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# Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing

SUSAN C. JARRATT

The value of postcolonial theory for teachers of writing arises in part from its focus on the rhetorical situation of intellectual work applied to the question of difference. By pointing out that academic traditions of Western universities are built on several centuries of economic and cultural imperialism, this theory demands that scholars and teachers of literature and literacies ask rhetorical questions the answers to which had been for many years assumed: who speaks? on behalf of whom? who is listening? and how? It interrogates the assumption of any group identification and more specifically the relationship of the single “I” to a collective “we” (see Anderson, Mohanty, Roof and Wiegman!).

My aim in this essay is to address the problem of speaking for others by looking at how “others” speak. Employing the figures of metaphor and metonymy, I analyze the ways three postcolonial feminists open up the workings of representation—of the self, groups, and audiences—such that participants are no longer disposed in the classical rhetorical position, a single subject facing an audience, but rather, “beside themselves.” This colloquial expression calls to mind situations of deep emotional turmoil—worry, anger, or maybe grief. Perhaps it means that, in times of intense emotional distress, one loses bodily or mental integrity and manufactures another version of oneself to express or absorb the pain. My appropriation of the expression bears some relation to its everyday use, in the sense that oppressed groups experience the pain of self-distancing or alienation (Fanon). As a rhetorician, though, I am interested in the way an experience of suffering is turned into a tool of language: an artful, rhetorical practice of self-multiplication used by speakers in response to their historical, rhetorical, and institutional circumstances. I am also interested in the way a painful image of self-division could be transformed into a hopeful vision of alliance. Tracing representational strategies of postcolonial feminist rhetoric might offer ways for composition teachers and students to imagine that scene—a difficult task in a culture that values individualism so highly. I hope this essay will contribute to that project in three ways: by analyzing changes in concepts of ethos and audience under the historical conditions of postcoloniality; by describing complex processes of writing the self; and, by attending to the ways teachers and students in U.S. universities “read” (about) formerly colonized people.

### Figuring structures of relation

How can differences be imagined? In what forms of relation? Rhetoric is useful for addressing these questions because it gives names to figures which structure relations in language and in the material world. Any choice of a figure is a discursive act that also simultaneously configures a material relationship of power and difference. One of the ways postcolonial theory has heightened attention to the politics of representation is to point out that exercises of domination occur not only in the sphere of politics proper but also through cultural practices. They insist on the dual functions of rhetoric as both political and figurative representation.<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her now-canonical essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, warns first-world intellectuals about the danger of obscuring their own acts of discursive imperialism in the process of facilely “representing” the interests of apparently silent subjects of oppression. She makes her point historically and philologically, using Marx’s essay on the mid-nineteenth-century coup d’etat of Louis Bonaparte, who came to “represent” a peasant class politically through an exercise of executive power without their having any consciousness of themselves as a class, i.e. without participating in an imaginative or political construction of themselves as a class (Marx 602, 608). The typical translation of two different German words (*Vertretung* and *Darstellung*) into a single English word, “representation,” emblemizes for Spivak the danger of collapsing these two distinct processes: the first, a political or legal process of standing for members of a constituency group; the second a symbolic process of creating images of such groups (“Subaltern” 276; see also Landry and MacLean 198). She associates these two forms of representation with two kinds of rhetoric, persuasion and trope, graphically captured in the analogies of “proxy” and “portrait”—arguing that in her historical example of Louis Bonaparte the former assumes or enacts the latter: “The event of representation as [a political process] . . . behaves like an [imaging], taking its place in the gap between the formation of a (descriptive) class and the nonformation of a (transformative) class” (“Subaltern” 277). In other words, when someone uses power over others to represent them politically—to act for them—there is an unavoidable, concomitant symbolic process underway: the represented group is sketched, painted, described in a particular way through that process. And this description may or may not “represent” them in ways they themselves would endorse.

The reason Spivak writes “nonformation” is to emphasize that “identity” as a class does not take place naturally (at what she calls “ground level consciousness”), but rather must be constructed through acts of political agency and self-description (“Subaltern” 277-78). One cannot assume a class identity for the French peasants Louis Bonaparte forcibly represented in the absence of their own representations of themselves or of acts on their on behalf as a class. The backlash against feminism in the U.S. (and other countries as well) offers a contemporary example of processes of “nonformation” and transformation. Many women on university campuses reject feminism—i.e., reject being identified as a politicized class, “women”—because they believe they haven’t had a hand in constructing the symbolic representations of the class. In Women’s Studies classes, female students actually read and discuss the works of feminists (as opposed to absorbing uncritically the grotesque caricatures offered

on talk radio and other popular media). As they talk and write about the ways their self-identification fits with or differs from the representations they read, a process of class-formation/transformation takes place, creating a locally grounded understanding of the class “women” from which some will actually go forward to act out of that class consciousness (in campus activism, volunteer work, or career choices). Inevitably, their subsequent actions as “women” on behalf of other “women” will recreate the gap between political agency and self-description.<sup>3</sup>

Discovering the workings of these two forms of representation at any site, the interwoven operations of imaging—textual descriptions of otherness—and political representation—entailing identification of or with a group—is the work of teachers and students of language practices. Rhetoric mobilizes an interaction between representation (political) and re-presentation (cultural), possibly enabling the transformative practices Marx found missing in the nineteenth-century French peasants: i.e., driving the movement from descriptive to transformative class, or at least calling attention to where and by whom groups are described. It is my argument that some postcolonial feminists have been particularly useful in activating rhetoric in these two senses, and that an analysis of their work in these terms might advance the argument over identity politics, helping to delineate with more care and refinement the bases on which identities are constructed, claimed, and linked with others. This framework might serve the ethical aim of “recognizing the responsibility for linking” (Faigley 237).

My method in the body of the essay is to use rhetorical figures—metaphor and metonymy—to analyze the ways postcolonial feminist writing calls attention to these dual processes of representation: political and pictorial. In this analysis, I take metaphor as a figure of substitution: one thing or person standing in for another, and in the process, obscuring some particularities of what it represents.<sup>4</sup> A metaphoric style of representation occurs any time a speaker or writer functions as a spokesperson for a particular category of people—workers, women, voters in a particular constituency—the partiality of the single member standing in for the whole. Here is an example of a critic using this definition of metaphor to distinguish autobiography from *testimonio*:

In rhetorical terms, whose political consequences may be evident, there is a fundamental difference here between the *metaphor* of autobiography and heroic narrative in general, which assumes an identity-by-substituting one (superior) signifier for another (I for we, leader for follower, Christ for the faithful), and metonymy, a lateral move of identification-through-relationship, which acknowledges the possible differences among “us” as components of a centerless whole. (Sommer 61)

Metonymy, on the other hand, as the passage above suggests, creates a chain of associations. It configures a relationship based on contiguity and context (Jakobson 79, 83, 90-91; Irigaray; Brady). The example of metonymy provided by Jakobson has an eerie resonance for postcolonial history. A hut may metonymically be associated with “thatched roof,” “family of twelve,” or “burnt by the army,” each association creating a narrative or contextualized understanding of the word without displacing or blocking out the word itself. Applying metonymy to identity politics suggests that

differences can be spoken of not in terms of exclusive categories but rather as places, descriptions, or narratives of relation. The writings of Gayatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha offer eloquent illustrations of what I see as a metonymic process of subject construction; each simultaneously makes visible the intellectual work of theorizing and gives voice to varieties of otherness, placing themselves not at the head of some silent group of followers but rather beside themselves. But in so doing, they unavoidably participate in a metaphoric process of representing “others,” thus enacting a tension between these two modes. After analyzing rhetorics of linkage and spatial location in texts of the Spivak and Trinh, I will turn to a very different text. The 1983 *testimonio* of Rigoberta Menchú Tum,<sup>5</sup> a Quiché Indian peasant and peace activist, arose from the midst of the Guatemalan civil war, a situation calling forth different strategies of representation from those used by postcolonial feminist academics writing within the context of the U.S. academy.<sup>6</sup>

### Immigrant academics as metonymic subjects

My first two subjects are both professional “representers,” engaged in literary criticism and cultural critique (Spivak); in documentary filmmaking, ethnography, and cultural theory (Trinh). These feminist theorists are hypersensitive to the constructed nature of the discourse of personal experience yet, nonetheless, acknowledge the need for the representation of others—to give others a vocal and visible presence. They both meet this need through the production of what Spivak terms “counter-sentences” by subjects of imperialism: alternatives to re-presentations—images of the “other”—produced from within dominant cultures. Such counter-sentences come into being through the strategic placement and voicing of narrative, but both Trinh and Spivak seek to avoid speaking for the other through displacement and indirection. Unlike the “Third World intellectuals” in metropolitan universities described by Ahmad, who “materially represent the undifferentiated colonized Other. . . without much examining of their own presence in that institution” (92), Trinh and Spivak figure themselves with an awareness of their placement within systems of privilege and draw attention to the modes of production and consumption of their academic work.

I turn first to cultural critic, Gayatri Spivak, an upper-caste Indian, an economic immigrant from Calcutta, who has studied and taught in English departments in U.S. universities since the early sixties. This biographical sentence introduces Spivak to those who don’t know of her work but, by consolidating her into a unified, coherent subject, works against the grain of her own rhetoric. In the second half of the “Subaltern” essay, Spivak calls into question the desire of first world intellectuals for an authentic native voice when that desire is directed toward people like her.<sup>7</sup> Spivak is at pains to point out her difference from that Other. She complicates the illusion of a single “native voice” by delineating various positions among Indians under British occupation. Setting off a silent underclass from those in closer contact with their colonizers, Spivak uses as her prime example a colonial subject whose agency and voice had the least possibility of being heard—Indian widows who became victims of sati, sacrificial burning—to demonstrate how many of the historically colonized had in fact

no legitimate platform from which to speak (“Subaltern” 297-308; see also Mani). Spivak argues that this situation is a problem not only for first-world intellectuals but for diasporic post-colonial academics as well in their own production of knowledge about their homelands. Her conclusion is that a postcolonial intellectual cannot speak for these unrepresented groups but only to them in an imagined conversation across class lines and historical distances (“Subaltern” 295). The emphasis here is on “imagined,” for of course Spivak assumes no possibility of reaching the present-day remnants of this group through the rarefied discourses of Western academies.<sup>8</sup> Rather, she uses this formulation to displace the representative potential of her own voice, opening a space for others. “Speaking to” might be construed as a movement from the metaphoric to the metonymic. Instead of substituting one voice for another, the speaker adds another voice to the parallel strands of discourse, a voice without its own clear origin. Her writings stand alongside other accounts and the person herself who continues to re-generate a speaking subject.

The ethical implications of Spivak’s performance lie in its difference from, on the one hand, a rhetoric of substitution, and on the other, from what Mohanty calls a “Western, postmodernist notion of agency and consciousness which often announces the splintering of the subject, and privileges multiplicity in the abstract” (37). Spivak’s performance should be understood as an ethical practice of seeking to displace any fixed sense of knowledge of the “other” a Western listener might be tempted to grasp through an encounter with an elite, immigrant academic. When “card-carrying hegemonic” listeners listen for someone speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, Spivak asserts, ignorance of a complex history is covered over with a fabricated homogeneity (“Alterity” 270). Within her chosen area of literary and cultural studies,<sup>9</sup> Spivak puts before a Western audience a multitude of postcolonial subjects—the Indian widow of 1829, the sixteen-year-old member of an Indian independence group who committed suicide in Calcutta in 1926, the women workers in today’s Export Processing Zones—along with her own “selves.”

Indeed, it seems that part of Spivak’s strategy for multiplying others is achieved through the manufacture of more and more versions of herself. She has experienced an amazing degree of public scrutiny, and I’m interested in examining how she has negotiated her self-constitution through that process. *The Post-Colonial Critic*, a series of interviews, collects and multiplies the many versions of this “highly commodified academic,” as she ironically calls herself (“Word” 130). In an interview with Ellen Rooney, she acknowledges complaints that “Spivak talks too much about herself” (“Word” 130). Though this focus on the self might suggest the seduction of “representativeness,” it might also be read as a continuing attempt to disperse the representative Indian in the U.S. academy.

Spivak is meticulous about her own processes of self-identification. Refusing several of the available options for self-representation—unmediated accounts of experience, the philosophical voice from nowhere, and the hollow echoes of the now-dead “author”—Spivak instead practices “deidentification . . . a claiming of an identity from a text that comes from somewhere else.”<sup>10</sup> Resisting the Western academy’s attempt to hear from her the voice of the native, she differentiates “talking about

oneself “from a process of “graphing one’s bio” such that it becomes representative of certain histories (“Word” 130). In this formulation, the text represents, not the self. This process of contexture and displacement begins when Spivak identifies herself with contingent and polemical labels—“woman,” “literary critic,” “Asian intellectual,” “Non-Resident Indian.” She then reveals the persistence of imperialist and sexist attitudes by recounting situations when one or another of those labels provoked conflict or effected marginalization in public forums. But instead of grounding these claims in authenticity, Spivak practices what she calls a reactive strategy, adopting different identities at different times to create a consciousness of the hazards of fixity and substitution. She seems to be saying, If you take me to be a feminist, I’ll show how I’m not the same as Western feminists. If you take me for an Indian, I’ll explain elite immigrant privilege. If you define me as anti-institutional, I show you the disciplinarian. Spivak consistently cannot be found where she is sought. She signals the relatively minimal significance of color and former colonial status (those markers of difference through which she appears as the representative Indian) through references to her high caste status, the historical moment within which her immigration took place (the early ’60s brain drain of Indians to the UK and U.S.), and the benefits accruing to her as the product of a British education from American academics’ Anglophilia. In specifying the geographical, economic and class locations of her background and academic formation, she engages in the project Ahmad calls “periodizing”: connecting academic practices with modes of production and larger historical movements, rather than assuming their distance from the material world (Ahmad 36).

In introductory passages contextualizing the essays in her latest book, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Spivak reflects on her positions in relation to other women (see especially 121-29, 141-46). Returning to early writing enables her to place positions side by side in a narrative sequence:

When I wrote “French Feminism in an International Frame” my assigned subject-position was actually determined by my moment in the United States and dominated my apparent choice of a postcolonial position. . . . Now it seems to me that the radical element of the postcolonial bourgeoisie must most specifically learn to negotiate with the structure of enabling violence that produced her. (145)

Spivak now seeks to negotiate “white feminism” rather than simply resisting it; she seeks not “to neglect the postcolonial’s particular generalization in the vaster common space of woman” (145). Throughout these passages she rearticulates the problematic of representation: “It is obvious that these positions [feminism, European Enlightenment, nationhood, etc.], logically defined, swirl in the inaccessible intimacy of the everyday, giving hue to being. To fix it in paint is to efface as much as to disclose” (144-45).

It is through a carefully crafted rhetoric that Spivak revises her early position.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes tortured, almost always tortuous, her prose seems at times almost to parody classical philosophical argument. Deeply engaged with the most traditional philosophical issues, Spivak’s prose is full of “lurches”: unconventional word use (e.g. “to operate “ as a conceptual process), abrupt transitions, unexpected juxtaposition

of subjects. Where most academic readers are accustomed to the Aristotelian format—state your case and prove it—Spivak seems to work laterally, moving from case to case, point to point, rarely offering examples.<sup>12</sup> Despite all her efforts, we see an operation of substitution emerging when Toril Moi suggests that Spivak's texts might be representative of “an enactment of the violent clash of discourses experienced by the subject in exile” (20). Though her writing at first seems radically different from the *écriture féminine* of French feminists, I find common elements: along with deep engagements with the canonical male texts of Western culture, there is “a courageous effort to explode linear sequentiality, a deliberate desire to enact the decentering of the subject and its discourses” (Moi 21). Simultaneous with the pretense of what Catherine Clément calls “democratic transmission” (Cixous and Clément)—i.e. the implicit agreement with a reader that she seeks to communicate—we find at times “a text where the connections are so elusive as to become private” (Moi 20). I've seen some of the same patterns in the writing of female students: a struggle under the burden of a masculine literary heritage, a movement from public communication into the realm of private codes, a break-down in the conventional structures of argument. I'm suggesting not that these textual features be celebrated as expressions of a gendered essence, nor praised as the curious idiosyncrasies of a brilliant thinker, but rather be read as symptoms—textual traces of a strained encounter with multiple forms of dominance. Within, then, Spivak's meticulous and principled renunciation of a representation of substitution, her highly artful theory and practice of metonymic association with others, I find an informing if painful case of writing difference.

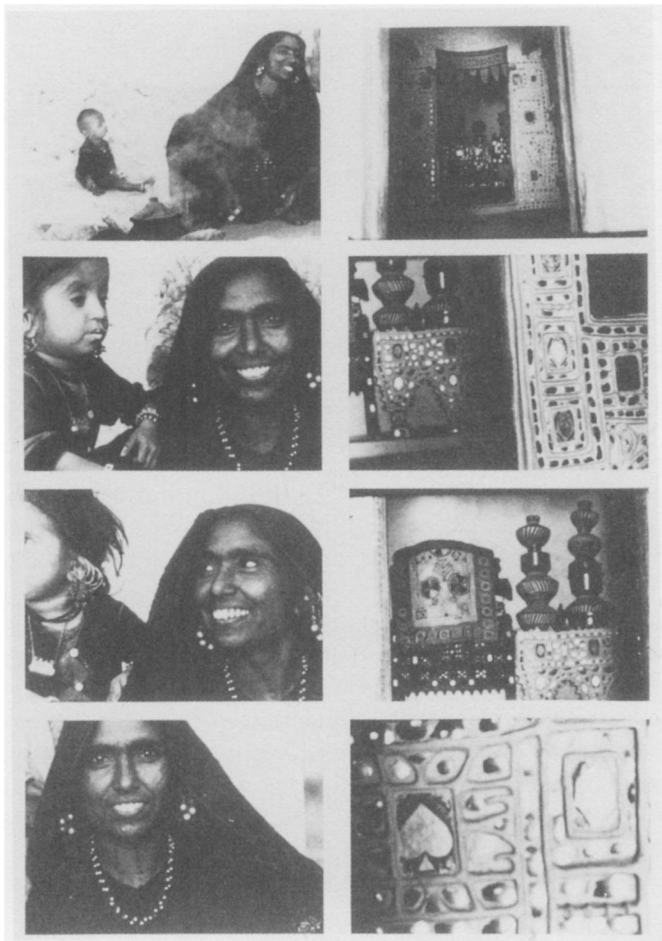
Trinh T. Minh-ha claims writing without equivocation as the defining act for “third world women,” a phrase she chooses despite its anachronistic assumption of a tri-partite division of world powers and the risk of homogenization. From the jacket of her first book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, we learn that she is a writer, filmmaker, composer, and academic. But, despite the fact that her text is full of first person pronouns both singular and plural, her one moment of specific self-definition is delayed until late in the book and displaced into third person: “From jagged transitions between the headless and bottomless storytelling, what is exposed in this text is the inscription and de-scription of a non-unitary female subject of color through her engagement, therefore also disengagement, with master discourses” (43). The self she creates in her text is figured by the broken mirror. It destroys a pure relation of “I to I” (23), but does not cease reflecting: “here reality is not reconstituted, it is put into pieces so as to allow another world to rebuild (keep on unbuilding and rebuilding) itself with its debris” (23). The subject is dispersed throughout her text, yet Trinh speaks at times with complete presence, easily adopting the role of “writing woman” (as opposed to “written woman”) and using conventions of the “priest-god scheme” (her version of the critique of the author). Her discussion of commitment, responsibility, and guilt capture Trinh as a most consolidated subject: “In a sense, committed writers are the ones who write both to awaken to the consciousness of their guilt and to give their readers a guilty conscience. Bound to one another by an awareness of their guilt, writer and reader may thus assess their positions, engaging



themselves wholly in their situations and carrying their weight into the weight of their communities, the weight of the world” (10-11). For those on the margin, Trinh suggests, constructing a “we” implies a responsibility for representation. While Spivak only goes so far as to speak of “un-learning privilege,” Trinh foregrounds the ethical entailments of her representative status.

At other moments she delights in the multiplicity of voices in writing, dividing herself into subject and object through a play of pronouns: “writing . . . is an ongoing practice that is concerned not with inserting a ‘me’ into language, but with creating an opening where the ‘me’ disappears while ‘I’ endlessly come and go” (35). She then breaks the boundary of that “i”: “Taking in any voice that goes through me, I/i will answer every time someone says: I. One woman within another, eternally” (37). Pronouns are powerful tools for Trinh, who doubles the “I” in capital and lower case, privileging the subject case (but multiple) “I” over the object “me.” This mix of modes—metaphoric and metonymic—stymies attempts to categorize her and enacts her point that “Woman can only redefine while being defined by language” (44).

The visuals in her text—stills from her movies—illustrate her strategy of multiplication and a metonymic style of representation.



Offering multiple images rather than a single image breaks apart a process of metaphoric substitution. That we see the “native woman” with a child and without, calls into question a Western stereotype of non-Western women as primarily reproducers of masses of “others.” The subject smiles directly into the camera, presumably held by Trinh (or perhaps an associate), indicating her apparent ease and pleasure in the process of being represented by another “other” suggesting perhaps a collaboration in the process of representation (see Bal). That she is shown in various “sizes,” with child and without, looking into the camera and looking off, suggests subjects in context, in motion—not able to be caught or reduced through a single process of substitution.

Trinh’s most effective strategy for moving between metaphoric and metonymic subjectivities is her frequent use of a broad ironic tone. In the following passage, she sarcastically rejects the position of authenticity, mimicking (but at the same time using) a voice of unreflective autobiography: “I am so much that nothing can enter me or pass through me. I struggle, I resist, and I am filled with my own self. [Here the tone shifts.] The ‘personal’ may liberate as it may enslave” (35). On the same issue, she asks: “How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind?” Trinh wants to find her way between “navel-gazing and navel-erasing” (28).

Trinh is sensitive to the current seductions of fashionable otherness in academic circles, devoting the better part of a chapter to what she terms the “special” third world woman issue. Parodying the title of a special issue of an academic journal, she points out how both the Western audience and the iconized postcolonial are complicit in dealing with otherness as a special issue: “Specialness as a soporific soothes, anaesthetizes my sense of justice; it is, to the wo/man of ambition, as effective a drug of psychological self-intoxication as alcohol is to the exiles of society” (88). The admonition is to be more sensitive to the systems of authorization, as well as the (very Western) myth of authenticity.

For Trinh, the relation to the collective is highly textualized but still there. Again we hear her mimicking one of the familiar voices of the American collective:

A writing *for* the people, *by* the people, and *from* the people is, literally, a multipolar reflecting reflection that remains free from the conditions of subjectivity and objectivity and yet reveals them both. I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing. I-You: not one, not two. (22, emphasis in original)

I hear in this passage a bold refiguration of the “subject,” involving the group in its formation and complicating visibility as it is theorized in classical Western systems of representation.

Trinh is more at ease than Spivak in making common cause across differences. She accepts the alliance of non-white U.S. minorities with citizens of the older non-aligned nations who made up the original “Third World” group. She finds more threat in the colonialist creed of Divide and Conquer than she does in the threat of obscuring differences when such pacts are made. The radical dispersion of self through writing coexists in this text with a voice of collective solidarity. This coexistence in the

rhetorical scene is articulated metonymically: “The process of differentiation... continues, and speaking nearby or together with certainly differs from speaking for and about.” (101). “Difference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity” (104).

What strikes me as most apt in the specifically *postcolonial* rhetoric of these two feminists is the tension here between metonymic and metaphoric representation—between a poststructural dispersal of subjectivity and an ethical commitment to analyzing communication in terms of the material realities of speakers and listeners. Postcolonial feminists dare to commit theoretical inconsistency, deploying a pragmatic rhetoric that suits their multiple locations. The principled resistance to the temptation to speak for India, for Vietnam, for women is joined with the principled impulse to put the voice of the “other” in play in first-world academic discourse. When we hear Spivak’s speaking to (rather than for or about) and Trinh speaking alongside, we hear an attempt to move between the two poles in the double session of representation.

For both writers, the metonymic operation of speaking alongside is not divided sharply from a rhetoric of substitution; they co-exist, operating simultaneously. Practices of political representation cannot avoid the enactment of symbolic representation, the constant process of creating and recreating public images of difference. Actually appearing through symbolic representation entails access to public forums gained through (loosely defined) political processes. Both these writers are fully aware of their representational function: they do speak for the other. But they simultaneously recast images and frustrate any simple process of representation. As post-colonial subjects located in the metropolitan academic scene, both choose a complex construction of subjectivity in an ethical response to the exigencies of that placement.

These choices are consummately rhetorical, revealing a disruption of conventional assumptions about ethos and audience. Unlike the classical scenario, wherein the speaker constructs an ethos in relation to an audience—assuming it to be a group of which he was a member—the habitus of the postcolonial feminist is not shared by a Western academic audience.<sup>13</sup> The aim of this rhetoric is to open the distance between writer and audience rather than close it. Lunsford and Ede suggest a similar distancing in a recent self-critique of their earlier essay on audience, pointing out the “exclusionary tendencies of the rhetorical tradition” (174) in its assumption that the rhetor (and in their case, the student writer) would unproblematically seek to mold herself to the audience at hand. I believe these postcolonial feminist restructurings of ethos and audience might be helpful to teachers of writing and rhetoric. First, they illustrate through their elaboration of difference the power relations and assumptions about social similarity inherent in the classical model. Next, they might help us in developing strategies for our own speaking and writing that avoid reproducing unproblematically those older models, based on the assumption that speaker and audience will unquestionably share knowledge, goals, and habits. Finally, they might help us as we read student writing about the self to discover how students resist or refigure ethos and audience to characterize their own relations to the academy. I am not suggesting that students will consciously employ the complex tactics I have outlined in the writings of the two academic postcolonial feminists but rather that we might use Spivak’s and Trinh’s rhetorical gestures as guides for reading traces or

symptoms of texts from students writing their own relations to institutional power. Imagining students capable of inscribing multiple selves could be an important reading posture for teachers concerned with subject construction in a postcolonial era.

I have proposed ways that the writings of Spivak and Trinh might contribute to rhetorical theory and to the reading practices of writing teachers.<sup>14</sup> The third subject of my analysis occupies a substantially different position in relation to composition studies in that (1) she was not a writer<sup>15</sup> and (2) her published account has appeared on reading lists for undergraduates across the country. As winner of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, Rigoberta Menchú Tum has gained international recognition as a spokesperson for her people. Given her chosen status as representative “other,” her rhetorical task would appear to be quite the different from that of the postcolonial immigrant intellectuals analyzed above.

### A revolutionary subject

In the 1983 English translation of Guatemalan Indian Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s *testimonio*, the construction of a subject appears in high relief from the opening lines:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people. It’s hard for me to remember everything that’s happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people. (1)

There appears to be no hesitation here to claim representative status—no hedging about subject positions or the problem of speaking for others. Menchú Tum tells the story of Indian peasants deprived of land, freedom, and life by an oligarchic government using the army to suppress any attempts by the Indians to seek justice and stop exploitive land grabs and cruel labor practices.<sup>16</sup> Literary critics identify a distinctive articulation of the speaking subject as a feature of the genre, *testimonio*. John Beverly’s persuasive analysis places these accounts within the context of struggles for national autonomy: they are “novel or novella-length narratives told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts” (*Literature* 70). The claim of representation is at the center of these texts: “the situation of the narrator in *testimonio* must be representative (in both the mimetic and the legal-political senses) of a larger social class or group”; indeed, there is “an insistence on and affirmation of the authority of the subject” (Beverly, *Literature* 74, 76).

Neither the “deliverers,” compilers, nor the critics of *testimonio*, however, are naïve about the processes of textual construction involved in production of these accounts. Barbara Harlow, whose book *Resistance Literature* brings a number of these texts to the attention of Western readers, makes note of the ideological complexity of resistance organizations and national liberation movements (29). The involvement of a first-world intelligentsia in the collection of material complicates the question of authenticity further. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, the compiler of Menchú Tum’s *testimonio*, a Venezuelan social scientist living in Paris, documents the ways she

constructed and adjusted the language in the oral account. In a recent visit to Miami University, Menchú Tum spoke about the caution she exercised in telling her story to Burgos-Debray. This caution involved presenting herself as a particular kind of subject, as well as withholding information about the Indian resistance fighters still at war in Guatemala at the time she was working for peace in Europe and Mexico.

Even though they acknowledge these mediations in the collection and production of *testimonios*, however, critics generally place more importance on the commonality of political goals between compiler and testifier. Beverly, for example, offers the examples of Margaret Randall, who assisted women in Cuba and Nicaragua through workshops in writing popular histories, and Nawal al-Saadawi, whose work with women in an Egyptian prison eventually led to testimonial novel *Woman at Point Zero*, as examples of politically committed *testimonio* compilers (“Margin” 15, n. 8; 17, n. 11; see also Harlow). These relationships are forged out of “mutuality in struggle against a common system of oppression”; the compiling of the testimony under these conditions is specifically not, Beverly argues, “a reenactment of the anthropological function of the colonial or subaltern ‘native informant’” (“Margin” 21).

The *testimonio*, nonetheless, still offers interpretive challenges on the issue of representation, even if they aren’t exactly the same as those created by the particular national, educational, and class circumstances of the immigrant academic feminists.<sup>17</sup> For both Spivak and Trinh, the denial of authenticity is a necessary position for the diasporic intellectual, one which forces the first-world academic to notice the difference between another academic and a suppressed history of colonization. For Menchú Tum, the claim to authority—to the truth of her lived experience—is central to her project. There still remains a question about how to interpret the representational force of the strongly asserted “I” in the *testimonio* and how to understand the relationship with the reader. Does this mode of representation constitute a rhetoric of substitution?

Interpreters of *testimonio* answer that question by changing the terms. In the material and historical circumstances of a revolutionary struggle, the idea of one speaker “blocking out” another, as though subjects were individual, strongly differentiated units, gives way to the exigencies of communicating as a collective. The elite intellectual postcolonial feminists, working within a Western discourse tradition, needed to take apart individual subjectivity from the inside; Menchú Tum, on the other hand, comes from a strongly communal Indian village culture with a completely different understanding of the relation of the self to the community. Despite the first-person of Menchú Tum’s title, Lynda Marín notes that *testimonios* are marked by the “self-professed eschewal of the first person singular subject” in favor of a collective “we” (52).<sup>18</sup> Though these authors do specify their personal conditions, those details are less significant than the group struggle against state coercion. Their primary aim is getting out the reality of their collective experience to a metropolitan reading public, bringing to light experiences and events hidden in large measure from first world media. Doris Sommer, in an elegant reading of Rigoberta’s continual reference to secrets about the community that cannot be revealed, claims that this strategy “defends us [first-world readers] from any illusions of complete or stable knowledge, and

therefore from the desire to replace one apparently limited speaker for another more totalizing one" (57). Sommer goes on to say that Menchú Tum "takes care not to substitute her community in a totalizing gesture. Instead, her singularity achieves its identity as an extension of the collective. The singular represents the plural, not because it replaces or subsumes the group, but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole" (60-61). It is worth noting that Sommer's purpose in analyzing Menchú Tum is to distinguish the genre of *testimonio* from standard Western autobiography, a centuries-old locus for individuality: "Where autobiographies nurture an illusion of singularity [sic], assuming they can stand in for others, testimonies stand up among them" (61). John Beverly, similarly, attempts to redefine the terms through which subjectivity is expressed: "*testimonio* constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode" ("Margin" 17). The oral delivery of *testimonio* and the political context of collective struggle combine to set aside figures of the "author" and "individual," and along with them, the problem of speaking for others as a gesture of substitution.

Looking at the *testimonio* from a rhetorical rather than a literary perspective actually makes it easier to imagine this shift. When we examined the postcolonial academic writers, the analysis was framed in terms of writing style. But for an orally produced text, the rhetorical category of ethos is more suitable. Sommer acknowledges the value of a shift to rhetoric: "while the autobiography strains to produce a personal and distinctive style as part of the individuation process, the testimonial strives to preserve or to renew an interpersonal rhetoric" (Sommer 65). The ethos/audience relation was redefined above for Asian postcolonial feminists to mark a difference and distance between rhetor and audience. In the case of Menchú Tum, *ethos* could signify the intense solidarity among members of the revolutionary group, as well as a powerfully rhetorical relationship to first-world readers.

Whereas the first two writers needed to disperse their subjectivity and representativeness for Western readers, Menchú Tum, as a subject of a nation still in struggle, had a much stronger interest—indeed, a life-or-death need—to engage the audience. Written for a metropolitan public, the *testimonio* creates a bond with its readers, "involv[ing] their identification—by engaging their standards of ethics and justice in a speech-act situation that requires response" (Beverly, *Literature* 78). The rhetoric of reading *testimonio* is cast as a movement from identification to persuasion, or "complicity." Sommer uses that term to spell out the psychological dynamics of subject-formation and audience address in the public event of *testimonio*:

When the narrator talks about herself to you, she implies both the existing relationship to other representative selves in the community, and potential relationships that extend her community through the text. She calls us in, interpellates us as readers who identify with the narrator's project and, by extension, with the political community to which she belongs. The appeal does not produce only admiration for the ego-ideal, of the type we might feel for an autobiographer who impresses us precisely with her difference from other women, nor the consequent yearning to be (like) her and so to deny her and our distinctiveness. Rather, the testimonial produces complicity. Even if the reader cannot identify with the writer enough to imagine taking her place, the map of possible identifications through the text spreads out laterally. (65)

In this lateral movement, the represented community, testifier, and readers are found beside themselves.

Reading Menchú Tum against the two Asian feminists enables us to see a reversal of the movement from descriptive to transformative class. We are to understand from Menchú Tum that the class she represents is solidly constituted, already engaged in political action. Her task is to create that group as a descriptive class—to bring the Mayan Indians of Central America into view for a U.S. and Western European public. Because the two poles in the double session of representation are so closely connected for her group, there is a strong justification for the representational strategy she uses. Her goal is exactly the opposite of Spivak's: not "deidentification" but identification. My goal in making this contrast is not to value one mode of representation over another. It is, rather, to develop more supple instruments for recognizing and responding to diverse subjects in the absence of stable criteria for doing so. It has become standard for feminists (and others) to complain of poststructuralist theory that it robs non-dominant groups of subjectivity before they've ever had a chance to have it. Gregory S. Jay raises a question about the terms of this dilemma: "it is not clear how the widely challenged classical schemas of representation can be replaced by a different representative system if there is no agreement about the "unit" or basic element grounding the claim to representation [in the Enlightenment, the individual]" (15). Perhaps the rhetorical materials at use here might give us a way to describe subjectivities as something more multiple and diverse than "units," to discuss the question in terms less simply binary than presence or absence of a subject.

### Pedagogy

The political reason we need something more complex than poststructural or postmodern critiques of the subject concerns the ways such arguments "travel." Criticisms of a representation of substitution—of "authentic voice" literature that makes claims to speak for others—from within non-dominant groups line up disturbingly with the derision of a right-wing dogmatist like Dinesh D'Souza, who uses the evidence of Rigoberta Menchú Tum's differences from the Indians she represents as an excuse to dismiss her as a "seemingly authentic Third World source" (72, emphasis added). That Menchú Tum was able to move from the position of silenced subaltern to vocal victim of oppression provides D'Souza the opportunity to dismiss the account of her experience, to hear her instead as a mouthpiece for "Marxist and feminist views," and to focus his critical energies on the travesty of her displacement of Western classics in the Stanford University canon.

The difference between John Beverly's reading of Menchú Tum as an organizer, organic intellectual, and "foreign agent" to the West—i.e., as specifically not "the subaltern"—and D'Souza's reading is that the former is doing a sympathetic reading of representational strategies; the latter rejects Menchú Tum's account in favor of silence: i.e., he disqualifies her representative status so as to silence her. D'Souza's response recalls a stance I've encountered in some students who find reports from the margins so disturbing that their very claim to be heard is called into question (see Lu). This reaction takes shape as the skepticism on the part of an autonomous knower

toward any truth claim: the response of a Kantian subject who, in rejecting the authority of teacher and text, overcomes “tutelage,” the barrier to ascendance into full personhood, a rejection made all the easier if that narrative in some way calls into question the status of that very subject. Is it possible to distinguish between a silencing skepticism and a nuanced reading of representation?

It is our responsibility as teachers to try to mark out that difference. Through our choices of texts and every word we say about them we inevitably represent others to our students. Choosing different reading strategies for different texts is an exercise of power, but then, Rigoberta Menchú Tum is not Louis Bonaparte and neither are “we”: teachers of writing, language, and literature in U.S. universities. Every pedagogical moment is a complex fusion of re-presentation, exercises of executive power, and transformation of consciousness. If we enter into that process relying solely on what Linda Alcoff calls the “retreat” response—claiming to speak only from our own narrow positions—we not only blind ourselves to the multiple functions of pedagogical discourse, but also lose opportunities for political effectivity (17-19).

Many of us believe that we have remade the teaching scene so as to avoid careless abuses of power. But we can’t control the processes of representation—of metaphorical substitution. As those in non-dominant positions well know, their voices are often heard as the voice of women, African-Americans, or lesbians despite disclaimers or qualifications. If, as teachers and scholars we retreated from the risk of representation, punctiliously refusing any occasion of speaking for others ourselves and vigilantly pointing out any instance of metaphoric substitution in others, we would avoid making a theoretical error. But, as Alcoff points out, “the desire to find an absolute means to avoid making errors comes perhaps not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation” (22).

What is it we recognize? What parts of the whole do we “read”? What forms the links in the chains of association that lead us to act? Can we transform the modes of visibility through our teaching? Who is the “we” in these questions? By locating texts, including our own, in their different geopolitical contexts, teachers in U.S. universities can practice modes of writing and reading that allow us (students and teachers) to move collectively across the axes of metaphor/metonymy rather than speech/silence. And by enabling our students to write multiple versions of themselves informed by a knowledge of rhetoric in its political and figurative functions, we may give them access to their own experiences of conjunction and disjunction, of association and substitution. In doing this, we might more fully inhabit the meanings of the prefix to both figures, meta—which, in the poetic language of the Greek lexicon, places us “beside, alongside, among, in common with, with the help and favor of, in the midst of” others.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In the Roof and Wiegman collection, see especially essays by Leslie Bow, Dymna Callaghan, and Sabina Sawhney.

<sup>2</sup>See Mailloux for a related definition of rhetoric incorporating political effectivity and trope.

<sup>3</sup>Chandra Talpade Mohanty offers a revealing critique of the ways some Western feminists have performed a similar operation on “third world women” by beginning their analyses with the descriptive category of “woman” (59). In the research she cites, universal groupings such as “women of Africa” become “homogeneous sociological grouping[s] characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness” (59). Mohanty explains the ways resistance activities of third world women—i.e., efforts toward representing themselves politically—are obscured by the assumption that they are “legal minors (read ‘they are still not conscious of their rights’)” (72). Given Mohanty’s endorsement of historical contextualization, it is odd that she ends her essay with the hope of moving beyond “the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (74)—a reference to Marx’s “Eighteenth Brumaire” (see Marx 608). Marx is quite careful, in his analysis of the second phase of the French Revolution (1848–1851), to distinguish between a group of peasants who have historically resisted the oppressions of the old order (609) and those who, because of their geographic isolation and other circumstances of their mode of production, are “incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name” (608). It is the latter Louis Bonaparte claims to represent. The danger to which Mohanty and Spivak point is assuming in advance of such careful analysis that a subordinated group cannot speak for themselves.

<sup>4</sup>This definition doesn’t presume to be the only or best definition of “metaphor”; in fact, it is a specialized definition associated with one strand of twentieth-century rhetorical theory. An anonymous reader of an earlier version of this essay objected to my use of metaphor in this way, arguing that the figure works through analogy and comparison rather than substitution, the point of an analogy depending on both terms being present to the mind rather than one standing in for or blocking out another. This reader objected that my use of “metaphor” to suggest substitution would not be helpful to language teachers struggling to help students understand how figures work. These comments led me to think about (among other things) the way all figures depend on the resonance between tenor and vehicle, and the way all figures distort or misrepresent. I ultimately decided to stay with this figurative analysis, including the definitions given above, because of a body of work I’ve encountered using the term in a similar way. Barbara Johnson summarizes this work, locating its contemporary origins with Roman Jakobson’s famous study of aphasia. Johnson traces Jakobson’s formulation of the metaphor/metonymy distinction from a linguistic construct to its use in designating hierarchies of genre poetry based on a principle of equivalence (narrative, on selection) through French structuralist and poststructuralist theory (DeMan’s association of metaphor with necessity and metonymy with chance) and finally to the political implications of separating similarity from contiguity (153–58). This trajectory follows metaphor from privileged trope to “the trope of privilege” (158). See also Laclau and Mouffe, Ryan, and Sommer. One could say that this use of “metaphor” is itself a metaphoric act—substituting one partial definition of the figure for a fuller, more varied one.

<sup>5</sup>Originally titled *Mellamo Rigoberta Menchú. An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, before Menchú Tum married and changed her name.

<sup>6</sup>My choice of three women as representative of postcolonial feminism performs the kind of metaphorical substitution I’m analyzing in the essay. I choose Spivak and Trinh because they revel in the act of writing, working over and through the problem of representation with a painful sensitivity I find appealing; Menchú Tum, because of the urgency of her situation. I choose them because I love to read them, each for different reasons. One of my purposes for writing this essay was to direct my responses away from a “conventional ethics of altruism” (Gunn 165) or an “uncritical hero-worship” (Sommer 69), and toward a “respect [that] is the condition of possibility for the kind of love that takes care not to simply appropriate its object” (Sommer 69).

<sup>7</sup>Robert Con Davis and David S. Gross analyze Spivak's rhetoric in terms of *ethos*, raising some of the issues discussed below toward the end of pointing a direction for an ethical practice of cultural studies. They characterize Spivak's style in terms of "theatricality" (69) and imagine the voice of the subaltern as produced by a kind of "ventriloquism" (76).

<sup>8</sup>In the analysis of Davis and Gross, the subaltern *ethos* does not refer to a particular group but rather to the impossibility of any discourse of the "other" available to the colonizer that has not been "defined by and related to the master discourse" (77).

<sup>9</sup>Spivak differentiates her work from the "information retrieval" taking place in anthropology, political science, history, and sociology. She applies her critique of subaltern representation across these disciplinary boundaries, warning of potential for violence when historians et al. assume a consciousness of the subject under examination ("Subaltern" 295). Benita Perry takes issue with Spivak and others on this point, arguing that an over-scrupulous concern for such "violence" can have the effect of quelling efforts toward uncovering knowledge of colonized peoples and their resistant practices.

<sup>10</sup>See Hennessy (96) for a discussion of a related theory: Pecheux's concept of "dis-identification." Hennessy defines it as the practice of "*working on the subject-form*": "critique, enacted in the disruption and re-arrangement of the pre-constructed categories on which the formation of subjects depends" (96).

<sup>11</sup>In a survey of work at the borders of feminism and rhetoric, Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford discuss women's alternative styles and the challenge by feminists of color to white feminists on issues of representation (420-28).

<sup>12</sup>See Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford for a discussion of feminist alternatives to classical rhetorical arrangement (414-20).

<sup>13</sup>See Jarratt and Reynolds for a related version of classical *ethos* through postmodern feminist theory.

<sup>14</sup>Although this discussion of Spivak and Trinh is focused more on theorizing than pedagogy, I have assigned portions of Trinh's book to upper-division undergraduates in classes cross-listed with Women's Studies and English. I know at least one colleague who has used her chapter "Grandma's Story" with first-year composition students, and another who has taught Spivak in undergraduate feminist theory courses.

<sup>15</sup>I use the past tense to indicate that Menchú Tum's literacy has changed in the fifteen years since she provided the oral account that led to the publication of her *testimonio*. In 1982, she had been studying spoken Spanish for three years. In 1997, she reported being almost finished with a new book, which I assume she herself is writing in Spanish.

<sup>16</sup>The postcoloniality of Guatemala is multi-layered. As Menchú Tum explains in her book, the Spanish conquest of Central America left as part of its legacy a three-layered society, with the indigenous Indian groups at the bottom, *ladinos*—Spanish-speaking assimilated *mestizos*—in the middle, and upper-class descendants of the Spanish conquerors at the top. Although Menchú Tum does not emphasize the intervention of the U.S. government in the struggle for power in Guatemala, the role of the CIA in supporting the military government (even to the point of abetting the murder of U.S. citizens) in its deadly campaign during the 1980s to take land from the Indians and force them to work in extremely exploitative conditions on plantations is finally beginning to be documented by mainstream media (Krauss; Weiner).

<sup>17</sup>Susan Morgan makes this point eloquently in her recent book on Victorian women writers in Southeast Asia, arguing (through the title) that *Place Matters*. She points out major differences among Singapore, Thailand, and India in their histories of contact with the West, its economies, and its social structures, and shows how those differences matter in our interpretations of colonial and postcolonial literatures.

<sup>18</sup>Other examples of *testimonio* include Domitilia Barrios, *Let Me Speak* (Bolivia, 1978); Eugenia Claribel Alegria, *They Won't Take Me Alive* (El Salvador, 1987); and Elvia Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo* (Honduras, 1987).

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