these predicates are as numerous and diverse as the type or order of subjects dictates, they are all in fact ordered around being-present: presence to self, identity to self, positionality, property, ego, consciousness, will, intentionality, freedom, humanity" (273).

The move whereby the intellectual confers subject-status *on themselves* by representing the subaltern *other* as a subject—that is to say, the multilevel subject-constitution that Spivak discerns in various discourses—thus trails in its wake an entire metaphysical edifice. To treat the other as a subject, then, involves preemptively understanding the other's communicative offer according to a certain conceptual schema that determines the other's being. This in turn has the effect of foreclosing the possibility of relating to the other in a manner that does not already conform to one's expectations of what it means to be a subject; in other words, it desensitizes one to the possibility of really being *surprised* by what the other has to offer. Consequently, inasmuch as a speech act is illegible according to the prevailing notion of subjectivity and its accompanying attributes, it will receive no uptake. And, as we saw above, it is in this sense that the subaltern, according to Spivak, cannot speak.

Derrida will often use the language of "anticipation" to capture this kind of semantic overdetermination in an encounter with alterity—an anticipation that, as Derrida writes in *Rogues*, "comes to orient, order, and make possible" an encounter, in such a way that it ultimately "annuls [the encounter] by the same token and neutralizes the unforeseeable and incalculable irruption, the singular and exceptional alterity of *what* comes, or indeed of *who* comes" (2009, 128). Ultimately, Derrida's point is that to relate to the other as a subject amounts to negating their very alterity: "the 'who' of the other . . . could only appear absolutely *as such* [i.e., as subject] by disappearing as other" (1995, 275).

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak deepens this deconstructive insight into the metaphysical baggage implied by the notion of "subjectivity" by thinking through the effects of an attribution of subjectivity within a colonial context. Spivak writes: "until recently, the clearest example of such epistemic violence is the remotely-orchestrated, far-flung, heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject" (2010b, 35). The deconstructive worry about the manner in which the presumption of subject-status predetermines the other's mode of presentation takes on a specific urgency when what is at issue is the encounter between European colonizers and the colonized, and the afterlives of this encounter as they are lived out across the world. The determination of the colonized as *subjects* is violent in a specifically epistemic manner, because it involves, to borrow a phrase from Kwasi Wiredu, "the superimposition of a Western category of thought" (2009, 9). By inscribing the alterity of the colonized into the *proprium* of a European metaphysics of subjectivity, other epistemic systems that might work to puncture the reality of the European colonizer are effectively neutralized. It is in this way that

the subaltern is silenced, in that she can only be heard through a familiar enough representational schema and by conforming to a particular, and indeed parochial, mode of thought.

To be clear, my intention here is certainly not to deny that the colonial enterprise involved a deeply violent project of "othering" whereby the colonized were conceived as subhuman, indeed as objects, and as irremediably strange, and that this served to underwrite brutal physical violence against the colonized. As Homi K. Bhabha and a number of other postcolonial critics point out, however, in one of the central contradictions of empire, this movement of estrangement proceeded *alongside* an inscription of the colonial constituency into the order of the already-familiar (2004, 122).[4] Bhabha writes, "colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (101). Across a variety of discourses, the colonial other is constructed as an inadequate subject of sorts, but a subject nonetheless, in such a way as to neutralize and arrest the "play of difference" (107). Identified with Europe's prehistory, the colonial subject is "almost the same, but not quite," an exotic opportunity for a glance into Europe's own past (122). Indeed, as Mary Louise Pratt has masterfully shown across an analysis of European colonial travel-writing, this archive bespeaks a deep desire to render the colonized recognizable *enough*, to provide the European reader with a "sense of ownership, entitlement, and familiarity" (1992, 3–4).

I take it that it is in light of this that Spivak speaks of the colonial project as "the asymmetrical obliteration" of the trace of the other *as other* (2010b, 35). In tandem with the constitution of the colonized other as subject, the European self is assured of its own status as subject by way of its representation of the other. The constitution of the other as the "self's shadow" reaffirms the subjectivity of the European colonizer and its domestic constituents. As Pratt (1992, 4) writes, European empire develops an "obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself. It becomes dependent on others to know itself"—and, I would add, to know itself precisely as a representing subject by re-presenting images and discursive constructions of its colonial others. Assured not merely of its subject status but of the putative superiority and universal reach of its metaphysics, the European subject extends its own modes of representation, its forms of discursive acceptability across the globe.

[4] I am thinking here especially of Edward Said's (1979) understanding of attempts at "domestication" of the threat of Islam in Europe's imaginative geographies, and V. Y. Mudimbe's (1988) exploration of discursive constructions of Africa and Africanness through European colonization.

It is this movement that one risks rehearsing in a no doubt well-meaning attempt to set up a space where the other could speak. The effort to render epistemic practices more inclusive by constituting others as *subjects* discounts the fact that the "subject" is not a natural or neutral notion, but a product of the European ontological tradition. To neglect this is to preemptively preclude the possibility of a kind of knowledge disclosure that goes beyond the subject/object distinction characteristic of Western metaphysics. It is from this deconstructive perspective that a move like Fricker's—that is, "adopting Kant's ready-made formulation" (2007, 133)—appears as highly inappropriate, indeed as an enactment of the very violence it sets out to correct. For it handles the moral universe that "we" inhabit, and its metaphysical underpinnings, as singular from the start, hence occluding the very possibility that there are other conceptual schemas, other ways of being and indeed of knowing that go beyond the "passive inheritance" which Fricker is elsewhere careful to question (83).

Spivak's demand that we hesitate in attributing subjectivity to others, then, is by no means a celebration of epistemic objectification, but rather a powerful rejoinder to the idea that inasmuch as marginalized others are silenced as a consequence of objectification, the solution would be to restore subject-status to such individuals. Spivak wants to broaden our understanding of the conditions under which silencing occurs, to include even those moments where we attribute subjectivity to the other in the otherwise laudable efforts to generate a more inclusive dialogical climate. Against Fricker's suggestion that we tend toward epistemic justice as we compensate for prejudicial perception and, consequently, come to regard others as full epistemic subjects, Spivak worries that this apparently benevolent attribution of subjectivity often masks a deeper dimension of epistemic harm, namely, the foreclosing of a sensitivity to alterity not already captured by the subject/object distinction.

It is important that the broadened understanding of epistemic harm and exclusion advanced here need not hinge on a concrete allusion to alternative, precolonial understandings of personhood, agency, or alterity somehow left intact through the cultural devastation wrought by European colonialism. Rather, the argument depends on pinpointing a specific type of harm experienced by those on the margins when their speech acts and indeed their very identity are assimilated to the particular conceptual scheme of European metaphysics. We might think here of a now famous example borrowed from another field—Latinx feminism—by turning to María Lugones's careful unpacking of her experience of "both having and not having a particular attribute," namely, playfulness (2003, 86). As

Lugones explains, it is with "profound confusion" that she came to recognize that within a predominantly white, Anglo-American context, she was understood and indeed constructed as a thoroughly serious woman by those around her. On her own self-understanding, however, as well as that of people within her own community, Lugones conceived of playfulness as an important component of her identity (86). For Lugones, the insight garnered from this disjunctive experience is not that the "underlying 'I' that is the 'true' self" has been somehow misunderstood, that at bottom she either is or is not playful (128). To the contrary, she insists that "I both have and do not have this attribute," and argues on this basis for a plural, ambiguous, and many-sided conception of selfhood (86).

What is disorienting and even painful about this contradictory interpellation—being understood both as playful and as not playful—is that it is inexplicable within prevalent conceptual schemes. As Lugones puts it, this very real experience, one that she wagers is common among those who occupy the margins, is "ontologically problematic" (89). It is "ontologically problematic" in that it sits uncomfortably with the traditional Western notion of subjectivity that privileges self-identity and coherence (121–48). Nonetheless, Lugones argues, it is true to the experience of "outsiders to the mainstream," and to insist on the dominant conception of subjectivity and its metaphysics does little more than "constrain, erase, or deem aberrant"—we might say, silence—alternate ways of understanding (89). Deploying the schema of subjectivity in an attempt to virtuously hear the testimony of those who have been marginalized, Lugones shows us, may very well amount to an unintended demand that the speaker flatten her understanding of her own experience so as to conform to a predetermined understanding of what or who the subject is. This in turn reaffirms a naturalized and neutralized vision of the being of those involved in a conversational exchange which draws heavily on the tradition of European metaphysics, all the while obscuring this reliance on a particular system of thought. Here we see quite clearly the specific harm involved in the subjectivization characteristic of Spivak's notion of epistemic violence: the expectation that the speech acts of marginalized individuals or communities will cohere with the conceptual schema of subjectivity as it has been articulated in the Western tradition is a mechanism of silencing, for it does not tolerate, cannot *hear*, aspects of what is said that would upend this rigid classificatory system.

A quite different but no less pertinent example of the silencing attendant on subjectivization is to be found in Dean Spade's "Mutilating Gender" (2006). In this essay, Spade elucidates the power-laden encounter between

medical practitioners and those seeking gender-affirming procedures. While there is much to be said about Spade's careful analysis of how the medical regime reaffirms traditional gender dichotomies by permitting only the production of gender-normative altered bodies, I would like to focus here on Spade's use of personal narrative in order to capture the specific type of harm involved in the deployment of the metaphysics of subjectivity in a situation in which power is unevenly distributed. Analyzing the costs of consciously opting *not* to participate in a "selective recitation" of a normative trans childhood narrative that has become the "approved model" by the lights of the medical field, Spade writes:

> From what I've gathered in my various counseling sessions, in order to be deemed real I need to want to pass as male all the time, and not feel ambivalent about this. I need to be willing to make the commitment to 'full-time' maleness, or they can't be sure that I won't regret my surgery. . . . I'm supposed to feel wholly joyous when I get called 'sir' or 'boy.' How could I ever have such an uncomplicated relationship to that moment? (Spade 2006, 322)

Spade goes on to note that the demand issuing from the medical field is that of "accepting, uncritically, the entirety of the subject-position" associated with "manhood" or "womanhood" (323), in such a way that any rejection of an underlying self-identity, any experience of ambiguity, and indeed a felt awareness of the very "inhabitability of dichotomous gender," is deemed aberrant and unacceptable—unsayable as much as unhearable—from the outset.

In different ways, then, Lugones and Spade give content to the harms involved in being assimilated to a predetermined vision of subjectivity; neither endorses the horizon of intelligibility through which the compensatory project of epistemic justice has been constructed. This is the point at which a critical engagement with deconstruction would not merely corroborate some of the key insights developed by Fricker and others working in the epistemic injustice field, but would demand that the field deepen its critical gaze by considering seriously the varieties of silencing that may result from a lack of critical caution with respect to the philosophical tradition from which it draws its key concepts. In particular, with its reliance on the notion of subjectivity, the theory of epistemic injustice risks recommending an epistemic comportment to historically marginalized individuals that ultimately does no more than offer a "reception or inclusion of the other" which "control[s] and master[s]" their mode of presentation (Derrida 2001, 17). Whether the discourse of epistemic injustice can happily accommodate this kind of amendment to its style of criticism is, I think, an open question,

but I hope to have made clear that it would at least be consistent with some of its aims to do so.

3. CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this article is to set into contact the epistemic injustice literature and deconstruction. My strategy has been to work through Spivak's seminal piece on epistemic violence, with an emphasis on the distinctiveness of her understanding of the manifold and varied situations in which historically marginalized individuals are continually silenced. Against the background of Fricker's very different notion of epistemic *injustice*, I hope to have motivated the importance of considering the ways in which an attribution of subjectivity—often taken to be precisely the *solution* to prejudicial mishearing and silencing—is a significant and oft overlooked category of epistemic harm and exclusion. In my concluding remarks, I would like to map out a possible avenue for what it might mean to resist epistemic violence so understood, while keeping in mind some deconstructive reservations about the formulation of any "program" by which to relate to the other.

At the very least, Spivak's unique understanding of epistemic violence in terms of subject-attribution encourages some due hesitation to solutions to epistemic injustice that would consist in restoring victims of epistemic violence to subject-status. In this sense, the contribution of deconstruction to the epistemic injustice literature amounts to unsettling any easy path to inclusion that would depend on metaphysically laden concepts. Relatedly, and more positively, there is a sense in which working toward epistemic justice might require *actively* resisting a premature attribution of subjectivity, so as to let others appear without semantic over-determination, without the presupposition that one already *understands* what kind of being they are and what kinds of claims they will make. In light of this, we might ask with Rosalyn Diprose what this radical openness looks like, and how we might begin to give alterity a chance: "What experience transports us beyond what constitutes our ways of being and beyond the familiar worlds we inhabit? What experience sets us on the path of thinking differently?" (2002, 136).

Derrida speaks to this "experience," I think, in his interest in a kind of hospitality that would attempt to cultivate an openness to the other *as other*—that is, as a singular entity whose being and utterances cannot be grasped or pinned down in advance. This radical, unconditional hospitality—"if it is possible"—is not, Derrida insists, rendered to others as *subjects*, for this

would involve already identifying and positing the other as this or that, but to the "absolute, unknown, anonymous other" (2000, 25).

I understand this ideal of hospitality to be closely connected to a further deconstructive "theme" broached in this essay—namely, a watchfulness of and imperative to work through the European metaphysical tradition and the fateful manner in which it has determined and continues to underwrite certain philosophical concepts, prominently the idea of "the subject." This "deconstruction" of the Western canon is necessary, at least in part, because the sedimentation of a tradition "seems always to inhibit, suspend, or even contradict the coming of the other" (Derrida 2009, 128). The contribution of deconstruction to epistemic justice, then, would be, in Derrida's words, to suspend the "credit or credibility of an axiom" and "this anguishing moment of suspense also opens the interval of spacing in which transformations, even juridicopolitical revolutions, take place" (2002, 249). And this *in order* to cultivate an openness, a receptivity—in short, a hospitality—to the other, to another way of thinking, to that which cannot be circumscribed by traditional Western conceptual schemes.

Derrida is by no means suggesting that this ideal of absolute hospitality is one that may be simply instituted in practice; in fact, he insists that the moment it is rendered empirical, inscribed in law, for example, it reverts inevitably to the order of *conditional* hospitality with its attendant limitations and demands (Derrida 2000, 23). Nonetheless, Derrida remains interested in this higher form of hospitality as one that is indissociable from, and comes to orient, those moments in which hospitality is attempted, where a welcome is extended in a form that does not shield the putative "host" from the surprise that the guest's mode of presentation may proffer. Scenes of ordinary hospitality, while inevitably given over to conditionality, thus provide an opening onto a "welcome without reserve and without calculation" (Derrida 2005, 6). We catch a glimpse of the possibility of unconditional hospitality, then, whenever strictures of expectation and mechanisms of filtering are momentarily suspended, where an arsenal of categories is not yet in play, ready to be imposed upon the other's being.

Rather than examine in depth the aporetic entanglement of unconditional hospitality and its conditional counterpart,[5] I would like to consider what I understand to be an artistic homage to unconditional hospitality in its role as ideal, as "inspiration" and "aspiration" (Derrida 2000, 79): Sarah Wood's short film, *Boat People*. The film begins with a striking proclamation: "Revelation comes from the generosity of a welcome. Welcome." As we are

[5] See Haddad (2013).

taken through scenes of migration that span the history of humankind, we are asked not merely to connect with the everyday reality that millions of people face as they search for better lives elsewhere, but to reimagine a constricted and demoralizing debate on migration and refugees from the perspective of a *higher form of hospitality*. "We don't have to live like this," Olivia Laing writes of her experience of the film. And she goes on: "There are other ways to conduct yourself, to apprehend the world" (2020, 106). The welcome that Wood's film envisages is not one that hinges on making the unfamiliar familiar, on assimilating those who cross the Mediterranean or the few that ultimately arrive on Britain's shores. Instead, it attempts to hold in view an ideal of limitless hospitality that breathes fresh air into our restricted imaginative horizons, and insists that another form of relation, another world, is possible.

While the burning question of refugees and migration may seem far from the epistemic issues here under discussion, I invoke this example not merely because these questions lie at the heart of Derrida's own writings on hospitality, but in order to demonstrate what the notion of unconditional hospitality—while strictly speaking "impracticable"—can open up, even as it remains an ideal. And this, in my view, has important implications for thinking about possible ways of resisting epistemic violence. In Wood's work, we experience a loosening up of our sense of what is possible, a graceful suggestion that our expectations and our stipulations need not be so stringent, that, in Derrida's words, ethics *qua* hospitality consists in "giv[ing] place to them, let[ting] them come" (2000, 25). Transmuted into an epistemic register, we see the cognitive possibilities of an engagement with alterity that gives space to who or what the other may be, outside of any horizon of expectation. The ideal of hospitality thus puts a no doubt difficult demand on interlocutors to hesitate, to unlearn comfortable categories, and to cultivate an openness to the unexpected. In this way, hospitality *qua* ideal seems to answer to Diprose's desire for an antidote to the violence involved in "limit[ing] the other through the imposition of familiar ideas" (2002, 137).

If one is convinced that this deconstructive perspective merits greater consideration by theorists of epistemic injustice interested in the ongoing work of epistemic *justice*, some cautionary remarks are in order. For neither Derrida nor Spivak come close to suggesting that the kind of hospitality which would make space for the other to appear as other is in any sense straightforward; in fact, as we saw above, the very possibility of such a hospitality subverts traditional conceptions of modality, and Derrida typically understands it in terms of an *im*possible possibility. In the context of this

article, this is important because it speaks to the deconstructive conviction that one cannot simply abstract oneself from dominant modes of thinking; the Western philosophical tradition seems to possess "some unlimited power of envelopment, by which he who attempts to repel it would always already be overtaken" (Derrida 1978, 139).[6] To be sure, the critique of epistemic violence issues a demand that we venture forth toward a kind of thinking that would resist reducing the alterity of the other to traditional Western conceptuality, that we render ourselves hospitable to a mode of being that is not already understood. But the attempt to do this cannot but recoil to a mode of thought that urges itself upon us "most often and most prevailingly" (Derrida 2004, 90–91). One cannot cast off the weight of traditional conceptuality—"ward off subjectity," to borrow Spivak's formulation—and imagine that one can simply begin again, as it were (1994, 28).

What is more, the deconstructive hesitation in recommending a program for resisting epistemic violence goes beyond this complicated relationship to a dominant, Western philosophical inheritance. For both Derrida and Spivak, it is not simply regrettable that the concept of "subjectivity" and its semantic field often comes to orient and give sense to conversational offers emanating from historically marginalized others. As Derrida makes clear, in spite of the epistemic violence it instantiates, sometimes "it is no doubt more urgent to recall that [the metaphysics of subjectivity and its humanist teleology] have remained *up till now* the price to be paid in the ethico-political denunciation of biologism, racism, etc." (1989, 56). That is to say—in line with Fricker's worries about the dangers of reducing other persons to objects—the discourse of subjectivity *has* been a tool to guard against political oppression. To simply neglect this in our efforts to "decenter" the subject, then, risks falling back on another kind of violence, namely, the violence justified by a failure to understand others as full subjects. In certain instances, then, unconditional hospitality as a mode of resistance to epistemic violence may not even be desirable.

Ultimately, then, what is the upshot of the deconstructive intervention in the epistemic injustice literature pursued in this article? First, we broaden our understanding of the way that others are often silenced, and this goes far beyond what Fricker recognizes as the "normality of injustice" (2007, 27): Spivak's radical insight is that attributing subjectivity to others might foreclose the possibility of genuinely inclusive dialogical practices. Inasmuch as the epistemic injustice project remains uncritically wedded to an idea of an essential subject, then, it may continue to underwrite the normalized

[6] Cf. Spivak (1994, 26–28).

centrality of a very specific identity in its remedial attempts to incorporate the communicative offers of the marginalized. Second, although this might imply that we should actively refrain from attributing subjectivity to others, the deconstructive suggestion is more nuanced and in fact demands an acute sensitivity to the risks involved in *both* the attribution of subjectivity and the counterattempt to resist an axiomatics of subjectivity. In certain of our practices, we will—and surely ought to—attribute subjectivity to others. But we must simultaneously recognize that, in doing so, we fail to be open to others *as others*, and we are consequently involved in the continuation of a form of epistemic violence. What is required, then, is that we perpetually seek to imagine, explore, and think anew how we can become open to others, and this will involve a singular decision, each time. Deconstruction offers us no formulaic program for achieving epistemic justice; but we can begin by experimenting with gestures of invention, building avenues for dialogue that would allow us to begin to listen to others in a way that might finally conduce to the decolonial goal of enabling the possibility of "hear[ing] that which one does not already understand" (Chakrabarty 2002, 36).

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